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Managing Diversity and Political Inclusion

THE CASE OF GHANA

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What accounts for Ghana's success in building an inclusive society?

- **Leadership:** Ghana's political elite have been committed to establishing an ethnically inclusive state since before independence.
- **Legal Commitments:** The 1992 Constitution has been crucial to the creation of institutions that facilitate inclusive governance, political accountability and citizen engagement across multiple levels of state.
- **Strong Civil Society and Media:** Ghana's diverse civil society and varied media landscape are essential to its culture of inclusion, creating spaces for marginalized groups to seek social justice and hold politicians accountable.

What challenges remain?

- Despite constitutional commitments to equal representation, many groups are still marginalized in national politics.
- Ghana's economic successes have not been equally distributed, entrenching economic marginalization in the North.

This paper is part of a new publication series from the **Global Centre for Pluralism** called **Accounting for Change in Diverse Societies**. Focused on six world regions, each "change case" examines a specific moment in time when a country altered its approach to diversity, either expanding or eroding the foundations of inclusive citizenship. The aim of the series – which also features thematic overviews by leading global scholars – is to build global understanding of the sources of inclusion and exclusion in diverse societies and the pathways to pluralism.

BACKGROUND

Ghana is one of the most diverse countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with some 25 million people composed of 92 ethnic groups, the majority of whom are Christian or Muslim. Historically, conflicts have broken out over land and resource access, sovereignty issues and lingering socio-cultural discrimination towards ethnic and religious minorities by successive tribal or colonial authorities. Such conflicts have been intermittent roadblocks to building national unity.

Overlaying this diversity are socio-economic cleavages deeply rooted in the long-standing developmental disparity between Ghana's North and South. British colonial rule predominantly favoured the resource-abundant South and its populace over the arid North, leaving northern communities with an underdeveloped economic, political, and social infrastructure. Post-independence governments could not break this pattern, further cementing the North as the lesser region in terms of income, available services, economic opportunities, and representation in political and administrative institutions.

Running parallel to this heritage of ethno-regional and religious diversity is the evolution of Ghana's nation-building process and the concomitant push to embrace inclusive democratization and pluralism. The foundation for inclusion was planted in 1951 under British rule when, in response to demands for self-government, colonial administrators moved to pass constitutional reforms that included holding popular elections. Ghanaian independence and nationalist activists used this opportunity to first push for full participation in the colonial government

and then for complete independence, which was gained in 1957. This struggle took place amidst the movements' dealing with their own ethno-cultural divisions and disagreements over what an inclusive nation-state would look like.

FROM AUTHORITARIANISM TO DEMOCRACY

Governments in the immediate post-independence years moved toward a national structure built upon legal, institutional, social and economic policies ostensibly promoting inclusion, but which were also accompanied by authoritarianism. Nation-building became an effort to centralize state power, fill the bureaucracy and senior government positions with patronage appointees, and establish government control of resources. This resulted in the effective closure of democracy and public spaces to many Ghanaians.

Incredibly, Ghana did not descend into war or total socio-economic disintegration, and remained relatively unified, peaceful, and stable during this period. This is in large part due to the efforts of political elites who remained committed to creating a unified, inclusive state. Despite the lack of democracy and representation for many groups in the country, post-colonial governments recognized the need to address the historic legacy of regional inequalities in Ghana. This recognition led to affirmative action policies and investment in infrastructure that largely targeted the North, and public service appointments for members from diverse ethnic and cultural groups.

By the late 1980s, there was increasing pressure to reinstate democratic rule as a means to foster more inclusion. The country undertook a rigorous constitution-making effort, which culminated in the ratification of the 1992 Constitution (passed by popular referendum) and the re-introduction of multi-party elections in 1993 (the first since 1979). Authoritarian- and patronage-driven nation-building was replaced with institutions committed to democracy and inclusion. The Constitution also safeguarded the recognition of socio-cultural rights and civil liberties, providing a normative framework for the acknowledgement and management of Ghana's ethno-regional and cultural diversity. A wide range of institutions and mechanisms have since been created to promote political, social and economic inclusion, including the Electoral Commission (the national electoral management body), the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (which investigates corruption, abuses of power and human rights violations), and the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE): a non-partisan agency mandated with increasing Ghanaians' awareness of their rights under the Constitution and their civic responsibilities.

GHANA AS AN INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY

Since 1993, the country has largely succeeded in promoting inclusive citizenship and fostering a culture of acceptance for diverse ethno-cultural and religious identities. This has in large part been due to the work of grassroots activists, faith-based and traditional

associations, and civil society organizations—supported by foreign donors and a political culture open to the freedom of organization and expression—who are working to inject the Ghanaian body politic with unity, pluralism, inclusivity, peace and stability. These groups, joined by secular research and policy-based think tanks, encourage democratic participation and civic education, present vehicles for identity expression, and act as government watchdogs. The progressive media landscape is also a bright spot for the country's inclusive nation-building project. Government-controlled media platforms have given way to private newspapers, radio and television. Local-language media has opened space for rural and non-literate participation in multi-level political and policy discussions, which has prompted calls for greater government transparency and accountability, especially with regard to the legitimacy of the electoral process.

Despite these successes in cultivating inclusion and representation, it is important to qualify Ghana's victories due to the legacy of authoritarian rule. Though Ghana's judiciary appears to uphold good governance and constitutionalism, the application of the rule of law favours the affluent and politically connected, leaving deep inefficiencies and a lack of representation in the legal system for the majority of citizens; thus, many constitutional violations go unreported and unchecked. Furthermore, despite political elites' commitment to meeting the constitutionally mandated ethno-regional balance in representation, the government contains significant gaps in representation and participation (including government appointments), ignoring gender, people living with disabilities, and rural citizens, among others.

Pro-poor inclusive economic growth has been a commitment of multiple governments and policy frameworks, and has been aided by non-governmental organizations investing in human development and economic infrastructure. Improvements have been made in critical areas such as access to education, clean water, health care, child nutrition, youth employment programs and poverty reduction schemes. However, continued socio-economic disparities between North and South remain a real challenge to Ghana's dedication to inclusive, democratic governance. This is all the more unfortunate because institutions like the NCCE, whose objectives are to support inclusivity, participatory democracy and to prevent conflict, are bogged down by underfunding and bureaucratization.

PLURALISM IN GHANA: A MIXED SUCCESS?

Ghana's success in building an inclusive society is a story of institutions. A new constitution that emphasized Ghana's multi-ethnic identity paved the way for the reintroduction of multi-party democracy, and lay the foundations for a framework

of independent institutions dedicated to promoting inclusion of diverse groups in a variety of ways. Ghana's success also demonstrates the importance of leadership: even before independence, Ghana's political leaders were driven by the need to create a unitary state in a society that is extremely diverse. As a result, successive generations of political elites, both authoritarian and democratic, have continued to view Ghana's diversity as central to its identity through policies aimed at increasing inclusion and participation for diverse groups.

Since 1993, Ghana has seen several peaceful transfers of power through elections, in large part because of the stability and inclusivity of its institutions. While this is a significant achievement, systemic inequalities between the North and South and decreasing accountability from the government risk eroding the progress that Ghana has made in fostering pluralism. These challenges are not unique in West Africa, but Ghana has an opportunity to capitalize on its strong institutions and continue building a society that values diversity and inclusion. It is essential that commitments to inclusive economic growth and political representative are broadened and systematically enforced so that Ghana can continue on a path of inclusion and pluralism.

CASE AUTHORS

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The Global Centre for Pluralism is an applied knowledge organization that facilitates dialogue, analysis and exchange about the building blocks of inclusive societies in which human differences are respected. Based in Ottawa, the Centre is inspired by Canadian pluralism, which demonstrates what governments and citizens can achieve when human diversity is valued and recognized as a foundation for shared citizenship. Please visit us at pluralism.ca