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Political Vigilante Groups in Ghana: Violence or Democracy?

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Abstract

Literature on political vigilante groups has centred on the violence and conflict that emanate from their activities. This article approaches political vigilante groups as political actors who engage in political mobilisation and participation and therewith also contribute to nation state building. It explores how such groups participate in Ghana's democratic governance and asks whether violence is an inevitable characteristic. The article builds on individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with political vigilante group members in Kumasi and Tamale in 2019. Findings show that political vigilante "youth" appeared to refer primarily to the social position attributed to non-elite groups in the political field. Political vigilante groups are multi-faceted in their organisational structures, membership, and activities both during electoral campaigns and during governing periods. While some groups revert to violence occasionally, the study concludes that political vigilante groups, in enabling different voices to be heard, are also contributing to democratic governance.

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Keywords

Ghana, political vigilante groups, political vigilantism, democracy, youth

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Introduction

Since Ghana returned from military rule to democratic governance in 1993, Ghanaians have consistently gone to the polls every four years to change or retain government. After seven consecutive presidential and parliamentary elections since the beginning of the Fourth Republic, Ghana is identified as a beacon of peace for other emerging African democracies (Gyekye-Jandoh, 2014). Ghana's democratic elections in the Fourth Republic have succeeded Huntington's (1993) "turn over test." Yet Ghana's relatively stable and democratic trajectory is not devoid of violence.

The Ghanaian literature has widely explored the violence that occurs before, during, and after elections as ephemeral fading off after elections (Bekoe, 2012; Bob-Milliar, 2014a, 2014b; Lindberg, 2006). The violence has been attributed to youth groups within political parties. These youth groups within political parties are described by public opinion, civil societies, and some scholarly works in Ghana as political vigilante groups (Asamoah, 2020; Coalition of Domestic Election Observers [CODEO], 2017; Daddieh and Bob-Milliar, 2012; Paalo, 2017). We find, however, that political vigilantism in Ghana extends beyond the electoral transition period into the governing era (CODEO, 2017: 1), and includes activities other than violence and supportive of democratic governance. Moreover, a closer look at these groups show that "youth" should not be taken at face value.

In 2019, during the parliamentary by-election in Ayawaso West constituency in Accra, violence occurred and it was attributed to the presence of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC) political vigilante groups in the polling centres. In consequence, the President of the Republic of Ghana criminalised political vigilante groups in September 2019 when he signed the Vigilantism and Related Offences Bill into law (Afua, 2019).[1] The new law draws attention to the dichotomy that exists between official disbandment of political vigilantism in Ghana's democratic governance and the lived experiences of political vigilantism within the political field. Given the long history in Ghana's politics, political vigilante groups can be seen as political actors with interests in the political field that seemingly cannot be curtailed by bureaucratic laws.

Political vigilantism in sub-Saharan Africa has received significant attention in the literature, though attention has been largely limited to the violence and their manifestation as state failure (Asamoah, 2020; Bob-Milliar, 2014a, 2014b; Pratten, 2008; Rasmussen, 2020; Smith, 2004). For instance, in the study of vigilante groups in Nigeria, Pratten (2008) and Smith (2004) underlined the violence that emanates from the activities of the vigilante group called Bakassi Boys. Asamoah (2020) and Daddieh and Bob-Milliar (2012), in their work, questioned the sustainability of political vigilantism in Ghana's democracy. Nonetheless, a few studies have explored the non-violent engagements of youth groups in the political field. Fleisher (2000) noted that state-sponsored vigilantism in Tanzania provided services that were beneficial to both the local community and the government. Chisanga (2018) discussed how, in Zambia, youth groups in political parties are prepared technically to promote the ideals of their political parties, while Kyei (2020) identified the political mobilisation activities of political vigilante groups in Ghana.

By focusing on the case of Ghana, this research aims to investigate the institutionalisation of political vigilantism in Ghana's democratic governance. Specifically, we seek to understand the meanings and motivations that drive political vigilantism in Ghana's political system. In this way, this research contributes towards filling the gap on the dynamics and operations of political vigilantism in the process of democratic governance in Ghana. Moreover, the research questions whether violence is an inevitable characteristic of political vigilante groups in the political field, often mentioned as a reason to disband such groups in Ghana's politics, as the law now also stipulates. Thus, contrary to the narrative that political vigilantism is detrimental to democratic governance, we propose that political vigilante groups should be seen as political actors that engage in political mobilisation and participation, with potentially constructive contributions to democratic processes. We further argue that the violence created by political vigilante groups are, rather than signs of a failed state per se, communicative acts that present the voice of the specific excluded social forces in the political field.

In this article, we first proceed by conceptualising the political field and political vigilantism. Subsequently, we contextualise political youth engagement in Ghana's political history, discuss the methods, and then continue with a description of the findings. These are followed by the conclusions.

Conceptualising the Political Field and Political Vigilantism

Bourdieu's (1985) concept of field enables the conceptualisation of a political space within which political vigilante groups operate. Bourdieu was interested in understanding the latent interests and struggles that shape the empirical realities of social arenas (Swartz, 2012). Field is a central concept in Bourdieu's theory of practice, in which he draws attention to the power relations that are involved in practices (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The concept of field in Bourdieu's work refers to a social arena and simultaneously a space of conflict and competition within which different actors struggle for the accumulation of resources (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 7). The political field is likened to a game with players occupying different positions of domination depending on the type of resources, or what Bourdieu calls capital, that they possess (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

In this article, the field in which power struggles occur is the political field of Ghana's democratic governance. We understand democracy as the participation and representation of citizens in the governance system of a nation state. Rather than a normative concept, we investigate democracy in the first place as experienced in the daily life of the different actors in the political field. Democracy is thus seen as constructed, reconstructed, and negotiated (Hagberg et al., 2018: 14) by the diverse political actors in the political field. The actors in the political field are individual activists, political parties, small groups within political parties, and political institutions.

Previous studies (Asamoah, 2020; Bob-Milliar, 2014a; Gyampo et al., 2017; Rasmussen, 2020) have not reached any consensus as to the understanding of vigilantism. Generally, vigilantism is claimed to be primarily a violent, extra-legal action by a

group of persons (Abrahams, 1998). Vigilantism is also identified as a manifestation of formal institutional failure (Johnston, 1996: 221; Pratten, 2008; Smith, 2004). Rosenbaum and Sederberg (1976) placed vigilantism under the category of establishment violence. Others argued that vigilantism concerns an "informal political sector" (Abrahams, 1998: 76) or informal involvement of neo-traditional actors (Moumouni, 2017) in governance. For instance, Moumouni (2017) discussed how so-called vigilante hunters' associations called Dambanga in Benin collaborate with security forces in the fight against crime.

There are different categories of vigilantism depending on the field in which the act of vigilantism occurs. It has been argued that *political* vigilantism needs the existence of the state for it to function; as such, political vigilantism cannot exist in a stateless environment (Abrahams, 1998: 16). Some have argued that political vigilante groups do not fight the state with the aim of creating an autonomous polity, but against marginalisation in the distribution of the endowed state resources as promised by modern democracy (Caldeira and Holston, 1999). Moreover, political vigilante groups are said to rekindle the social contract the state has with its citizens in Hobbesian fashion (Abrahams, 1998; Goldstein, 2003). We argue that political vigilantism is a mark of refusal on the part of some of the citizenry to accept the political exclusion enforced on them by the state. We conceptualise political vigilantism as the activities of political party members or sympathisers aimed at claiming their own political interests or those of their political parties, potentially through force and/or violence. Political vigilante groups, we propose, may be conceptualised as small groups affiliated with political parties that strive to improve their access to resources while operating in the political field.

Contextualising Political Vigilantism in Ghana's Political History

Political youth groups, such as the political vigilante groups, are not new to Ghana's politics. They have their roots in the struggle for independence from colonial rule. Particularly J. B. Danquah and Kwame Nkrumah played pivotal roles in the political mobilisation of the youth for the formation and strengthening of political parties (Bob-Milliar, 2014b). During the Gold Coast era,[2] J. B. Danquah's mobilisation of youth groups under one leadership was instrumental in the formation of a new political party. The organisation of Youth Conferences was one of the strategies that enabled youth who had not attained formal schooling to work together with youth who had been schooled, in order to present their grievances to the colonial authorities (Austin, 1961). In 1930, Danquah managed to call for the first Youth Conference and from there the second one took place in 1938 at Mfantspim School (Austin, 1961). The third Youth Conference occurred in Kumasi the following year, during which a permanent organisation was formed to oversee the activities of the youth groups in the local assemblies. Forty representatives of the quasi-political bodies (Austin, 1961: 279) were brought together on 4 August 1947, which led to the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC). The UGCC, with Kwame Nkrumah as the secretary general, was the first political party to be formed in the era preceding Ghana's independence.

Kwame Nkrumah's unconventional approach did not go well with the founders and the other leaders of the UGCC. In particular, the leadership of the UGCC had problems with Kwame Nkrumah's assumption of responsibility for the violence that took place in the 1948 riot. They were also concerned that Kwame Nkrumah had orchestrated the formation of the Committee on Youth Organisation (CYO). The CYO was radical in its demand for self-government as it had as its slogan "Self Government Now," whereas the UGCC had as its policy "'self-government in the shortest possible time." On 12 June 1949, Kwame Nkrumah broke out from the UGCC and formed a political party called the Convention People's Party (CPP), declaring himself as leader and chairman.

The CPP strategically formed the Veranda Boys, who were youthful, exuberant, and devoted to the cause of immediate political freedom. In 1951, Kwame Nkrumah was released from prison and was invited to lead the government's business affairs. Kwame Nkrumah's CPP managed to gain independence for the Gold Coast and changed the name to Ghana on 6 March 1957. During the presidency of Kwame Nkrumah, the opposition political party, the National Liberation Movement, formed the Action Troopers, which was a youth wing of that party. The two-party system established during the fight for independence has resurfaced throughout the political history of Ghana's four republics. The UGCC has transformed into the Danquah–Dombo–Busia tradition, while the CPP has established itself as the Nkrumahist tradition. The Fourth Republic has witnessed the winning of presidential elections sometimes by the NPP that traces its history to the Danquah–Dombo–Busia tradition and sometimes by the NDC with affiliation to the Nkrumahist tradition (Bob-Milliar, 2012). As in the pre- and early post-colonial era, these two traditions have youth groups that are currently identified in the political and public discourse as political vigilante groups.

Data and Methods

This research seeks to understand the meanings and motivations of the political vigilante groups and their activities in Ghana. Given the interest in meanings and motivations, a qualitative research approach was adopted. The focus is on political vigilante groups associated with the NPP and NDC. Political vigilante groups associated with these political parties were selected because they were the only parties with such groups in Ghana (Gyampo et al., 2017). The political vigilante groups of the NDC and NPP are concentrated mainly in the capital cities of the regions. Tamale in the Northern Region of Ghana and Kumasi in the Ashanti Region of Ghana were selected as the sites of data collection, as they present the strongholds of the NDC and NPP, respectively. In Tamale, political vigilante groups called the Azorka Boys, Aluta Boys, Bawumia Fan Club, Samira Fan Club, and the Al Jazeera of the NDC, as well as the Kandahaar Boys of the NPP, were interviewed. In Kumasi, the Invincible Force and the Delta Force of the NPP and the Task Force of the NDC were interviewed.

The fieldwork, conducted by the first author, took place between the months of August and October 2019. It was a period when the Vigilantism and Related Offenses Bill 2019 in Ghana (Afua, 2019) was passed into law. The law criminalised all acts of vigilantism,

with emphasis on the activities by political vigilante groups. Moreover, public discourse in Ghana on political vigilante groups was not favourable, describing them as dangerous and nation wreckers. Consequently, scepticism on the part of the political vigilante groups towards anyone who sought to understand their activities in the political field was widespread. Aware of these challenges, the authors employed a variety of strategies to negotiate access. For some of the political vigilante groups, we gained access through the hierarchical structures of the political party to which they were affiliated. Second, contacts with some of the groups were made possible through key informants who mediated the access. Lastly, some of the political vigilante groups were directly approached at their meeting places, where we explained our research objectives in detail and asked for their participation. Our institutional affiliation also played a significant role in strengthening the confidence of the research participants in the neutrality of the study and the goal of knowledge creation.

In total, forty-two individual interviews took place among individual members of the various political vigilante groups. In addition, four focus group discussions were also conducted with political vigilante group members. Moreover, in total, eight key informant interviews were conducted with leaders of the NPP and NDC. Prior to the interviews and group discussions, verbal, informed consent was obtained from the research participants. Given the political and legal contexts, confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants are crucial. All the names attributed to the respondents are pseudonyms so as to keep their anonymity.

The data were transcribed verbatim and translated from Dagbani and Asante languages into English language for uploading onto NVIVO software. The data were disintegrated into manageable patterns, themes, subthemes, and relationships (Babbie and Mouton, 2001; Marshall and Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 1998). Analysis was conducted by the first and second author collaboratively. The second author contributed to the analysis and presentation of findings through continuous discussion about the findings and their meanings, and by co-authoring the various drafts of the article.

Findings and Discussions

Characteristics of Political Vigilante Group Members

Thirty-seven of the research participants were men and the remaining five were women. The gender composition confirms the masculine discourse in the literature on political vigilantism (Kwarkye, 2018; Nyabor, 2017), though the five women contest the fact that women are absent in the field of political vigilantism.

The age composition of the members of the political vigilante groups interviewed varied from as young as eighteen years up till sixty years. Political elites and public discourse in Ghana often referred to the studied groups as the "youth wings" of the political parties. The variation in age of our research participants, however, calls into question the understanding of these groups as "youth groups." As Ali questioned, "Are we boys?" (Tamale, October). While in definitions of "youth" boundaries of the relevant age brackets vary across contexts, many resonate with the one put forward by the United

Nations, which sees youth as young people between eighteen and thirty-six years old. Other definitions of youth signal a period of transition from childhood to adulthood (Reis and Berckmoes, 2018) or refer to a specific socio-generational position, often related to characteristics of dependency (Christiansen et al., 2006: 9; see also, Abbink and Kessel, 2005; Durham, 2000; Honwana and De Boeck, 2005). In the political field of Ghana, we found that the term "youth" is applied to indicate the political position of a person vis-à-vis more powerful political actors. Those who are not able to enter the class of political elites, irrespective of their age, are ascribed the position of youth in the political field.

About twenty-one of the respondents had basic education, twelve had secondary education, five were pursuing undergraduate education, and four were graduates. Several members of the political vigilante groups interviewed explicitly sought to redress the general perception that they were individuals without any sense of purpose in life, as is the current view in public discourse. In light of this, a research participant stated: "I am a professional carpenter and I own my shop with apprentices who work for me. When you came earlier on [meeting place], you realised that there was no one here; it was because we all have our various professions" (Kwesi, Kumasi, September).

Variation between Political Vigilante Groups

Ghana's political vigilante groups vary tremendously and are multi-faceted in nature. In this research, we identified various themes that highlight characteristics and activities of political vigilante groups, which we will discuss below. These regard the duration of membership, the organisational structure of the group, the voice that groups have been able to secure within the political field, and whether or not a political vigilante group employs the use of force or violence in their activities. All these characteristics reflect how political vigilante groups perceive and position themselves as political actors in the political field. Across the groups interviewed, the characteristics and activities are combined in different ways.

Membership Duration. The first characteristic found to differ across political vigilante groups concerns the state and duration of membership. Two main categories are identified. The first comprises political vigilantes who acknowledge their membership of a group within a particular political party. Here, members openly declared and accepted the socially ascribed or self-imposed names of political vigilante groups, which were linked to either the NPP or the NDC. The following political vigilante groups fell within this category: the Kandahar Boys, the Invincible Force, the Delta Force, the Bawumia Fan Club, and the Samira Fan Club. In these groups, membership is more or less well defined with nominated leaders occupying different formal positions within the groups. Among the members, moreover, there appears explicit commitment to the growth of the group. The duration of membership is described by members as consistent and lasting, as we see in the following quotes:

> I am a member of the Kandahar Boys and I have been with the group since its inception in 1996. (Ibra, Tamale, October)
>
> We derive our political history from the CPP and PNC then we continued through Chairman Rawlings in the NDC at the beginning of the Fourth Republic. We have a membership of over 200 and we are registered under the NDC for that is where our roots are. (Bamba, Kumasi, September)
>
> This group is NDC and we will forever be NDC otherwise our parents will not forgive us. We have a large membership and we keep records of members in the group. (Isak, Tamale, October)

In contrast to the members of this first category of political vigilante groups, individuals associated with other political vigilante groups denied affiliation to these groups, even though they sometimes assumed the socially ascribed or self-imposed names. Some referred to themselves as called-upon individuals who are loyalists to a specific political party leader. They explained that they were called upon by their leaders in times of need, or "mobilisation on demand." Because of the temporary attachment, involvement of individuals in these groups is sporadic and inconsistent. Loyalists generally do not acknowledge their togetherness as a group. Ali shows how such nuanced understanding of what "membership" entails can lead to seeming contradictions:

> Are we boys? There is nothing like Azorka Boys because anybody who comes to sit here is called Azorka Boy.
>
> (*Someone interrupts the interview followed by an exchange of greetings*)
>
> Alhaji!!
>
> The Azorka Boy!!
>
> Alhaji!!!
>
> The Azorka Boy!!
>
> Ali, to interviewer: We are loyalists of Chairman Azorka but not a group. When the Chairman calls and requests for boys, we mobilise from different parts of Tamale and then we execute that action. (Ali, Tamale, October)

In other words, the Azorka Boys and other groupings exist at the instance of the leader who instructs and directs a few loyalists to mobilise other people for specific actions.

Organisational Structure. The second characteristic concerns the organisational structure of the group within the political party, which was often connected to how long the group had been in existence. Our findings reveal that some of the political vigilante groups are well organised and well connected to the internal political party structures.

The hierarchical structures of these groups have clearly defined internal rules that dictate the norms and values of the group. There is a chain of command that descends from top to bottom, and in general, members respected the authority; otherwise they risked dismissal from the group. Although most of these norms are not written down but shared orally, they inform the lived experience of most of the political vigilante groups. For example, Enoch narrated how his group was organised and in what way these internal structures added to the sense of order and togetherness:

> We are familiar with each other and we have our register with the members of the group. We have monthly contributions, which we use as a welfare fund. In case of any unforeseen contingencies we support any member of good standing with it. The group has the executive body and I am the leader of the group. (Enoch, Kumasi, September)

Similarly, Kay described the hierarchy in his group:

> In the group we have seniors and juniors. We have to respect our seniors and follow the directions that they give. If a junior faults, he or she is dealt with accordingly. We know ourselves as members. (Kay, Kumasi, September)

The Aluta Boys and the Kandahar Boys political vigilante groups were also well structured and kept records of membership and leadership. From the participant observation and focus group discussions, especially members of the Aluta Boys, the NDC Task Force, and the Delta Force accorded due respect to the leaders. A typical remark from members who participated in the (informal) exchanges of our research was "*our boss has said it all*."

Voice. The longevity of a political vigilante group also affected the group's adaptability to the political field in terms of claiming their interests and making demands. Of the above-named groups, for instance, the NDC Task Force started in 1992, the Aluta Boys in 2003, the Kandahar in 1996, and the Delta Force in 1999. Below, Adam explains that the formation of the group within the NDC party was motivated by the possibilities it gave in terms of making claims. Alan, in contrast, explains that they formed a political vigilante group to protect voters in their area from threats of opposing groups:

> When President Rawlings took the country to democracy, we became interested in politics. The best way to let our voices heard or to be recognised was to form a group. Actually we were already a group of friends so we only converted it into a political group within the NDC. (Adam, Kumasi, September)

> In 1992 when multi-party system of governance started, we were in secondary school but when we came out and attained the age of voting, we realised that the only way to ensure that no one comes to our locality to threaten voters was to form a group and that was how we formed the group in 1999 which is affiliated to the NPP. (Alan, Kumasi, September)

In contrast, the Bawumia Fun Club and the Samira Fan Club were established only recently, in 2016. Their level of engagement in governance has been low even though their political party is in power. Dan and Ahmed recounted that their groups appear not to be recognised by the political party leadership, which affects their ability to benefit from the party's success:

> The group started in 2016 with the aim of helping the party win power. We had to register with the NPP regional office but I doubt if the leader has done that because I learnt the party brought items for the various youth groups but we never had our share because we were told our group was not registered. We have not had anything from the party. (Dan, Tamale, October)

> The group and its members have not received any materials from the party since the party got into power. This place is predominantly Muslim and during the period of Ramadan, the party can at least send us some food items like sugar to be given to our members as a sign of solidarity but that is not done. We have never been consulted. (Ahmed, Tamale, October)

In brief, political vigilante groups that survived over a long period of time often had been able to secure a certain position of influence in the political party or in the locality they represent.

During and After Elections. One of the activities political vigilante groups mentioned as important concerns their involvement in electoral mobilisation. Voting is a fundamental right in multi-party democracy, and citizens are encouraged to exercise that right, although various circumstances may contribute to a lack of motivation among citizens to go to the polling stations. For example, in Ghana, practical constraints such as distance or transport costs involved in arriving at polling stations may discourage them from voting. As such, several research participants mentioned how they facilitated transport for voters:

> In this city, we have many villages and not all of them have polling stations. We get some funds from the party to hire buses to transport persons that we are sure of voting for us to the nearest polling centre. You cannot be hundred per cent sure but at least some level of trust is maintained. (Moses, Tamale, October)

> All the parties do bus people in their strongholds to the polling centres where they registered so as to provide them the opportunity to elect the right person to lead the country. Democracy has come to stay in Ghana and this is our way of mobilising people to be part of the process. (Don, Tamale, October)

Another challenge regularly mentioned was the problem of misinformation during electoral campaigns that political vigilante groups sought to address:

> I love NPP and I am not expecting any direct material gains from the party but I want to ensure that it governs the country because of their efficient policies. As such during electoral periods, we move to the villages to spread the good works that the government is doing otherwise the NDC might go and distort the information. (Ado, Kumasi, October)

Another research participant reiterated that:

> The NPP government has brought hardships upon the country and the country needs change. As a group associated with the NDC, we move from house to house, door to door to present the evil that the NPP government is doing for which reason they have to vote for NDC. (Dan, Tamale, September)

For political parties, these campaigning activities are critical to reach potential voters. Voting of citizens in the nation state is essential as the outcome from the ballot box grants political legitimacy to the winner in multi-party system of democracy. That said, the competition for voters is sometimes marked by violence and intimidation, which can silence or deter some voters from exercising their voting rights. However, such happenings in the Ghanaian electoral period are exceptions rather than the norm.

After electoral periods, political vigilante groups often continued their engagement in the political field, for instance through activities of lobbying and advocacy aimed at improving living conditions in their area of influence. As such, Ato, Isa, and Kan underlined their role in infrastructural development in their neighbourhoods:

> The road here is tarred because of the presence of Aluta Boys. We advocated for the construction of roads in our vicinity. (Ato, Tamale, September)

> The road here is well constructed because of the lobbies that we made with our Member of Parliament and the minister for roads. We have also ensured that our children go to school so that they can be like you. Some of our members have gotten scholarships to further their education. (Kan, Kumasi, October)

> The community toilet is functioning well because of the presence of Aluta Boys. We manage the facility and we want to maintain hygiene and promote healthy living so we ensure that the place is clean and accessible to all members of the community. We also maintain security in our community. It is not possible to steal in our community. (Isa, Tamale, September)

To summarise, the political vigilante groups in our research explained how, in a variety of ways, they are engaged in making their voice and the voices of their constituency heard in the political arena, both during and after electoral periods.

Force and/or Violence. An important question concerns the way in which political vigilante groups, given their officially marginalised position in the political field, are able to make their voices heard – whether or not through violence. In this regard, some of the

political vigilante groups claimed not to have been involved in any forceful acts, while others categorised themselves as having applied force or "violence." Among political vigilante groups who claim not to use force or violence, a contradiction in the discourse sometimes becomes apparent. In this regard, Bol narrated that while staying away from violence, they regularly defend themselves when they are attacked:

> We are not violent but if we are attacked, we defend ourselves and that is what normally happens. […]. Election is a serious business and our presence at the polling station is to only witness that there is transparency. (Bol, Tamale, October)

Randy similarly emphasised the importance of defence and protection:

> When our presidential candidate visits Ashanti Region, it is our duty to provide escort to him as party faithful. You never know if anybody has bad intentions so we secure his safety throughout his stay. At the end of his stay, we escort him until the border of Ashanti Region where our territory ends. We do not cause any violence. (Randy, Kumasi, September)

There are also groups who explicitly acknowledge their use of violence. They gave three main motivations for violence, which can be classified as related to communal, institutional, and livelihood contexts. Our findings suggest that communal motivation stems from the inability of the affiliated political party to heed the demands of employment, political positions, and favours of a political vigilante group and its members. For instance, in 2017, the Delta Force stormed the office of the Regional Security Coordinator in Ashanti Region and moved him out of office because he was not their preferred candidate for the position. They suspected he would not do them the favours they hoped for (Nyabor, 2017). Similarly, Ernest recounted how they threatened their party elites when those in specific, powerful positions were not living up to the expectations of the political vigilante group members or community:

> When the behaviour of the Chief Executive Officer of the Tamale Government hospital was not pleasing to the residents of Tamale and several appeals to the party executives did not yield any results, we protested by locking his office. That was how we demonstrated our displeasure and the government acted swiftly afterwards. (Ernest, Tamale, October)

The second motivation is institutional, in that it relates to the position and success of the political party with which the political vigilante group identifies. Especially when the groups realise that the actions and/or inactions of the political party elites have the tendency to adversely affect the success of the party in the next elections, they may resort to the use of force. Martin recounted how they confiscated means to promote their party in the electoral campaigns:

> During the political campaign preceding the 2016 elections, we needed vehicles to go to the villages to campaign for the NDC but the Municipal Chief Executive was not responding to

> our demand. We therefore stopped him in the middle of the road and moved him out of his pickup van and used it for the work of the party. (Martin, Tamale, October)

With regard to livelihood, the research participants seek to benefit from resources that help improve their livelihoods when "their party" is in power. Joe narrated that when their political party was in power, they benefitted from resources that helped improve their livelihoods:

> When the NDC was in power, we took about fifty acres of land and we cultivated farm produce and we shared the proceeds. We were able to acquire tractors from the Regional Coordinating Council to plough and cultivate the land. Last year each person got about five bags and that was motivating. The land is for us, not for Azorka, but this year we did not farm because our party is not in power and we do not have the tractors. (Joe, Tamale, October)

Often, after elections are won, only some livelihood and other interests of vigilante groups and their members are fulfilled. To express frustration and anxiety about the latter, most groups sometimes apply force. In spite of the varying levels of political accomplishment, however, most of the research participants explained they would not abandon the political field because they were aware that obtaining success requires a struggle.

Importantly, all political vigilante groups in the Ghanaian political field with a strong organisational structure interviewed in this study acknowledged having used force or violence to achieve specific objectives. In contrast, the less organised groups, in their discourse, largely did not acknowledge their application of force, with the exception of the Azorka Boys. Yet notably the Azorka Boys also have a long period of existence in the political field. It may be that the groups that have a long period of experience in the political field are more aware of how the application of force may serve as a bargaining tool in negotiating with their political elites. The more newly established groups may be less conversant with the rules of the game. Alternatively, the less organised groups, given that often they are only to a limited extent recognised by their political party elites, may benefit less from protection by their political leaders should negative consequences follow (e.g. imprisonment).

Conclusions

The political field is embedded with power relations that inform the accumulation of resources or capital of individuals or institutions (Bourdieu, 1985). The boundaries of the political field are not fixed but relational, enabling diverse actors to participate in the political field (Bourdieu, 1985). As a result, besides the few political elites, "non-conventional" individuals and groups, including those in the limelight in this study, also participate in the political field. By representing their own interests and those of their political parties, we argue that these groups contribute to the strengthening of the nation state (cf. Kyei, 2020).

In Ghana, political vigilante groups have a long history. In the Gold Coast era, Kwame Nkrumah's Verandah Boys were initially ignored and there were even calls for the group to be disbanded because they did not fit into the status quo. Kwame Nkrumah retorted that when "the CPP were vigorously castigating imperialism and colonialism and were struggling to be free, our opponents chose to denounce us as a pack of 'irresponsible and unruly Verandah boys'" (Nkrumah, 1955: 397). Nonetheless, the Verandah Boys prevailed over the political boundaries and found a way to create space within the political field. The political vigilante groups of present-day Ghana, like the Verandah Boys in the past, engage in political mobilisation especially during electoral periods, and resort to other, diverse activities such as lobbying and advocacy in the governance period.

In general, the research finds that existing political vigilante groups are complex and multi-faceted in nature and activities. Most of the political vigilante groups in this research demonstrate having internal organisational structures that are institutionalised with individuals entrusted with leadership roles that are endowed with authority. In the process of institutionalisation, political organisations acquire value and stability (Tull and Simons, 2017) as they adapt to the complex systems within the political field. The longer the existence of an organisation, the higher the level of institutionalisation, because it has built the capacity over time to withstand crisis. Almost all the political vigilante groups we spoke to have survived about five of the seven terms of government in Ghana's Fourth Republic. If Ghana's democracy is classified as institutionalised and stable, then political vigilantism in Ghana is as well.

Ghana's relatively stable democratic trajectory has succeeded Huntington's (1993) two-turnover test of democratic stability. Yet Ghana is still in the process of strengthening its democracy, and the rate of growth of the social forces outgrows the building of political institutions. Diverse social forces such as political vigilante groups are now incorporated in political parties and they contribute towards the winning of elections. Once the political parties enter into government, however, they find it difficult to integrate all these social forces into the governance structure. Rapid political decentralisation with the non-accompaniment of political inclusion creates tension in the political field, as the field lacks the ability to provide proper regulatory boundaries (van Cranenburgh, 2011).

Our research participants translated into their life history the trajectories of Ghana's political history and economy and how they navigate through the complex political field. The respondents were a group of agents who did not seek to impose their political will on others in order to claim autonomy; rather, they were political actors who struggled to create space within the elite-filled political field so as to gain recognition and advance their political situation. The members of the political vigilante groups constructed their identity within the political field so as to become political beings. Instead of being in a project of "social becoming" (Vigh, 2006: 11), as is often said about youth in Africa, this research suggests that members of political vigilante groups, often referred to as "youth" irrespective of their biological age, are in the project of "political becoming." Currently in a situation of relative dependence on political elites, they seek how their voices can be heard and taken into account by participating in the political field.

For our research participants, membership in political vigilante groups is thus a way of escaping the limits imposed by economic, social, and political impediments in the political field that are almost impossible to achieve individually. We have argued that since political vigilante groups allow political voices otherwise not heard to be taken into account in the political field, political vigilantism enhance rather than destroy democratic governance. In conclusion, given their long history, activities, and motivations, we propose that political vigilante groups have become an integral part of modern democratic governance, at least in Ghana.

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Notes

1. Notably, the passing of Ghana's Vigilantism and Related Offenses Bill 2019 into law followed violence in the by-election in the constituency in Accra, the capital of Ghana. Yet this was not the first time violence occurred in the Fourth Republic. Arguably, however, for legal steps to be taken, location was fundamental in defining legality and illegality, which brings into the discussion a centre–periphery dichotomy in the discourse on political vigilantism. The political elites responded to a political problem that should not have happened in the centre, Accra, which is the seat of government and international organisation.
2. Ghana was called Gold Coast during the colonial era, a name given by the British because of the endowment of gold in that territory.

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Politische Vigilantengruppen in Ghana: Gewalt oder Demokratie?

Zusammenfassung
Die Literatur über politische Vigilantengruppen konzentriert sich auf die Gewalt und Konflikte, die von ihren Aktivitäten ausgehen. Dieser Beitrag nähert sich politischen Vigilantengruppen als Akteuren, die sich für politische Mobilisierung und Partizipation einsetzen und damit auch zum Aufbau eines Nationalstaates beitragen. Er untersucht, wie diese Gruppen an demokratischen Prozessen in Ghana beteiligt sind und fragt, ob Gewalt ein unvermeidliches Merkmal davon ist. Der Artikel basiert auf ausführlichen Interviews und Fokusgruppendiskussionen mit Mitgliedern von Gruppen in Kumasi und Tamale aus dem Jahr 2019. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass sich die politische vigilantistische „Jugend" in erster Linie auf die soziale Position bezieht, die nichtelitären Gruppen im politischen Bereich zugeschrieben wird. Politische Vigilantengruppen zeichnen sich sowohl während des Wahlkampfes als auch während der Regierungsperioden durch vielfältige Organisationsstrukturen, Mitgliedschaften und Aktivitäten aus. Während einige Gruppen gelegentlich auf Gewalt zurückgreifen, kommt der Artikel zu dem Schluss, dass politische Vigilantengruppen auch zur demokratischen Regierungsführung beitragen, da sie verschiedenen Stimmen Gehör verschaffen.

Schlagwörter
Ghana, politische Vigilantengruppen, politischer Vigantilismus, Demokratie, Jugend