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**AGREEING TO DISAGREE IN THE
INTEREST OF GHANA**

IEA MONOGRAPH
No. 23

**THE SURVIVAL OF MULTI-PARTY DEMOCRACY AND
POLITICS OF ACCOMMODATION AND TOLERANCE**

**Agreeing to Disagree in the
Interest of Ghana**

by

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A publication by The IEA/Ghana Political Parties Programme

The Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) Ghana was founded in October 1989 as an independent, non-government institution dedicated to the establishment and strengthening of a market economy and a democratic, free and open society. It considers improvements in the legal, social and political institutions as necessary conditions for a sustained economic growth and human development.

The IEA supports research, and promotes and publishes studies on important economic, socio-political and legal issues in order to enhance understanding of public policy.

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ISBN: 988-584-72-5

ISSN: 0855-3238

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PREFACE

Once again, we find our nation Ghana at the edge of a cross road. Behind us lie a host of disturbing episodes on the path along which we have played out our multi-party democracy. Yes, those experience have been dotted with the sounds of our sighs of relief, as we have, with each process of national elections, escaped the unmistakable presence of national conflict and strife by the skin of our teeth. Nonetheless, none of us can deny that we still cast nervous glances behind our shoulders as we remember those episodes, and that we look into the future with even greater trepidation, as we observe developments in our nation's practice of governance, politics and democracy.

And yet Ghana does have everything it takes to succeed in multiparty democracy. We have in place the institutions, the lessons of history and the drive to make this work for us. Beyond the heat and passion of politicking, our political actors acknowledge that for the national interest, they do need to work together, their political differences notwithstanding. And indeed they have proven through The Institute of Economic Affairs/Ghana Political Parties Programme, that it is possible to work together towards the national interest. It is necessary that at this crucial point in our nation's development, that we as political parties and civil society, lead the path towards national coherence, by sitting together to agree the parameters for our multi-party democracy and to establish the tenets of tolerance and accommodation that underlie this form of democracy.

It is for this reason that The Institute of Economic Affairs organized a three-day seminar on the theme, “The Survival of Multi Party Democracy and Politics of Accommodation from the 9th to the 11th of October 2009.

This paper on the topic *Agreeing To Disagree in The Interest of Ghana* was delivered as part of the two day seminar.

The paper offers a stark picture of the true reality of Ghana’s political environment today. This disturbing picture was softened with practical, workable and sound alternatives for addressing the challenges that we face as a nation.

I invite you to read and reflect upon this paper, and to join in small and big ways in a struggle of proportions as high as those of our struggle towards independence. Let us join together to build a strong and healthy practice of democracy for the sake of our homeland Ghana.

Jean Mensa
Executive Director

Introduction

Embedded in Ghana's multiparty democracy ushered in by the fourth Republican Constitution, 1992 is recognition of the idea that not all Ghanaians will share in the same political ideology on issues regarding how the country should be governed. And yet the actors in this political theatre need to work together to create a point of convergence for the welfare of the people of Ghana.

The framers of the fourth republican Constitution of Ghana, 1992 conceived the benefits of such a system of government and how these should work out, through laid down procedures when they observed that “for a democratic society, politics is (and must be) presaged on the assumption of divergence of views and interest, not on opposite assumption”. The “necessity for free discussion and debate” is required to “bring differences among the citizenry into the open and openly seek accommodation and compromise”.

Agreeing to disagree is a natural phenomenon of the human essence—diversity. God did not create all human beings the same and therefore it is unnatural for everyone to think alike. Diversity and disagreements are inevitable in any human relations but are neither for destruction nor acrimony. They have the inherent worth of contributing to the general well-being and the common good of the nation, in that they allow for the development of

values such as tolerance, compassion, patience, and perseverance; virtues that are necessary for social harmony.

Beyond that, diversity is not intended for division, but unity in terms of purpose and actions for cohesive social existence—complementarity. There is therefore nothing wrong with having differences in opinions or ideas regarding goals and procedures on any matter in question. However, if not handled properly or abused, disagreement may become dysfunctional and lead to social disharmony. Therefore, the refusal to recognize a contrary view (even though one may not accept it) is a denial of the very essence of humanity namely, that we were not made to always think alike.

“Agreeing to disagree in the interest of Ghana” in the context of a multiparty democracy therefore means the acknowledgement and tolerance of “differences of interest, principles and philosophies” as well as “principled compromises in the overall national interest” by all the actors involved in the political process.

Ghana's multiparty democracy is in its fifth government. The benefit of a multiparty system has manifestly been attested to by Ghanaians who have shown their preference for diversity in governance—being governed by different political

administrations at given political epochs through the power of choice at the most fundamental level. Thus this country has succeeded in changing government through the ballot box for the first time in the political history of Ghana in 2001 when the National Patriotic Party (NPP) emerged a winner in the 2000 general elections and took the political baton from the National Democratic Congress (NDC). The wheels of power turned again when the NDC won the 2008 elections and took the political baton from the NPP in January 2009.

A cursory look at the Parliamentary elections also shows an interesting scenario in that “out of the total two hundred (200) MPs elected into Parliament in 1993only five (5) of the original Members in the 1993 Parliament continuously served till to date”. There were “130 new entrants recorded in 1997, 86 in 2001, 128 in 2005, and 85 in 2009. Several reasons may have accounted for this; the obvious one being that the people of Ghana took delight in deciding who should represent them and did not think the seat of government should be the preserve of any individuals or group of individuals. This has won Ghana the admiration of her counterparts on the continent as well as internationally. In the words of Gyima-Boadi, the successful transitions have “confirmed Ghana's place as a beacon of hope for democracy in Africa”. In addition, Ghana's democracy has

been growing and improving steadily and some gains have been made over the years.

There is a strong media presence, which provides an avenue for debate on leading issues in governance as well as for civil dissent. The Judiciary and other accountability institutions such as the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) have provided policy directives on seemingly controversial issues on governance as well as government accountability respectively. Ghana has been ranked the 6th best governed country in Africa on the 2009 Index of African governance results and rankings at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

The above notwithstanding, Ghana's democracy is characterized with bickering and animosity among the main political divide and virtually everything is subjected to partisan politics. Elections of whatever kind jerk the nation repeatedly, resulting in tensions and violence. The political transitions have also been characterized with, tensions, harassment, and rancor. The country is thus polarized in “the negative sense”. The experiences so far seem to suggest that Ghana is being denied the gains that diversity and multiplicity should have brought to bear on governance—crystallizing arguments to churn out the best

alternative solution to issues that are called into question.

A question that comes to the fore is how come diversity and disagreement have been misunderstood to the extent of polarizing the country? This development and Ghana's political past make it clear that democracy should not be taken for granted. In the past Ghana took the lead in showing independence on a multiparty platform in the sub-Saharan Africa, but ended up becoming a one-party state with protracted military regimes. It becomes imperative to nurture the cultivation of political tolerance that will accommodate diversity of views and at the same time make the necessary concessions for consensus building among the various points of interests by the actors. In this regard Politicians, the Media, and Civil Society have the responsibility to balance out competing interests into harmony for the good of all. The gist of the paper is that disagreements on issues may not be bad to the extent that it leads to finding the better alternative out of all the contending views on the table. But a disagreement becomes unhealthy for any nation if it is anchored on trivialities, rivalry and the likes.

Multipartism as a Portrait of Political Diversity

The 1992 Constitution provides that Ghanaians who qualify to vote may form Political Parties “to participate in shaping the

political will of the people, to disseminate information on political ideas, social and economic programs of a national character, and sponsor candidates for elections to any public other than District Assemblies or lower local government units”.

Through the laid down process, Political Parties put up their manifestoes or agendas indicating how they would govern the country when given the opportunity to do, and present candidates to contest the elections. Political Parties aside, individuals are allowed to parade their ideology to also contest elections for deserving positions. The various ideological blocks through party platforms or otherwise are then, given the opportunity to campaign after which elections are conducted and the candidates/parties that emerge a winner forms a government.

Thus at the point of forming a government, Ghanaians have a wide array of political agendas to choose from as manifestos of the respective political parties may not in material terms be the same. In the case of Presidential Elections, the candidate who wins more than half of the total number of the votes cast becomes the President and forms government. For example, an independent candidate and seven political parties contested for the 2008 Presidential elections; the National Democratic Congress (NDC), the National Patriotic Party (NPP), the

Conventions People's Party (CPP), the Reformed Patriotic Democrats (RPD), the Peoples National Convention (PNC), the Democratic Peoples Party (DPP) and the Democratic Freedom Party (DFP). The NDC flag bearer won through a run off by obtaining 50.23% with the NPP losing with 49.77%. Similarly, at the Parliamentary level several candidates and interests groups contested at the Constituency level.

From the foregoing, it is clear that at any given period, the nation Ghana comprises of different categories of people in the political environment namely (1) supporters of the winning Party/Independent Candidate, (2) supporters of the losing Party/Independent Candidate, (3) individuals who were not politically active and may not have voted at all.

Again, apart from the competing agendas at the inter-party level or national levels, the process of electing party flag bearers and candidates may have result in intra-party blocks or cliques. The political diversity aside, Ghana consists of ethnic and religious groupings with diverse interests and norms which are brought to the political arena. The playing field of politics in Ghana therefore consists of diverse groups and of different representation of constituencies and interest. Yet the one that emerges out of the competition should be accepted by the different grouping in the hope that they “will be able to get

enough of what it wants out of the process” This is the *democratic bargain and agreement*.

In consequence therefore the democratic fibre of any society according to Shively is fragile. This is because “All that is needed to make a democracy collapse is for one or more important groups to reject the result of the democratic bargain and to have access to enough power to overthrow the system”. Hence, the government of the day is or should be the government of all the people of Ghana to the extent that the respective groupings will realise their reasonable expectations of the *bargain*. This includes those who voted for the government, those who did not vote for the government, and those who did not vote at all.

Agreeing to Disagree in the National Interest

The ideal of diversity as a human essence for complementarity for the common good is incontrovertible as shown so far. The challenge however is how to transport it into the action part of politics in such a way that the various points of interest are brought into harmony. This difficulty is evidenced in Ghanaian politics. Even though there have been situations where the political divides have sought to accommodate each other, on the whole, Ghana's democratic experience so far shows lack of tolerance and accommodation among the political blocks

especially between the NDC and NPP, the two dominant Parties at the political scene. These two Parties seem to be disagreeing on everything without agreeing on anything. There is disagreement about major issues as well as on minor and mundane issues. For example, there is no agreement as to the official residency of the President and an incoming President decides on where to live.

Again, there is disagreement as to what the policy on basic and secondary school education in the country should be. Under the administration of the NDC, there was a three- year (3) junior secondary school (JSS) system and a three-year (3) senior secondary school (SSS) system. When the NPP took over government, they reformed the basic and secondary education as a result of which the JSS became a three-year (3) Junior high school(JHS) and the SSS a four-year(4) programme. When the NDC took power from the NPP, the NDC had maintained the three-year (3) JHS with some variations to the curriculum and returned the SSS to the original three-year program. The consequence of this unending squabble between the two major political parties, the NPP and NDC that have dominated the Ghanaian political scene amount to a right violation of the children caught up in this political web, besides other effects. For the Constitution of Ghana makes it mandatory that in the consideration of any matter involving a child, the interest of the

child shall be paramount.

For the purposes of illustration, it may be helpful to consider a hypothetical case on the matter: Adwoa, a 12 year old girl started her basic education at the age of 6 under the NDC administration. Thus, from Kindergarten, Adwoa was taught and instructed based on the curriculum of the educational policy under the NDC government. At the age of 10 when Adwoa got to Primary five, the system had been reformed under the NPP government so Adwoa had to switch over to a new curriculum. By the time Adwoa got to JHS 1 the NDC government was back in office with further educational reforms so Adwoa had to switch to yet another new system. The educational well being of Adwoa and many other children in Ghana has become a pawn in the hands of politicians. Even so there is no certainty as to the policy of basic and secondary education in the future in a situation where a change in government occurs.

Several reasons may have accounted for the above and many other scenarios. Firstly, it appears that the political actors have failed to appreciate diversity as a source of strength—a strategy to work out the national interests. In view of this Parties are intolerant of each other, and seem to consider each other as an *enemy*. The end result is that they engage as enemies do.

Secondly, it appears that a Party in government fails or refuses to transform itself from being a Political Party to a national government with allegiance to the Constitution and the people of Ghana, including the opposition for that matter. Thus instead of concentrating its attention on the welfare of Ghanaians, a Political Party in power continues to behave like a Party competing with the other Parties particularly the predominant Party in the opposition for power, by showing how *bad* the opposition is. As a result the Party in government and their supporters seek to gain political points on a wrong platform—Party platform whilst standing on national platform. The irony of the situation is that at the end of the day, the Political Party in question will seek for the renewal of its mandate from the people who may renew or revoke it as the case may be. The end result is that a Party in power is not tolerant of the views of the opposition Party, thinking that such tolerance may make the opposition look good—a sign of weakness for the government in power.

Similarly, the opposition Party also opposes the government in power for the sake of it no matter what, in the belief that making the government in power appear bad will accord it (the opposition) with respectability. The essence of an opposition in democracy is to offer constructive criticisms to the policies of the

government with the view of ensuring that the people in the country obtain the best from government. By so doing democracy is protected and secured. The Ghanaian experience with the opposition under the respective dispensations of the 1992 Constitution in some cases has caused the government of reconsider its intended policies or actions or even delayed their implementation as the case may be. This notwithstanding, it appears that the norm has been for the opposition to oppose the government policies and shoot them down no matter what without sometimes paying attention to their intended benefit for the people of Ghana.

Thirdly, it appears that the Parties fail to appreciate the rules of the game, namely that a Party can be voted in and out of power at any given election period and does not have a perpetual mandate but a limited mandate of four years. Therefore, a government in power should be prepared for such an eventuality without throwing any tantrums when it happens. Due to their failure to adjust to this reality, a Party which finds itself out of power is embittered toward the Party that took power from it without realizing that such decisions spring from the sovereign will of the people of Ghana. Hence, it positions itself to deal with “the enemy”.

The situation is further compounded by the fact that transitional arrangements for the transfer of power to a new administration in Ghana's democratic system are currently somewhat clumsy. The absence of a framework or a practice to guide the transition resulted in mistakes being made when the NPP took over the baton from the NDC and vice versa. There was blatant abuse of human rights in both transitions as people from the opposing Parties were sacked from office illegally. The transitions “left in their wake acrimony, tension and ill-feeling” (IEA, 2008, P.3).

The effect of this rivalry is that, the political actors have denied themselves the capability of objectivity in their consideration of national issues. Discussions of national issues are reduced to trivialities. The yardstick for political consideration and for that matter what is right politically has become a matter of expediency. Hence, the term right in the political sphere seems to have lost its meaning. Expediency as opposed to national interest has become the determining factor for rightness or wrongness. A thing is therefore right to the extent that it is of a political expediency. In effect what the ruling government may consider as being right may be opposed by the opposition and vice versa. And in the case of the Ghanaian situation where the two main political Parties dominate the scene, it becomes a situation of “*you do me, I do you*” politics. Although, there may be

exceptional situations to these assertions, on the whole this appears to be the norm.

The Duty of Politicians

It should be pointed out that the Politician occupies a position created for the benefit and welfare of the people of Ghana. The 1992 Constitution is emphatic on this as article 1 (1) states; "Sovereignty of Ghana resides in the people of Ghana in whose name and for whose welfare the powers of government are to be exercised in the manner and within the limits laid down in the Constitution". Within the context of this discussions, Politicians have the core mandate is to steer disagreement and forge consensus through formal and informal structures for the well-being of the Ghanaian. In actual fact, that is the core duty of any Politicians irrespective of which side they may find themselves.

It may be argued, and rightly so, that this duty of politicians is self evident as typically politicians put themselves up to serve their nation. The test however of such assertions can be ascertained by the manner in which the game is played. Or is it the case that the way the game is played is in the nature of the game so it is said that politics is a dirty game? And in this case the assertion that politicians are helpless except to follow the game as it is played? This proposition can be challenged by resorting to the conceptual

resources of the original meaning of politics to maintain that politics is good and the game of politics ought to be good.

In its original meaning, politics is defined as the “science of government; that part of ethics which consists in the regulation and government of a nation or state, for the preservation of its safety, peace and prosperity; comprehending the defense of its existence and rights against foreign control or conquest, the augmentation of its strength and resources, and the protection of its citizens in their rights, with the preservation and improvement of their morals”. A politician or a *politicus* is also defined as “wise; prudent and sagacious in devising and pursuing measures adapted to promote the public welfare; applied to persons; as a politic prince”. In other words the ends of politics is the overall welfare of the people. And a politician is the one who works in pursuit of that goal. Again, it is important to distinguish a *Politicus* the wise politician from the *Politician*, “a petty politician; a pretender to politics”. A true politician rather than a petty politician therefore works in the interest of his or her people. This principle no doubt guided the founding fathers of the Western democracies leading to the creation of strong democratic foundations and values in those societies, which Ghana is striving to achieve.

It is the core business of politicians in the current democratic dispensation is to balance out the competing interests into harmony for the good of all and thereby give hope to the people of Ghana in democracy. The political elites of the country hold the destiny of democracy in their hands, given the country's socio-economic and cultural conditions. It should be noted that the citizens' understanding of democracy is derived from their leaders' behaviors. This in turn informs their judgement as to what is right or wrong in their democracy. When they (the people) unfortunately arrive at the conclusion that democracy is just a game played by *big men* and that, this is all there is to it, they will lose confidence in the process. In this regard politicians should endeavor to make the needed concessions to bring about consensus. It is also in the interest of the political elites to let democracy flourish in that an individual career politician stands to benefit at the personal level. After all which professional body does not guide their trade?

The Role of the Media

The Media has a very important role to play in the field of politics of accommodation given its position in the scheme of affairs of Ghana. Article 162(5) of the 1992 Constitution provides “All agencies of the media shall, at all times, be free to uphold the principles, provisions and objectives of this Constitution, and

shall uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people of Ghana”. The media is expected to publish rejoinders concerning information they have disseminated (Article 162(6)). The state-owned media is enjoined to provide a fair opportunity for the “presentation of all divergent views and dissenting opinions” (Article 163). Further, Article 164 of the Constitution subjects the media to the laws that are reasonably required for the “interest of [the] nation, public order, public morality, and for the purpose of protecting the reputations, rights and freedoms of other persons”. The importance of the media in producing informed electorate can be likened to the words of Achebe:

The sounding of the battle-drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards—each is important in its own way. I tell you there is not one of them we could do without. But if you ask me which of them takes the eagle feather I will say boldly; the story... Because it is only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of the war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without

it, we are blind.

The Media is therefore a “public trust” that guides society irrespective of who owes it. The people of Ghana and in some cases government officials may not know about an issue until the media has let it out in the open. In as much as in Ghana, there is a strong media presence which provides an avenue for debate on leading issues in governance as well as for civil dissent, one may also not doubt that some media are visibly tilted towards Party's interests and seem to have compromised their objectivity. The media's objectivity is critical to hold the needed balance through which all aspects or parts of the whole can be seen by the public for informed judgement. It is therefore important for the media to guide their independence, be fair and objective in their reportage and should not inflame partisan passions/sensationalism for the sake of any Political Party to the detriment of the people of Ghana as some seem to be doing. The media should be engaged in responsible journalism and investigate issues as to their true facts before bringing them out to the public. In their reportage of whatever kind, the key consideration should be the national interest. Above all, the media should serve as a channel for educating and sensitizing the public about democratic tenets.

The Role of Civil Society

Civil Society is community-based and therefore in touch with the people and their reality. Again, Civil Society is a watchdog over the rights of the people and therefore custodians of the people's interests. In view of this, Civil Society world wide generates the social capital—“fostering civic values and participation, monitoring government, and informing public policy through education, research and analysis” (p.17). Within the context of the politics of “agreeing to disagree”, Civil Society of Ghana could be the glue, which would bind various points of interests and representations together. In this regard, Civil Society could create a platform, where divergent views are discussed for collaborative meaning for consensus building. Civil society should also engage in political advocacy in creating the national agenda for the national interest. Civil Society should keep their objectivity in discharging their functions as partisan affiliation will compromise their objectivity.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

From the foregoing, it is clear that the idea of “agreeing to disagree in the interest of Ghana” is inherently wedged in the interstices of Ghana's democratic philosophy, structurally and procedurally. The diversity of strands that make up Ghana's

democracy has provided Ghanaians with the benefits to choose their government from an array of Political Parties at any given election time. This notwithstanding, living out this mosaic tenet has been challenging to the extent of polarizing the country negatively. It has emerged that political actors have failed to appreciate the essence of each other's role in Ghana's democracy, leading to intolerance of one another. As a result the various points of representations and interest in the political arena may not realize their part of the bargain.

This has implication for the government of Ghana, the Political Parties, individual politicians, the Media, Civil Society Organizations and Constitutional or State institutions, since as critical stakeholders, they should work collaboratively to build a strong foundation for the democratic house of Ghana.

The government of Ghana in particular should rise above Party sentiments and respect the requirements imposed on it by law and insulate state institutions from partisan politics. The removal from office of public servants in contravention with the Constitution should cease and wrongful terminations be remedied by government. The government could set up a mini Reconciliation Body (it could be called any name) to address the casualties of the two transitions. The Government of Ghana

should ensure that concrete transitional arrangements are in place by passing into law the Presidential Transitional Bill, 2009 (being proposed by the IEA) which seeks to provide a workable framework to guide future transitions.

Political Parties should respect the legal requirement imposed on them by law. The Party in government should respect the rights of all others and desist from acts which violate the fundamental human rights of those who do not belong to their Party. Likewise the Parties in the opposition should accord the government in power due recognition as government and should not undermine its credibility. Inter-party platform should be created for inter-party dialoguing for the resolutions of differences that impact on the nation negatively, particularly where formal existing structures fail to do that.

Civil Society could facilitate in creating such platforms. The Council of State being as a council of elders and custodian of national interest could be a convener for such dialogue. Again, political Parties should offer training to their members about democratic tenets and build the respect for the culture of the right of others.

The individual Politicians should sharpen their ethical edge not only *to do things right, but to do the right things*. The orientation

program for Ministers and Parliamentarians which is organized by Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration should be institutionalized beyond the orientation so Ministers and Parliamentarians will have a continuing governance education even while in office.

The media and Civil Society organizations should guard their independence in pursuit of their objectives. They should not descend into the arena of partisan politics else they will lose their touch and mislead the ordinary person.

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