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BOOK REVIEW

Chasing the elephant into the bush: The politics of complacency

by Arthur Kennedy 2009.

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The 2008 Presidential and Parliamentary elections of Ghana were one of the most fiercely contested in the country. The elections ushered in the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) and drove out the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP). The former was represented by the symbol of the umbrella and the latter by the *osono* or the elephant. The election was decided after three rounds because neither the first nor the second could determine a clear winner. Even after round three the difference between the victorious NDC, and the defeated NPP was a small margin: 50.277% to 49.77% of the valid votes cast, a difference of fewer than 41,000 votes.

The NPP was shocked at the defeat because the socio-economic and political situation in Ghana improved dramatically during its 8-year rule, leading to a reduction in the percentage of people living under the poverty line from 39.5 per cent in 1998/99 to 28.5% in 2005/6. Why was the ‘elephant chased into the bush’ despite its impressive track record?

This book attempts to explain the causes of this electoral defeat, setting some misconceptions straight and remedying the dearth of literature on politics in Ghana, especially from professional politicians (p.xiii). Its author is an influential member of the defeated NPP and served as the Chairman of the Communication Committee for the 2008 NPP Campaign Team. For these reasons, this book deserves careful attention.

It argues that the main causes of defeat were: 1) disunity in the party; 2) inefficient use of financial resources; 3) election day problems; and 4) ‘round 2’ issues. Disunity

was a real problem for the NPP. It began when the party started the search for a flag bearer to lead the party in the 2008 elections. In all, 17 people were vetted to run for this position, leading to 17 different 'factions' within the party. Matters were not helped when the sitting president lent his support to one of the candidates (see pp. 8-23). Similar tensions plagued the elections of other party officials and candidates for members of parliament when those at the top of the party hierarchy chose to impose 'favourites' rather than allow free and fair elections to determine who got what position (pp.11-23). This disunity impacted the work of the campaign team negatively. There was lack of teamwork (pp. 33-56) and proper co-ordination between party and campaign team, campaign team and government, campaign team and independent groups (pp.44-45). Other problems identified are lack of commitment to the work of the committee (p.43); power struggles within and between committees (pp. 38-39) and unequal access to the flag bearer which determined how much power each committee or individual had (see, for example, pp. 52-53).

The problem of finance was not the lack of it but the use of it. The author argues that until very late in the campaign, there was no collaboration between the campaign team and the 'spending committee', prompting the Director of Campaign to once declare, '[A]s we sit here, they are in Brong-Ahafo. They are spending money so it means someone made a budget. I was not involved at all' (p.48). This problem prevented the campaign team from campaigning in areas like settler communities where some votes could have been won. Also, it created problems for the communication team as funds for crucial adverts were not forthcoming and there was no clear cut approach on which adverts – TV, radio, open space, etc. - to fund or how much to put in those adverts (see, for example, pp.43 and 83). Crucially, the little funds made available to some functionaries, especially those who had become indebted as a result of their own campaigns (for positions in the party or to stand on the ticket of the party for members of parliament) were diverted for settling debts. With all these problems hanging on its neck, the NPP marched into the elections a weaker party than it had been four years earlier.

Election day brought further problems. Among them was the inability to mobilise NPP voters (by providing adequate bus services, for example). Some simply did not vote, partly because of the imposition of candidates on them or because they thought victory was assured. There were also deficiencies in policing of the voting and counting processes and in provision of general security (p.128). The author argues that the NPP polling agents were few, lacked incentive and were inadequately trained. These inadequacies of the polling agents would not have mattered much had there been supportive returning and police officers. Unfortunately for the NPP, the credibility of hired returning officers was in question and generally it appeared the security forces were pro-NDC, with some police officers saying 'Sergeant Atta [the NDC

flag bearer] should go' (pp.127-130) and others exhibiting the 'Yere Sesamu' (or we are changing) sign of the NDC (p.148). The corollary of these problems was voting irregularities (see, for example, pp.131-133) and numerous spoiled ballots, enough to give the NPP a first round victory. The author notes that the NPP had got wind of this strategy of causing ballots to be 'spoiled' through the use of dubious voting ink; but the inadequacies of the NPP polling agents and the general apathy of the security agencies did not make it possible to avert these problems (pp.127-135). Despite these problems during the election day, the NPP won the first round of the elections but it did not obtain more than 50 per cent of the valid votes cast to be declared elected as required by the constitution. There was the need to go into a second round of elections.

The NPP lost round two of the elections. Five reasons are given by the author to explain this result. First, because the NDC had, by the first round, obtained more parliamentary seats, it claimed that the country would be ungovernable if the electorates voted for an NPP president. This was false, of course, but the propaganda was not effectively countered. Second, a lack of control in the NPP team regarding who could speak and what to say at rallies led to the bizarre incident of one ex-minister publicly asking for forgiveness from a section of the electorates. The NDC took advantage of this incident, claiming that it was a public admission of guilt of all the 'sins' the NDC had accused the NPP of and urged the electorates to vote out the 'sinners'. The third and fourth reasons gave credence to the second. Taxi drivers who had been given harsh sentences for trivial offences were suddenly released by the government and the price of premix fuel was suddenly reduced. These actions by the NPP government created the impression that the NPP could have made life much easier for the people but had failed to do so. Such problems, according to the author, were indicative of the lack of a potent strategy for the second round of elections. But the fifth reason was, perhaps, more important. There were dramatic voting irregularities (such as intimidation of NPP polling agents and sudden increases in the number of voters) in the Volta region, reputed as being pro-NDC. All these reasons collectively led to the victory of the NDC in round two (pp. 137-145). However, as with the first round victory of the NPP, the NDC had not obtained more than 50 per cent of the valid votes cast to be declared elected. There was the need for a third round of elections in another town, Tain, where voting had not taken place in the earlier elections because the offices of the electoral commission there had been burnt by arsonists.

As it turned out, the NPP boycotted the Tain elections because it had hoped it could get a court injunction to stop the elections. It could not. The NDC won Tain and hence was declared winner of the elections (pp.147-149).

The causes of NPP's defeat, therefore, fall into two groups: factors which are internal to the party (such as disunity) and external (such as vote rigging) to the party.

Of the two, the internal problems seemed less important. These are everyday problems of political parties. The author admits, ‘...our failure on voting day was most significant...’ (p.xiv). If so, the subtitle of the book – *The politics of complacency* – is not quite accurate: the causes of NPP’s defeat go beyond complacency.

The author’s advantaged position as Chairman of Communication of the NPP in the 2008 Campaign, should have led to a richer account of the internal problems. Unfortunately, the analysis is rather shallow. To label the factors internal to the party as ‘weak’, ‘ineffective’ or ‘wrong’ in the context of winning elections, the author needed to contextualise the 2008 strategy. For example, how did it compare and contrast with the strategy for earlier elections since 1992? Very little of this context is provided and the analysis tends, therefore, to be superficial. For instance, when analysing Tain, the main decider of the 2008 elections, the author provides only a two-sheet chapter (pp.147-149). The little contextual analysis that is presented relies too heavily on anecdotes from the USA. Such conjectures create the unfortunate impression that the author is, perhaps, more confident in describing politics in the USA than politics in Ghana. The distinctive touch of a practising politician promised by the author seems oddly lacking in this book.

The book adds few substantially new insights to what is already known. More detailed studies have long been carried out and published (see, for example, Amoah, 2009; Whitfield, 2009; Heinz et al, 2009; CODEO, 2009; Gyimah-Boadi, 2009). The book also lacks a good editor’s pen. It contains too much information that is only marginally relevant to its objectives. For example, why is so much space given to how speeches were written? Why does the author choose the body of the text to express regret about not thanking program organisers? (see, for example, p.74, pp.12-13). Several typographical errors occur (e.g. ‘violen’ for violence p.79; ‘seperation’ for separation, p.88; frame for framed, p.20); some sentences are not clear (e.g. p.77 ‘I was.....Ghanaweb’; p.80 ‘He...Latin America’); and some names are wrongly spelt (e.g. Ocquaye for Oquaye; T.D. Joshua for T.B. Joshua).

Though this book falls short of convincingly achieving its objectives, it is still an interesting read. It contains several ‘gossips’, jokes and anecdotes that could be relaxing for students of politics who have had previous doses of more analytical and well researched pieces.

About the Reviewer

Franklin Obeng-Odoom is author of the book, *Governance for Pro-Poor Urban Development: Lessons from Ghana* (Routledge, 2013). He is also a Dan David Scholar in ‘the march towards democracy’. He is based at DAB, UTS and can be contacted via email (Franklin.Obeng-Odoom@uts.edu.au).

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