

Ghana 2012: An African Election – A Reminder of What's At Stake

Ghanaian blogger Jemila Abdulai will be writing a series of posts in the lead up to Ghana's elections in December 2012. In this post, she reflects on what the documentary film, An African Election tells us about Ghana's upcoming polls on 7 December 2012. Jemila Abdulai also blogs at www.circumspecte.com.

Jarreth Merz' film **An African Election** covers the highs and lows of Ghana's crucial 2008 presidential election, giving important insights into the electoral processes which helped safeguard the very stability of this West African nation. With many African presidential elections on the horizon for 2012, the film is a reminder of what is really at stake when it comes to democracy across the continent.



Through Merz' camera lens, Ghana's political sphere in 2008 unravels. That year, both the **National Democratic Congress** (NDC) and the then-ruling **National Patriotic Party** (NPP) – Ghana's two main political parties – had eight years of governance under their belt since multiparty elections found its roots in Ghana in 1992. Then, as now, each party had its distinctive colours and symbol. An elephant with the colours red, white and blue for the NPP and an umbrella with an eagle head and the colours red, black, green and white for the NDC.

The film highlights the general consideration of NPP as the more conservative party versus the NDC which is supposedly more socially progressive. Indeed, the two main contenders embodied their party characteristics precisely. Political analysts would later attribute the NPP's loss to the aura of inaccessibility that the suit-wearing, British-accented Nana Akufo-Addo exuded. As far as it can be inferred from their campaigns, however, that seemed to be the extent of their political

differences. Both parties campaigned with promises of modernised agriculture, better education and equity in the utilisation of Ghana's expected oil revenue. For many Ghanaians, the real choice was between "the lesser of the two evils"; the party which would hopefully leave them better off, but at the very minimum, no worse than they had been before.

Oil. They do say that curious resource can change many a tide, and the 2008 election was no exception. While a direct inference was rarely made in the film the pot at the end of this particular rainbow was not gold, but rather oil. The party to win the election would essentially lay the groundwork for drilling up the oil, and more importantly, for deciding how the oil revenue would be spent. Oil represented a considerable injection of revenue into the coffers of the incoming government. For this very reason, both the NPP and the NDC went all out with their campaigns leaving no stone unturned in the main election, the run-off, and the run-off to the run-off in the unassuming Tain district.



Flags of the leading political parties, NPP and NDC, contesting the 2012 elections in Ghana

Four years later, there are some considerable changes in Ghana's political sphere which will make for a very interesting election come 7 December. Most notable is the **unfortunate and untimely demise of the late president John Atta Mills** in July 2012 which saw his vice-president John Dramani Mahama taking over Ghana's leadership. As is usually the case with personality-based elections, the actions of the outgoing president greatly determines his or her re-election. In this instance, Ghanaians know relatively little about the "outgoing" President John Mahama. However, that has not stopped a myriad of accusations related to corruption and his private life. There are also concerns that President Mahama is abusing incumbency by using the demise of President Mills as a campaign platform. How the NDC spins the change of their flag bearer will greatly impact their performance on election day.

In the NPP camp, a serious repositioning of presidential candidate Nana Akufo-Addo is taking place. While he showed great respect by postponing his campaign for the duration of President Mills' funeral, Akufo-Addo still has to work his way into the hearts of Ghanaians. That aside, his political footprints are all over the place, and many Ghanaians remember him primarily as foreign minister and attorney-general under the former NPP government. His challenge, therefore, will be to come to the people's level and leverage their memory in arguing for his competence.

Last, but certainly not the least, is **the role of social media** and citizen involvement in the upcoming election. In Ghana, **Ghana Decides** – a non-partisan election initiative by Blogging Ghana – is using both offline engagement and social media platforms like **Twitter**, **Youtube** and **Facebook** to inform, educate and encourage citizen participation in the 2012 election. Such social media projects will play a crucial role in (re)galvanising the interest of Africans, and particularly youth, in

politics during this year's elections and beyond. The contest between political candidates also seems to have shifted into cyberspace with the emergence of a "who has the best social media strategy" of sorts.

So, what *is* actually at stake? As many Ghanaians are finding out through Merz' **political safari** of his film, it is not the title of "president" nor oil or the opportunity to govern or lead (serve maybe?) a nation. Rather, it is the possibility of charting the course of a people towards fulfilled dreams or of relegating yet another nation to the all too familiar example of African democracy gone wrong.

You can follow Jemila Abdulai on twitter @jabdulai

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