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# The interface of modern partisan politics and community conflicts in Africa: the case of Northern Ghana conflicts

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# **The Interface of Modern Partisan Politics and Community Conflicts in Africa: the case of Northern Ghana Conflicts**

**By: Samuel Nana Abokyi**

## **ABSTRACT**

Conflicts are multi causal and remain an inevitable part of human existence, and Africa like other parts of the world has had to grapple with the phenomenon. The Northern Region of Ghana has over the years been a hotbed of conflicts as several communities have gained notoriety for frequent violent disturbances. Though the “North” is not the only place of simmering tensions and conflicts since colonial times, the violent nature and intractability of some conflicts which often make the headlines for obviously “bad” reasons leaves much to be desired. This paper examines Northern Ghana’s intractable conflicts many of which have partisan and political undertones, and have served as fodder to exacerbate; chieftaincy succession conflicts, land and boundary disputes, and others that may arise from competing group interests. More importantly, some of these disputes may directly be as a result of struggle for political power or domination. Whilst relying on textual or content analysis of conflicts in Ghana and Africa the author also makes use of, interviews, personal observation and experiences gained from the area under discussion. Resource persons and researchers, some from these conflict areas offered great insight for this write-up.

**Key words:** Conflict, Community, Northern Ghana, Politics, Colonialism, Constituency

## **1.1 Introduction and Background**

To say that conflict is inherently human is to state the obvious. Galtung (1967:20) puts it succinctly when he said “to live is to strive; where there is no drive, no strife, there is no life”. This is certainly not a justification or rationalisation of conflicts, but a clear indication that conflicts are an intricate part of human existence. If one has to live ‘meaningfully’, there has to be some struggle, and therein lays conflict, be it intra or inter personal. Even persons in a passive and relaxed condition may have to contend with aggressors or invaders. Every individual or community might have dealt with conflict in one way or another.

Conflict does not lend itself to easy characterization though there are certain ingredients that may be present for an occurrence to be so described. According to the Farmer Mentor Handbook (2008), the first observation that can be made about conflict is that it occurs either within a person (intra-personal) or between two or more people (interpersonal). Community conflict is most often interpersonal, due to the diversity in viewpoints, backgrounds and experiences of community members. It must thus be pointed out that, conflicts though may be intra-personal or inter-personal present different degrees or intensities and contexts. According to Brosch and Eldversson (2011), communal conflict is violent conflict between non-state groups that are organised along a shared communal identity, and violent conflict refers to the fact that the parties use lethal violence to gain control over some disputed and perceived indivisible resource, such as a piece of land or local political power. Communal violence is often perpetrated across ethnic or communal lines with the violent parties feeling solidarity for their respective groups as victims are chosen based upon group membership. Violent clashes across political, ethnic and religious lines have claimed millions of lives, displaced several others, and created a climate of instability even in ‘supposed’ democratic environments where protection of individual rights are expected to be non-negotiable.

Democracy has increasingly become a sine qua non for good governance. It is important to note therefore that modern partisan politics, which hinges on democracy, has gained currency as a key element of foreign policy and development assistance. Governments, multilateral organizations and a large number of national and international-NGOs have renewed their commitments to international engagement to support democracy, from both within and without. Many years of insistence led a wave of competitive multi-party elections in Africa. These unprecedented contests can be described as founding elections (Bratton and Posner,

1999) in the sense that, for many African countries, they marked a transition from an extended period of dictatorial rule to an era of democratic governance.

Multi-party democracy with fixed terms of office preceding competitive elections appears to have received massive endorsement as an ideal form of political governance for countries. Many African countries including Ghana have joined the bandwagon to gain acceptability in the League of Nations. Liberal democracy is conceived as a political phenomenon characterized by regular free and fair elections in which political parties compete to form the government. Liberal democracy also takes into concern a universal adult suffrage (eighteen years and above in Ghana); it also guarantees of a range of familiar political and civil rights (Sandbrook, 1988). These rights and freedoms however remain a mirage for many. Democratic elections are often accompanied by unhealthy contestations, violence, and ‘bad blood’ between and among political parties, individuals and communities. In some cases, opposing political parties are often at the mercy of incumbents who use state machinery to intimidate them. These partisan conflicts have largely polarized the society, thereby creeping into ethnic and chieftaincy feuds.

This paper examines Northern Ghana’s intractable conflicts many of which have partisan and political undertones, and have served as fodder to exacerbate; chieftaincy succession conflicts, land and boundary disputes, and others that may arise from competing group interests. More importantly, some of these disputes may directly be as a result of struggle for political power or domination. The multiple causes of conflicts in Northern Ghana are discussed in the context of Johan Galtung’s typology of “actor and frustration”. Whilst relying on textual or content analysis of conflicts in Ghana (published articles, reports and books), the author also makes use of personal observation and experiences gained from the area under discussion. Resource persons and researchers, some from these conflict areas offered great insight. Online newspaper accounts and articles proved very valuable and enriching.

## **1.2 Background to Community Conflicts**

Violent conflicts have afflicted Africa and exacted a heavy toll on the continent’s societies, polities and economies, robbing them of their developmental potential and democratic possibilities (Zezeza 2008). History is also replete with evidence of community violence across the globe emanating from modern partisan politics. Raleigh (2015) reveals that, countries affected by political instability, which hasn’t degenerated into civil wars often

experience the highest levels of urban unrest, and conflict rates are highest during periods of political contest, including elections and other periods of national instability. Conflicts in Kenya in (2002, 2007, 2008), Zimbabwe (2008), Cote d'Ivoire (2010–2011), Nigeria (2011) and Uganda (2016) are but a few recent examples of countries in which violence during elections have exceeded event frequencies typically associated with intense civil wars. Most often, the opponents of the ruling governments have suffered immensely, as they sometimes contend with forces marshalled by the state. In view of this, there have been several cases of politically motivated incarcerations, exiles, deaths and other human right abuses.

To this end, there is the perception that partisan politics in some Africa countries is 'synonymous' with conflict and violence. As already stated, this perception stems from various levels and degrees of conflicts that have accompanied or characterised modern partisan politics on the continent. The Kenyan example is worth recounting and emphasising because of its far-reaching consequences and lessons for the continent as far as modern partisan politics is concerned. Halakhe (2013) recounts that within hours of the announcement of the 2007 election results, protests turned violent and mass atrocities were committed. This had an ethnic dimension as it was mainly between the Kikuyus, Luos and Kalenjins. According to the Human Rights Watch (2008), violence during electoral periods in Kenya have killed at least 4,433 people and displaced over 1.8 million since the introduction of the multi-party system in 1991. Similarly, Ghana's neighbour *Côte d'Ivoire* was plunged into turmoil following incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo's refusal to concede defeat in the November 2010 elections. Also, as recent as February 2016, elections in Ugandan were described variously as shambolic and an affront to democracy. Even though *the forgoing sordid examples have cast a slur on the image of Africa as far as the practice of multi-party democracy is concerned though, conflicts may not be as widespread as it often described.*

A potential issue of drawback, acrimony and tension in Ghana's democratic dispensation can be attributed to the current political system or practice of "winner takes all". The winning candidate and his party take over the governance of the country and virtually appoint entirely new persons into some public institutions. Besides political office, party supporters and financiers are often rewarded with lucrative jobs, contracts, and executive positions in corporations among other largesse. This impinges very negatively on the national psyche and often polarises the political landscape of Ghana and largely contributes to acrimony and periodic antagonisms. The seizing of public toilets, tollbooths, the forceful and oftentimes

violent take-over of the management of some state institutions and wanton destruction of property has heralded electoral victories and defeats.

Comparatively and in recent times, Ghana may not have descended into huge political turmoil or violence as has been witnessed in Ivory Coast, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo or even Kenya, but she has still has to deal with the ethnic wars/conflict that have engulfed some parts of the Northern Region of Ghana since the early 1990s (often referred to as the guinea fowl war). There have not been large-scale partisan community conflicts and violence in the fourth republic though one cannot dispute pockets of such across the country that are often described as low intensity violence and in some geographical areas often referred to as flash points. Bob-Milliar (2014) describes *low-intensity electoral violence* as election-related disturbances or infractions occurring during the pre-vote and post-vote periods in which there are no more than ten election-related deaths; violence is localized; and, there is no large-scale displacement of human beings and dispossession of assets. The perceived mix of ethnic and partisan politics may have caused more deaths as was the case in Yendi in 2002 where *Yaa Naa Yakubu Andani II was murdered along with about forty (40) others*.

### **1.3 Related Conceptual/Theoretical Underpinnings**

The nature of community conflicts in Northern Ghana can be espoused and understood in the context of some theoretical expositions. Johan Galtung in his book “theories of conflict” (1967) explains how conflict escalates and how the different components of conflict are interlinked. Among others, his conflict theory explains why contradictions between and among actors escalate and result in violence. In this paper, I focus on the typologies of “actor” and “frustration” conflicts in discussing Northern Ghana conflicts.

Actor conflict according to Galtug, is horizontal and often between equivalent entities. With this type of conflict, the combatants or feuding parties are at the same level of “authority” or “importance” as one is often not significantly over and above the other. For example one ethnic group versus another or a political party in conflict with another can be referred to as actor conflict. Actor conflict is often sporadic as it comes into being from time to time and may be understood as an incompatible interaction between at least two actors, where one of the ‘actors’ experiences damage, caused by the other intentionally, or ignores the damage caused. In Ghana, the Tsito-peki, Nkonya-Alavanyo, Mamprusi-kusasi, Andani-Abudu, and



Dagomba-Konkomba conflicts are among several examples of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts. Also, both intra and inter political party (mostly NDC-NPP) conflicts and skirmishes are commonplace especially during major political activities like elections. Bob-Milliar (2014) describes these actor conflicts as localised violence. Enyedi (2005) also suggests that, cleavages may be formed (race, sex, ideological, religion, class etc) to reflect 'actor membership' which often served as a mobilizing tool.

As espoused by Galtung (1967), frustration conflict on the other hand is when goals are not realized or actors and parties are frustrated in the attainment of their goals thereby resulting in conflicts or aggression. This means that the access to the goal-state has been blocked. It is customary to talk about sources of frustration, which are seen as the factors that must be removed for access to the goal-state when the actor is said to be frustrated. Brukum (2001) characterizes some recent conflicts as wars of emancipation. In this regard he sees them in terms of one group of people determined to maintain a decadent status quo and the other fighting to overthrow it. As one group strives to maintain an obvious advantageous state or position over the other, at some point in time the oppressed may get "frustrated" and eventually fight back to overthrow the prevailing state of affairs. When people are frustrated, they may vent their anger on a perceived target that they think is hindering them. Also, according to (Gurr 1970), deprivation can cause frustration and exacerbate tensions, because to him, uneven growth in different sectors of the economy may intensify existing cleavages and lead to increasing inequality as the economy expands. People in a state of abject poverty or state of want, are likely to get frustrated and express it violently.

#### **1.4 Dynamics of Partisan Politics and Community Conflicts in Northern Ghana**

Northern Ghana is home to a number of different ethnic groups speaking a variety of related languages. According to Awedoba (2015), Northern Ghana comprises the three northernmost administrative regions of Ghana: the Upper West Region, Upper East Region and Northern Region which lie roughly north of the Lower Black Volta River, and together with its tributaries the White and Red Voltas and the Oti and Daka rivers, drain the area that comprises Northern Ghana. Some ethnic groups claim autochthony while others like the Dagomba, Mamprusi and Gonja claim ancestry from warrior newcomers, with the latter imposing their rule on the former. These groups have however lived together for centuries albeit with periodic conflicts and disagreements over different sets of variables (land, chieftaincy, natural resources etc.)

As the case may be with many societies if not all, conflicts in the Ghanaian society can be seen as an intrinsic part of its political, judicial and cultural history. Conflicts may therefore be as old as the communities themselves. To put this in perspective, even before the advent of colonialism, conflicts played very important roles in the formation of states and annexation of territories, the exercise of authority and identity construction. Ethnic groups thus fought another, especially as states were expanding and defending their territories. Even so, there were intra ethnic or family conflicts that arose internally. Traditional forms of dispute settlement, which predate colonialism, lend credence to this. The “burying of the blood” which was a prerequisite for conflict settlement especially between the Anufor and Konkomba predate colonialism since it was a major function of the earth priest, who is in-charge of the ‘earth shrine’<sup>1</sup>, an institution that existed before colonialism (Kirby 1999, Zimoñ 2003).

The colonial ‘enterprise’ cannot entirely be absolved of the numerous conflicts on the continent of Africa and for that matter Northern Ghana. The legacy of colonialism is still felt, and resonates many years back after the departure of the colonialists. Their actions and or in-actions in some sense have ‘given birth to’ or acted as fertile grounds for some conflicts to fester. According to Tsikata and Seini (2004) the differences in how territories were administered by the colonial government and how they experienced colonial economic policies have influenced the emerging character of ethnic configurations and relations that begun in the pre-colonial period. While certain ethnic groups thrived under colonialism and extended their rule over others, some faded from official view. For instance discussions with the Anufor<sup>2</sup> in Ghana point to a quagmire that many ethnic groups find themselves. Anuforland was a German protectorate in West Africa from 1884 to 1914, encompassing what is now Sansanne Mango in Togo and most of what is now Chereponi and parts of Saboba districts in Ghana. The territory was invaded and quickly overrun by British and French forces during what is referred to as the Togoland campaign. In 1916 the area came

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<sup>1</sup> According to MacGaffey (2013), earth shrine is a fixed shrine associated with a community which is presided over by a tindana (earth priest). These positions are usually reserved for the indigenous inhabitants who “understand the language of the gods” and often consulted to appease the earth (land) when ‘defiled’ by violence or conflict.

<sup>2</sup> The anufor (meaning the people of Anou in Akan) as they prefer to call themselves are believed to have migrated from Ivory Coast on a mercenary expedition. Interestingly, the Anufor were under German rule until the end of the First World War when the French took over Sansanne Mango in Togo whilst the Ghana portion of Chereponi and surrounding villages (Anufor territory) came under British rule.

under British and French rule and was formalized in 1922, (NRG8/1/2).<sup>3</sup> By this arrangement the Anufor came under Eastern Dagomba District where the *Feme* (chief) of Chereponi, upon selection had to travel to the Yaa Naa in Yendi for installation and legitimisation instead of across to Sansanne-Mango in Togo (traditional capital of the Anufor). Also, the Gonja chiefs in the Northern Region gained formal control of groups including the Tampulima, Vagala Nawuri, Nchumuru, and Mo, thus sowing the seeds for some of the more intensive inter-ethnic conflicts of the post-colonial period (Brukum, 1995). Ladouceur (1979) also reveals that Konkombas are not closely related to the Dagomba, yet are included within the Dagomba Traditional Area. Essentially there were several of such colonial arrangements, which placed some ethnic groups under the so-called 'majority' groups that have lingered on with numerous repercussions; apparent disagreements and hostilities. With the advent of multi-party democracy these conflicts have been transformed, with groups 'aligning' in an attempt to either maintain or change the status quo.

Zezeza (2007) observes that, the instabilities and insecurities of postcolonial Africa are rooted in the political and cultural economies of both colonialism and the post-independence order itself. The immediate post-independence era in Ghana witnessed some political machinations and manoeuvrings that heightened tensions and created conflict situations. The two main contenders in the Gold Coast (now Ghana); the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) and the Convention People's Party (CPP) were very central in the scheme of things that saw several groups aligning to court sympathies and form allegiances. To Tsikata and Seini (2004) some ethno-regional parties supported either the UGCC or the CPP based on what they perceived to be the party of their ethnic rivals, or simply their group interests. One way for the CPP to secure political control in the North was to undermine the power of the Mamprusi chief, the Nayiri Lund (2003). This is because according to Ladouceur (2003), in 1954, the Nayiri was in strong coalition with Mumuni Bawumia who was one of the principal political characters of the day. Thus the CPP began to mobilise among potential supporters in the areas controlled by the Mamprusi, notably among the Frafras and the Kusasis. This was to garner support from those who may not be too friendly with the Mamprusi, especially the Kusasi. Just like the Andani and Abudu chieftaincy conflict, the conflict between the Mamprusi and Kusasi has lingered on for several decades, resurrecting and taking different forms in the face of court cases and change in governments. In contemporary times (from 1992) and with Ghana's political landscape becoming a two horse race between the National

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<sup>3</sup> PRAAD, Tamale NRG8/1/2, Boundary Disputes, Togoland

Democratic Congress (NDC) and New Patriotic Party (NPP), these feuding parties have tended to align with either of them. Typically, the Andani royal family tend to support the NDC whilst the Abudus are usually on the side of the NPP. With individual government officials deciding to show a natural inclination towards their own ethnic groups, as has been seen in Bawku and Yendi, chieftaincy conflicts have thus taken a political dimension.

The Dagbon (Andani-Abudu) and Bawku (Mamprusi-Kusasi) conflicts present different dynamics. Whilst the latter is an inter-ethnic chieftaincy conflict, the former is an intra-ethnic chieftaincy succession dispute. These are non-state, actor conflicts with an element of frustration (inability to get enskinned) further causing a protraction. The conflicts are also as they present no surprise at all due to their longevity. Amankwah (2013) asserts that, a factor that has led to partisan-political election-related violence in Ghana is when either the NPP or the NDC are tied to factions that dispute chieftaincy rights. This has reflected in the competition between the two (2) gates in Dagbon and two ethnic groups in Bawku both of which have had far reaching consequences, engulfing whole ethnic groups with grave animosities and suspicion. Some resulting in the dissolution of marriages as happened in 2002 in Dagbon when unions between Abudu and Andani families ended prematurely. An observation of day to day activities Tamale reveals a religious angle where NDC supporters who are mostly Andani go for prayers in the Afajura Mosque whilst the Abudu and NPP faithful pray in what is referred to as the Central Mosque. This sharp polarization that is very conspicuous has been replicated or exported to other communities where disputants find themselves. Periodic disturbances at Agbogbloshie, Accra suburbs with a huge Northern population attest to this. Beyond Dagbon and Bawku, similar conflicts have occurred in Wa, Bimbilla, Bunkpurugu, Chereponi with varying social, economic and political implications.

Mainline partisan political violence is a very common phenomenon that cannot be discounted. Democratization and elections literature in analysing flawed elections or conflicts resulting from disputed elections in sub-Saharan Africa have largely used the concept “electoral violence” to describe these political infractions, disturbances, or riotous behaviour of party supporters (Bob-Milliar 2014). The underlying fact is that, these elections, in recent times and especially within the fourth republican period have heightened tensions and caused apprehension. Besides frequent clashes during major national electioneering campaigns, conflicts have resulted from disagreements over the use of venues for rallies among others. ‘By-elections’ however seem to present the worse form of violence as the stakes are often

surprisingly higher. Whilst the incumbent seeks to use it as an endorsement and vote of confidence, the opposition seeks to use it as evidence of government failure.

The Chereponi and Talensi<sup>4</sup> by-elections in the Northern and Upper East regions of Ghana respectively make interesting analysis. The Chereponi constituency is a swing one and has been won by both the NDC and NPP on various occasions. With the seat becoming vacant due to the demise of a sitting Member of Parliament in the year 2009, the stage was set for the usual political machinations and tensions that accompany by-elections, with one seeking to outsmart the other. As anticipated, the election didn't turn out to be peaceful, despite the huge presence of over a thousand (1,000) security men who were deployed to supervise it. This however fell short of preventing the violence that was witnessed. Also, the 2016 elections in the Chereponi Constituency reached violent levels shortly before the close of the main campaign period when between the NDC and NPP led to two fatalities and several others injured. Several market stalls and houses were destroyed in the process.

The Talensi by-election in 2016 was not any different if not worse. Imported party supporters from other regions with the intention of policing the elections caused mayhem. With the 'Bolga Bull Dogs' from Bolgatnga (aligned to the NPP) and 'Azorka Boys' from Tamale (an NDC group) the battle lines were drawn. As was the case in Chereponi, there were gunshots and destruction of property. With a recurring feature of accusations and counter accusations, the youth who often appear emboldened by their leaders rarely get prosecuted. Amankwaah (2013), reports of cases in Tamale where perpetrators of electoral violence were released from police cells upon intervention from a party 'big man'. The media (print and electronic) are often awash with images of atrocities carried out with impunity. These and together with other heinous crimes that have gone un-punished and or resolved amicably could be responsible for the escalation and protraction of community conflicts in Northern Ghana.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

As has been established, conflicts are undoubtedly multi-causal<sup>5</sup> in the sense that there are different sets of variables that are sufficient to bring about a conflict. Various conflicts in

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<sup>4</sup> The Chereponi and Talensi constituencies in the Northern and Upper East Regions respectively are part of Ghana Parliament

<sup>5</sup> Awedoba (2010) identifies some immediate and remote causes of conflicts especially in Northern Ghana as; competition for the control and ownership of land, rivalry over traditional power and authority, abuse of power and position on the part of the ruler and or someone in authority, rebellion against oppression and intolerable conditions, competition for resources among others.

Africa and Northern Ghana for that matter can be blamed on the enduring legacy of colonialism and the apparent failure of the state to respond adequately and deal decisively with the challenges of nation building. In some cases, the state has been found to be complicit with state machinery used for parochial interests. With the presence of different groups with competing interests, and the obvious limited resources, Northern Ghana conflicts have found a fertile ground to flourish. Chieftaincy, land and partisan political conflicts, community feuds and skirmishes have been exacerbated by the democratic practice of 'winner takes all'. The stakes are often very high in such election and this has resulted in parties sometimes employing all means possible (including violence) to win power. A reconsideration of this constitutional practice of 'winner takes all' is long overdue. Individual freedoms and dignities and by extension peace in communities and the country at large should remain inalienable. A successful resolution of the Dagbon and Bawku chieftaincy conflicts among several others that have existed since the 1800s would be a huge step in the right direction. Exploring traditional forms of conflict resolution should be given paramount consideration, taking cognizance of the differences in culture and belief systems in order to find middle grounds.

The Harvard Approach to conflict resolution places prominence in the differences in positions that are mostly entrenched in what is communicated as 'want' and reasons adduced for what feuding parties say they want. This approach suggests that conflicts can be resolved when actors focus on interests instead of positions, and together develop criteria to deal with these differences (Ury et al, 1993). The 'value' of what parties actually need or want should thus be the focus of discussion and resolution.

Though in some cases criminal elements infiltrate political and or ethnic feuds to perpetrate crime, to pretend that they are not 'political or ethnic' would be behaving like the proverbial ostrich. It must therefore be recognized that, though such feuds could be described as crimes, the motivation to commit such crimes should be the overriding consideration and target for resolution. Conflict resolution mechanisms should therefore move beyond applying 'force' or using the law courts as these have proven to be ineffective. At best, they only have had a temporal effect of dousing 'flames' albeit with a "we live to fight another day" posture which often materializes. It is very imperative to consider the complex nature of these conflicts because as has been demonstrated some have outlived several generations and therefore has implications not only for the living, but the dead and unborn.

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