

## **Chapter 4**

### **Election Campaign and Media**

#### **The election campaign**

The 2012 election campaign in Ghana was held in a largely peaceful environment, though there were reports of isolated violent incidents. Basic freedoms of association, movement and assembly were generally respected. The Electoral Commission of Ghana worked with the various political parties to agree on the schedule for campaigns.

The election campaign was highly competitive, with political parties and candidates holding rallies and meetings across the country. There was extensive use of advertisement on radio, television and in newspapers. Posters, flags and billboards were used extensively.

Candidates also used leaflets, road-shows, images, music and social media to reach their supporters. SMS text messages were used to invite party supporters to rallies. Parties also ran websites on which they advertised their manifestoes, news and information.

The campaigns generally focused on issues, with the candidates putting across a spirited agenda on, for instance, the use of oil resources, infrastructure development, education, youth employment and health.

The Kumasi Declaration, which was signed by the eight presidential candidates committing themselves to peaceful conduct in the lead up, during and after the elections, was a welcome development. The Group was encouraged by the consistent messages from various actors, in particular, the National Peace Council, calling for peaceful conduct of the elections.

During our briefings, we heard concerns about abuses of incumbency. The most flagrant alleged abuses involved the abuse of state vehicles, state security apparatus, state officials, venues and paraphernalia. It was suggested that abuses of incumbency in the Ghanaian electoral context were more pronounced due to the fact that the incumbent President and Vice-President were contesting the elections.

The Group heard calls for the consideration of public financing of political party activities. Smaller parties, in particular, expressed the view that public funding of political party activities, could enable them to compete on a more even ground, in the context of the overwhelming dominance of the two major political parties.

The Group observed that substantial resources were deployed by political parties in the campaign. We were informed that while existing campaign finance regulations prohibit political parties from obtaining foreign sources of funding certain foreign business interests were supporting some political parties. We also heard concerns that reporting requirements

for campaign expenditure were inadequate, and that the transparency of the electoral process could be enhanced by the strengthening of campaign finance regulations.

Overall, the campaign was peaceful, though characterised by fierce rivalry and trading of harsh words, particularly between the main political parties—NDC and NPP.

### **Media coverage**

Freedom and independence of the media is guaranteed by the 1992 Constitution. This guarantee provides for media to operate without interference and censorship. As a result, Ghana has a vibrant and diverse media with several newspapers, radio and television stations as well as online news agencies.

There are over 50 newspapers published in Ghana. Radio is a very popular medium, with over 200 FM stations spread across the country. There are over 50 registered television stations, with Ghana Broadcasting Corporation TV, a state owned station having national reach. Ghanaians are also increasingly using the internet as a source of news and information. Mobile phone subscription is also very high in Ghana with about 10 million people owning a handset.

A number of bodies, such as the Ghana Journalists Association, the National Communications Authority, the National Commission on Civic Education, the Media Foundation for West Africa and the National Peace Council, organised a series of workshops and training programmes for journalists on how to effectively and responsibly cover the election.

### **Laws and regulations**

As stated above, freedom and independence of the media is guaranteed in the 1992 Constitution of Ghana. Chapter 102 provides the framework for establishing media enterprises, and the benchmarks for professional practice. Article 166 provides for the establishment of the National Media Commission (NMC), a statutory body whose functions are to promote and ensure the freedom and independence of the media for mass communication and information. The Commission also is charged with the maintenance of the highest journalistic standards, including the investigation, mediation and settlement of complaints made against the press or other mass media.

Section 2 (c) of the National Media Commission Act (1993) stipulates that the NMC is meant to insulate the state owned media from government control. However, Section 19 of the same Act states that 'A President shall at all times have access to sound or television broadcasting, the press and other media of mass communication or information which are financed from public funds for the purpose of broadcast, announcement or publication of any matter which appears to the President to be in the public interest.' This leaves a conundrum during elections, particularly, with regard to state media, which is required by the Electoral Act to provide equal and balanced coverage to all political parties.

In ordinary situations, such a provision would not pose any problem. However during elections where a sitting President is also a candidate, such a provision may be subject to abuse.

In the lead up to the 2012 elections, the NMC maintained regular dialogue with media houses, calling on them to discharge their duties responsibly, to ensure a peaceful election. In light of the reports, the Group received regarding the use of inflammatory language by some media houses, it was however not clear what sanctions the NMC had in place to deal with media that did not live up to the guidelines of professional conduct.

### **Print media**

Newspapers devoted substantial space to covering the election process, highlighting political party platforms, analysing party manifestoes and activities of the National Electoral Commission. There were also in-depth analyses and commentaries of the profiles of the candidates. The Group noted that the main daily newspapers, notably, Daily Graphic, Ghanaian Times, The Chronicle, Daily Guide and Crusading Guide offered more in-depth reporting about the elections. There were also several pamphlets which were clearly partisan in their editorial content. These, the Group learnt, were started by various political groups to champion their cause, and that they would fold as soon as the elections are over.

### **Radio**

Radio provided robust coverage of the issues in the lead up to, during and after the elections. There were special programmes dedicated to discussing positions of political parties and their candidates. On polling day, there was live coverage of the process at locations around the country. Callers and reporters on the ground provided live updates about the events at the polling stations.

The Group was informed that some radio stations were allowing their platforms to be used to disseminate inflammatory information, bordering on hate speech. One organisation, the Media Foundation for West Africa carried out an extensive monitoring of the language used by the media during elections, and reported their findings at public fora. In general, their findings were that there had been many cases of use of indecent and insulting language on radio by some politicians as well as offensive, provocative and unsubstantiated allegations.

Against this background, there were reports in the newspapers that the National Media Commission and the National Communications Authority, two statutory bodies established to ensure professional conduct of media practitioners, issued statements calling on the media to desist from using language that could incite public violence. The use of inflammatory language in some newspapers and radio stations, however, persisted.

## **Television**

As noted above, there are several television stations in Ghana. The Group was informed that this time around, the state broadcaster, Ghana Broadcasting Corporation provided a fairly balanced coverage of the election process and campaign rallies, although this was largely in respect of the two main political parties—NDC and NPP. Another important feature during this election was live television coverage of the Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates debates. Like radio, television stations provided live updates and reports on polling day. In addition, the Group was pleased to note that Ghana Independent Broadcasters Association (GIBA), the umbrella body of independent radio and television stations, put in place guidelines and a code of conduct for its members to follow in reporting election related issues.

## **International media**

Various international media covered the events leading up to, during and after the elections. There were several foreign media correspondents in the country during the elections, and the story of the polls received international attention.

## **Use of social media**

Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, websites, et cetera were used as political campaigning tools. The ability to access internet on mobile phones enabled people to follow campaign issues. Candidates made announcements about forthcoming events on these social media platforms, and engaged in discussions with supporters online.

The Group was briefed by a team from 'An Africa Election Project', an initiative that used the internet to track media coverage as well as reporting on other incidences during the election process. Another initiative, Ghana Votes 2012, provided regular updates about incidents across the country on their website as well as through Twitter and Facebook pages.

The Group was particularly impressed that the websites of radio stations were regularly updated and provided instant postings of results as declared by the polling officials at various polling stations across the country. In many respects, the information on the website of this radio station was more up to date than the information on the EC website, which at times was unavailable.

## **Safety of journalists**

The Group received reports that there were attacks on some journalists who were covering the protests after the announcement of polls and during subsequent post-election events. One such incident was reports of the roughing up of a BBC journalist by a security officer on 8 December 2012. The journalist was reportedly covering a group of protesters in Accra, when a security officer roughed him up and confiscated his recording equipment. At the time

of writing this report, Ghana Journalists Association was investigating these reports, including those on alleged attacks on journalists from Metro, TV3 and Multi TV.

## **Conclusion**

With the exception of the issues highlighted above, the Commonwealth Observer Group was generally satisfied with the way media covered the 2012 elections. The media played a key and helpful role in informing the voters about the issues in the election and contributed to the quality of the process.

## **Recommendations**

- Mechanisms should be put in place to strengthen adherence to the Code of Conduct for Political Parties during elections.
- The National Media Commission working with editors and the Ghana Journalists Association and other relevant bodies should ensure greater adherence of journalists and media houses to the guidelines for reporting elections
- Editors should ensure that the content of materials they publish is in good taste.
- The Electoral Commission should improve the management and updating of its website, particularly during posting of results.
- State-owned media should develop and publish more detailed guidelines on how they intend to ensure that their reporting meets the benchmarks of the electoral regulations, regarding balanced and equitable coverage of various political parties.
- Safety of journalists who report and cover the election process should be guaranteed and protected, and where attacks occur, they should be investigated and action taken.