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What do different generations of Ghanaians make of Jerry Rawlings' legacy?

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Military leader-turned-democrat Jerry Rawlings dominated political life in Ghana throughout the 1980s and 90s, staging two successful coup d'états and winning two democratic elections. His death in November 2020 leaves a chequered legacy more divisive than ever. Different generations hold widely opposing views in both Ghana itself and across the diaspora.

Who was Jerry Rawlings?

Born in Accra, Ghana on 22 June 1947, Jerry Rawlings was the son of a Scottish farmer and a Ghanaian mother. He would later lead Ghana as its most senior statesman for more than 20 years, survive a firing

squad, stage two successful coup d'états and win two democratic elections. He died on 12 November 2020 at Korle Bu Teaching Hospital, Accra, after a short illness.

As a boy, Jerry Rawlings attended Achimota Secondary School, Ghana's elite school boasting notable alumni such as Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah, Gambia's first president Sir Dawda Jawara, and former Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe. After completing his studies, he entered the Ghanaian military academy in 1968, and rose to the ranks of Flight-Lieutenant by 1978. Around this time Ghana was helmed by a military government following the overthrow of Nkrumah's administration, and blighted by food shortages and economic stagnation. The increasingly politically active (and popular) Rawlings used this swelling energy to support his first coup d'état attempt in 1979, alleging mass corruption of the military government for declining living standards. However, the attempt failed, and Rawlings along with his comrades were jailed.

During the trial, Rawlings requested that his comrades be exonerated while he accepted sole culpability, which the court obliged, sentencing him to death. He continued to drum up support for his efforts, stating 'I am not an expert in economics and I am not an expert in law, but I am an expert in working on an empty stomach while wondering when and where the next meal will come from'. Not long afterwards, lower ranks of the armed forces sympathetic to Rawlings, and supported by junior officers, successfully overthrew the ruling government of General Fred Akuffo. Rawlings was released and took power in an uprising met with joy and enthusiasm by most Ghanaians.

Rawlings took charge of the newly-established Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), and assured the people that they intended to hand power back to civilians after a necessary 'housecleaning exercise', a thinly coded announcement of a stronghanded upheaval of political and social life. Several senior

military officers were killed, including former heads of state, Generals Fred Akuffo, Akwasi Afrifa and Ignatius Acheampong, which Rawlings attributes to the decision of junior officers.

Notably, after this short stint at the helm of the country, Rawlings did hand over power via the ballot box to the newly formed People's National Party, who had the political support of Nkrumah's followers, less than five months after seizing it. However, two years later, he seized power once more, staging his second coup d'état in 1981. He cited poor economic management of the state as the primary reason for the upheaval, noting **Ghana's spiralling foreign debts, inflation rising above 100%**, and growing civil unrest.

Rawlings returns for the second coming, 1981 onwards

Rawlings came into power for his second run, as a man of the people, his slogans included 'Always for People. Always for Development'. He believed it was up to him to 'change not only the status quo, but also put the country back on track'.

Soon after, Rawlings invoked in the public imagination the country's so-called 'hoaders' – corrupt officials and wealthy traders, often seeing market-women transformed into scapegoats, and publicly flogged. They were termed 'kalabule' which referred to excessive profiteering on the black market. Everyday Ghanaians found themselves labelled criminals through legal and social sanctions as the interim administration sought quick solutions to Ghana's economic troubles. In the vein of Nkrumah, Rawlings was initially a staunchly authoritarian-socialist, introducing workers' councils to oversee the country's burgeoning factories, attempting to instil government management of the economy and build close relationships with the Soviet Union. His rise to power was accompanied by a wave of draconian policies, such as 'one man, one house' which saw money, cars, and even market-goods violently

snatched from everyday Ghanaian's by soldiers. Though as the Soviet bloc began to collapse in the late 1980s, Rawlings abandoned his authoritarian-socialist direction and embraced the tenants of free-market capitalism.

Rawlings opened Ghana to the wider world, hosting figures such as Michael Jackson, Bill Clinton, and Queen Elizabeth II to public fanfare. He made Ghana into a major player in UN peacekeeping missions, and sought economic support from the IMF, who requested tough austerity measures and pushed Rawlings to transition Ghana, into a multi-party democracy. This led to the formation of the National Democratic Congress party (NDC) with Rawlings as their leader and the party slogan 'Unity, stability, and development' reminiscent of Rawlings' earlier slogan. In 1992 Ghana ushered in its fourth republic and held an election which the NDC won in a landslide, and again in 1996, with Rawlings presiding as President for both terms. He peacefully handed over power to the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) after John Agyekum Kufuor won the 2000 elections.

A divided legacy

As a second-generation immigrant, I (Kojo Apeagyei) have lived my entire life in the UK, connected to Ghana's rich history through two primary sources: the internet and my maternal grandma (born 1945). The news of Rawlings' passing was broken to me via a WhatsApp message from my grandma, and when I asked how she felt towards the news, she responded, 'I feel nothing at all'. A strange response from a woman so passionate about her country and its affairs. Rawlings' second coup d'état led to the death of my grandfather, Benjamin Kojo (Sardine) Yemoh – a powerfully wealthy man in the heart of Accra. My grandma noted how soldiers at this time 'attacked business workers, and anyone with money... they would take your money, strip you, and beat you in the streets'. My grandfather died to one of these attacks

after being hit in the head by the butt of a gun. He later died in detention.

Now for contrast, my father on the other hand, noted Rawlings as a 'a man who served his country', a revolutionary with good intentions, served by uncontrollable soldiers. He cites African leaders such as Ghaddafi, as kindred compatriots who deposed 'corrupt' governments. 'He has his faults, he's not perfect. But revolutions are like that... you can't control all of the soldiers below you, Rawlings did his best'. With my father, intentions reign supreme, and he highlights the chaos and turmoil Ghana was in, prior to Rawlings' rise. The security we have today, with Ghana being one of the most stable multi-party democracies in Africa is owed largely to the work Rawlings did decades ago.

I (Gillian Asafu-Adjaye) am the first generation of my family to be born outside of Ghana. I am your typical Sankofa diasporan Ghanaian; Sankofa is a Ghanaian Adinkra symbol meaning, 'go back and get it', the symbol is heavily associated with diaspora activities. I believe in Ghanaian people, the development of the nation and all things Ghanaian. This background meant there were two things I knew about Rawlings:

1. My grandmother detested him, because he ruined her trading business
2. He was a father of Ghana, just like Nkrumah, Kuffour and other leaders who have led the country. Without them, the Ghana I know and love today would not exist.

I have delved into a deep rabbit hole of Rawlings' 20 years in power, learning from conversations with my parents to a fantastic book *Ghana: the struggle to popular power. Rawlings: Saviour or demagogue*. The book was written by several contributors and edited by Zaya Yeebo, who fled the regime in 1982 and has been living in exile since. The more

questions I asked, and the more pages I read, the story worsened. My father spoke with disdain about the things he witnessed and experienced during Rawlings' early years. He spoke about the killings, most of all, and how barbaric and unnecessary they were. My grandmother was also a victim of the one-size-fits-all 'kalabule' brush everyone was painted with. Her goods were seized and sold. My father noted that 'anyone under 40 will love Rawlings'. Ironically, [a video recently surfaced online](#) of Rawlings directing traffic on a car-jammed street, and throughout the video you can audibly hear the chants of adoration by young people for the former president, 'Drive safe Sir. God bless you. We are proud of you; Ghana is proud of you!' Still very much, a man of the people.

What to make of Rawlings' legacy?

Rawlings remains one of the most polarising figures in Ghana's history, almost on par with his predecessor Kwame Nkrumah. Both figures undoubtedly laid their mark on the country in extremely tough times, shaping its institutions, and steering it towards an envisioned future of prosperity. Rawlings joins a club of controversial post-colonial leaders, boasting figures such as Mugabe and Kenyetta, who will continue to divide opinion long through the ages. So long as his detractors hold memories of brutality, torture, and theft close to their heart, his supporters will look more towards the security, prosperity and identity Rawlings brought the nation. For the two 20-something year old authors of this blog, raised in the diaspora, we lie somewhere between these perspectives. It is tough to reconcile these views and perhaps there is no reconciliation to be found. Rather, all that can be espoused is a recognition of what *was*, and what currently *is*. We must all live on this precariously complex ground.

For better or worse, Rawlings' is both a son and father of Ghana. His legacy is Ghana's legacy.

About the author



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