



GHANA ELECTION WATCH

DECEMBER 2020 GENERAL ELECTIONS

Release Date: November 2, 2020



GHANA ELECTION WATCH

DECEMBER 2020 GENERAL ELECTIONS

International Republican Institute
IRI.org
@IRIglobal

National Democratic Institute
NDI.org
@NDI

Ghana Election Watch
December 2020 General Elections

Copyright © 2020 International Republican Institute & National Democratic Institute. All rights reserved.

Permission Statement: No part of this work may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute.

Requests for permission should include the following information:

- The title of the document for which permission to copy material is desired.
- A description of the material for which permission to copy is desired.
- The purpose for which the copied material will be used and the manner in which it will be used.
- Your name, title, company or organization name, telephone number, fax number, e-mail address and mailing address.

Please send all requests for permission to:

Attn: Department of External Affairs
International Republican Institute
1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20005
info@iri.org

Attn: Government Relations and Communications
455 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20001
media@ndi.org

Release Date: November 2, 2020

GHANA ELECTION WATCH

On December 7, 2020 Ghana will hold presidential and parliamentary elections, the eighth since the start of the Fourth Republic. The International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) offer the following analysis of the pre-election environment based on in-depth interviews conducted October 20–29 with a wide array of representatives from the Electoral Commission (EC), political parties, the security sector, civil society organizations, and citizen observation groups. IRI and NDI's analysis was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and in light of constraints imposed by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which precluded deployment of an international delegation to Ghana. IRI and NDI therefore adapted its methodology to accommodate intensive remote engagement. This joint delegation was led by Constance Newman, former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. The report highlights findings and recommendations, in particular those related to electoral administration, vigilante violence and election security, inclusion of marginalized groups, and the media and information environment. IRI and NDI will continue to monitor the overall process through its conclusion.

OVERVIEW

These will be Ghana's eighth presidential and parliamentary elections since the country's return to civilian rule and the re-introduction of multiparty politics with the emergence of the Fourth Republic in 1992. While past elections have not been without their challenges, Ghana has a history of transparent and inclusive polls. Both major political parties have accepted electoral outcomes and pursued their grievances through the courts, contributing to Ghana's history of peaceful transfers of power. Ghanaians take pride in their democratic and electoral processes and their global reputation as a model for democratic progress and stability. Credible and peaceful polls on December 7 will not only validate this reputation but also serve as a bright spot to close out a tumultuous year for democracy in West Africa and the world. Throughout the assessment, Ghanaians expressed a fervent desire for these polls to meet the high expectations that they have come to hold for their elections.

Ghana's strong institutions, free and open political space, and democratic track record lay the foundation for inclusive, transparent, and accountable elections. However, the 2020 electoral process is not without its challenges. In the remaining weeks ahead of the December 7 polls, there is still sufficient time for electoral actors to take steps to instill more confidence in the electoral process and mitigate the risks for electoral violence, encourage the full participation of all voters, and deliver on Ghanaians' high expectations for their democracy.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

The 2020 polls feature familiar faces, with incumbent President Nana Akufo-Addo of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) facing former President John Mahama of the National Democratic Congress (NDC). This will be the third presidential contest in which these candidates will compete against one another, and each has graciously won or accepted defeat in the past. It will, notably, be the first time in Ghana's electoral history in which voters can choose between a sitting and a former president. In total, 12 candidates will vie for the presidency – including three women – and for the first time a woman is standing for vice president on a major-party ticket.

Election preparation has been complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The EC has introduced public health and safety protocols for election activities, and political parties and civil society have adapted their campaign and outreach strategies to government public health guidelines. However, as public safety restrictions are eased, it will be incumbent upon all electoral stakeholders to continue to ensure the health and safety of voters and all electoral participants.

Ghana has many democratic attributes and strong electoral institutions to its credit. Over the past seven election cycles, Ghana has demonstrated its ability to deliver well-administered elections. As in the past, the 2020 polls are expected to be competitive. Political campaigns are increasingly focused on issues that matter to Ghanaians, rather than on the personalities of the candidates. A vibrant civil society and a segment of increasingly professional media are contributing to a more informed, discerning, and engaged citizenry.

Democracy, however, is fragile and requires constant maintenance and strengthening to ensure it delivers for all citizens. While Ghana has demonstrated its ability to conduct credible polls, there remain persistent issues that hamper full confidence and participation in the electoral process. While the EC has demonstrated its technical capacity to administer elections, Ghanaian stakeholders are calling for increased transparency and more inclusion around important electoral processes, including the voter register and the results collation and transmission process. As in past election cycles, the presence of vigilante groups and the pervasiveness of disinformation, hate speech, and inflammatory language disseminated through social media platforms and a polarized media contribute to concerns about electoral violence. In addition, electoral actors could do more to make elections more inclusive. In particular, the consistently low number of women candidates fails to meet global standards. Many of these same issues were highlighted by international and citizen observer groups, including by IRI and NDI, during the 2016 electoral process.

ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

The Ghanaian EC is widely respected across Africa and around the world. The 2020 polls are being conducted under the leadership of a new EC chair. These will be the second consecutive polls to be conducted under new leadership. Since her appointment in August 2018, Chair Jean Mensa has instituted some important improvements to the electoral process. According to a recent public opinion poll conducted by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), 67 percent of Ghanaians trust the EC and 83 percent believe they are prepared to conduct the elections in December.

With less than six weeks to the polls, the EC assured the delegation that, despite challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, its preparations are on track. The commission has recruited and is in the process of training more than 150,000 temporary staff, and procurement processes for sensitive and non-sensitive materials are well underway. Significantly, in response to criticism of the opaque nature of its procurement processes in 2016, the EC has prioritized openness and transparency, including undertaking open tender processes and publishing requests for bids in newspapers.

Nearly all Ghanaians with whom the delegation met highlighted the level of public outreach by the EC as a significant improvement upon the 2016 elections. Specifically, the “Let the Citizen Know” campaign is a positive innovation that has allowed the EC to speak directly to the Ghanaian public to provide information, respond to concerns, and encourage participation in the election process.

At the time of the assessment, the EC was nearing completion of the voter registration process, having registered more than 16.6 million voters through the initial registration exercise. This is a laudable achievement, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. After initial reports by the media and the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) indicated lax enforcement of health protocols, the EC responded with additional measures to protect registrants and registration center officials.

However, some stakeholders expressed concerns about remaining issues with the voter register, citing claims that some names may be missing from the list. The EC acknowledged that the exhibition processes revealed issues with missing data on the provisional voter register, and assured the assessment team that it had taken measures to restore registered voters whose names were missing from the exhibited voters list. The EC also plans to release a mobile application that will allow voters to check their registration details.

In 2016, the EC attempted to use an electronic results transmission system to more rapidly compile and release election results. However, the system failed to function on Election Day. The EC told the assessment team that it does not plan to use an electronic results transmission system for this election, and instead will ensure that polling officials are more efficient and timely in collating and submitting election results through its traditional transmission methods of fax and email. In addition, the EC told the assessment team that it intends to release constituency-level results on a rolling basis,

rather than waiting to announce the full result totals at once. This would be a significant improvement upon past polls, when delays in announcing provisional results contributed to increased tensions.

Recent electoral cycles have produced a troubling pattern in how the EC is regarded; the party in government sees the commission's actions as appropriate and necessary, while those in the opposition view the EC with suspicion and mistrust. Interlocutors told the assessment team that this dynamic will continue regardless of which party is in power so long as the EC's chair and commissioners are appointed directly by the president. In the lead-up to this year's elections, it is incumbent upon the EC to reaffirm and demonstrate independence and nonpartisanship and for political parties to act in good faith in their interactions with the commission. In the past, the Inter-party Advisory Committee (IPAC) served as a valuable platform for consultation between the EC and political parties. However, Ghanaian stakeholders told the assessment team that IPAC is not currently being utilized effectively to this end. Stakeholders lamented that the EC uses that platform to communicate decisions it has already taken rather than to genuinely consult with political parties. In addition, the political parties frequently hold post-meeting press conferences where they share conflicting information about meeting outcomes, which generates tensions and confuses voters. Civil society actors believe the EC has not been sufficiently open to constructive criticism and recommendations coming from the sector that, if heeded, could strengthen confidence in the EC's actions.

As in 2008, 2012, and 2016, CODEO, a non-partisan civil society coalition, as part of its overall observation effort will conduct a parallel vote tabulation (PVT), in which observers are deployed to a statistically valid sample of polling stations in order to provide independent verification of the presidential election results. This will also help to enhance public confidence in the outcome of the presidential election.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** To further enhance transparency and build confidence in the voter register, the EC should make the full final voter register available to political parties, as well as citizen and international observers, in an electronic and analyzable format for better analysis, in line with election data standards (www.openelectiondata.net).
- 2** Political parties, civil society, and the media should engage the EC when they have concerns and work in good faith to build consensus on solutions. For its part, the EC should proactively seek such engagements and be open to constructive suggestions that could improve the electoral process.
- 3** To promote transparency, IPAC meetings should be made open to observers, civil society organizations, and international development partners. All actors should act in good faith to ensure meetings are consultative and constructive, and that there is consensus on the meeting outcomes that are communicated to citizens.
- 4** The EC should establish a simple and transparent system to collate, transmit, and communicate election results. The EC should fully, and in a timely manner, communicate its plans to political parties, IPAC, the media, civil society, and the public at large, including providing opportunities to observe demonstrations of the system.
- 5** The EC should make polling station-level results for the presidential and parliamentary elections available immediately upon the announcement of the final results in a simple spreadsheet to enable political parties and the public to assess for themselves the accuracy of the results.

VIGILANTE VIOLENCE AND ELECTION SECURITY

Just as Ghanaians place a high value on credible polls, they equally value Ghana's peace and stability. Guaranteeing this peace and stability is a responsibility shared by all electoral stakeholders including security services, political parties, and the public. The presence of vigilante groups affiliated with political parties has come to be a distressing feature of Ghana's electoral processes. The violence that marred the Ayawaso West Wuogon constituency by-election in January 2019 spurred the passage of the Vigilantism and Related Offences Act in September 2019, an important step to addressing and mitigating vigilante violence. However, many noted that the law alone will not change behavior, and that implementation and enforcement of the law remain weak. Ghanaian actors lamented that politicians are still using vigilante groups for personal security, in part, because they do not trust state security services to protect them. Moreover, interviewees questioned whether the perpetrators of the violent incidents that took place during the voter registration exercise were being investigated, noting that the arrest of these individuals could serve as an important deterrent ahead of Election Day.

As COVID-19 protocols are eased over the next several weeks, political parties are expected to organize rallies and other in-person activities. Ghanaians expressed concern to the assessment team that these events could elevate the risk of clashes between party supporters, as seen in Odododiodio constituency on October 25 during the assessment team's consultations where a peace walk devolved into opposing party supporters throwing rocks and bottles at one another. The universal condemnation of this violence from political parties, security services, civic groups, and the general public following this incident is positive and noteworthy. Civil society activists highlighted other possible triggers for conflict including parties trying to protect their ballots. Stakeholders also noted the potential for elevated tensions should there be a delay in announcing results or if political parties preempt the EC's announcement.

Ghanaians with whom the delegation met expressed concern that platforms previously used to de-escalate tensions and improve security coordination are not as visible and active as in past elections. The expected inauguration of new members of the board of the National Peace Council (NPC) just weeks before the polls leaves the NPC little time to build the confidence of stakeholders in its traditional role in convening peace dialogues, including to sign national- and regional-level peace pledges. Furthermore, the National Elections Security Task Force (NESTF), charged with coordinating security needs during the election process, has not been as active or communicative as in previous election cycles, when its visibility provided assurances to stakeholders and citizens. In addition, some stakeholders expressed concerns that national security-related activities in parts of the country could be perceived as interfering in the electoral process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** ▶ The NPC board members should be inaugurated and a chair selected in a timely manner. Board members should be individuals who are well respected across the political spectrum to allow the body to play its role in ensuring a peaceful election.
- 2** ▶ The NPC and other traditional and religious leaders should prioritize facilitating the signature of national and regional peace pledges. Political parties should adhere to these commitments, including publicly calling upon their supporters, especially youth, to refrain from violence.
- 3** ▶ Political parties should commit to addressing any potential electoral grievances and disputes through the court system.
- 4** ▶ Political parties should strengthen and fully implement internal guidelines and rules governing conduct by their members and candidates, including sanctions for misconduct.
- 5** ▶ Political parties should refrain from publicizing election results or declaring victory until after the EC announces the official results.
- 6** ▶ To provide increased confidence to the public and election stakeholders, members of the NESTF should prioritize publicizing outcomes of its meetings and the measures taken to ensure election security.
- 7** ▶ Security services should make a concerted effort to investigate, arrest, and prosecute individuals who commit electoral violence or violate the Vigilantism and Related Offences Act. These efforts should be made public to enhance citizen confidence and deter further violent acts.

REPRESENTATION OF MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS

While Ghana's democratic achievements have been commendable, the country has failed to live up to global standards concerning the representation and inclusion of marginalized populations in political processes. Marginalized groups including women, youth, and persons with disabilities continue to face barriers to their meaningful participation in elections as guaranteed in the 1992 Constitution. While many political stakeholders pointed to one-off events, policies, or individuals as examples of notable progress for these groups, minimal efforts have been made to address the persistent systemic barriers that have resulted in the poor representation and participation of marginalized groups.

The 2020 election has already been historic for women's representation, with NDC vice presidential candidate Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang as the first woman on a major party's presidential ticket. Three women are also standing as candidates for president. However, these women remain the exception rather than the norm. Both the NDC and NPP have fielded fewer women parliamentary candidates for this election than in 2016. It is widely anticipated that this will likely result in a reduction in the number of women serving as members of parliament. Women's representation is already low – according to the Inter Parliamentary Union, Ghana ranks 150 out of 188 countries with just over 13 percent of parliamentary seats currently occupied by women. In Ghana's 2019 district assembly elections, which serve to produce the political leaders of tomorrow, women won only 234 of 6,158 seats (less than 4 percent). This remains a stain on Ghana's global democratic standing. Women's rights and other civil society activists told the assessment team that women's representation is limited by gender norms and systemic financial barriers that impede women's ability to fully participate and succeed in elections. Women candidates are often victims of cyberbullying and hate speech, with attacks focusing on personal issues including their appearance and marital status. While the NDC, NPP, and other parties have notably reduced filing fees for women candidates, many stakeholders noted the failure of parties to adopt quota systems and other affirmative-action measures to support women candidates; they also observed that the prohibitively high costs associated with campaigns continue to deter women from standing for elections.

Youth make up a significant portion of voters in Ghana, with the Statistical Service showing that 18- to 35-year-olds account for more than half of all eligible voters. Interviewees noted that both the NDC and NPP are trying to court the youth vote, capitalizing on the popular Free Secondary High School policy, which played a major role in the NPP's success in the 2016 presidential elections. The NDC is now promising to expand free education to the tertiary level. Yet high unemployment rates for youth, a top priority issue according to a 2019 Afrobarometer survey, leaves young people vulnerable to be mobilized to violence by political actors and recruitment by vigilante groups. At the same time, a culture of respect for and deference to elders has limited young people's constructive involvement

in the political sphere. Youth organizers told the delegation that youth candidates are viewed as “rebellious” for contesting against older candidates, and young people who are elected to parliament lack the capacity to effectively legislate.

Ghana has historically been at the forefront of ensuring the participation of persons with disabilities in elections, including being among the first sub-Saharan African countries to introduce a tactile ballot sleeve for visually impaired voters in 2004. Stakeholders noted more recent progress by the EC, including increased use of sign-language interpretation in its voter education messaging. However, advocates noted that the EC’s decision to only collect data on select categories of persons with disabilities during the voter registration period will limit the EC’s ability to channel resources to provide proper accommodation at voting sites. Disability rights advocates commented that many polling stations remain inaccessible to the physically disabled.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** To help create a space for women candidates, all parties should agree to a national ban on violence against women in elections, including a ban on hate speech and cyberbullying often used to target women. Political parties should publicly condemn any incidents by their supporters of violence against women.
- 2** Political parties should make efforts to provide financial and other support to women candidates to support their campaign and to offset the structural challenges they face standing for office.
- 3** The National Commission for Civic Education, the EC, political parties, and civil society should strengthen youth-focused civic and voter education efforts and should engage youth to reject vigilantism and engage constructively during the election cycle.
- 4** To facilitate the participation of persons with disabilities in the electoral process, the EC should ensure that adaptations such as wheelchair ramps, tactile ballot sleeves, and sign-language interpretation are available at polling sites where needed, and should make all information about voting accessible to persons with disabilities.

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT AND INFORMATION SPACE






Some stakeholders highlighted a small number of increasingly professional independent media outlets that are informing voters, analyzing political parties' manifestos, and fact-checking statements. However, a majority noted that the media landscape is highly polarized, with media outlets affiliated with or owned by politicians and political parties. Stakeholders asserted that these partisan outlets are contributing to the dissemination of hate speech, inflammatory language, and misinformation.

Ghanaians, particularly youth and those living in urban areas, are increasingly using social media, including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, as their source for election news. A 2017 GeoPoll straw poll survey indicates 64 percent of youth in Ghana (18- to 34-year-olds) use social media as their primary source of information. To reach this important electorate, the EC, political parties, civil society organizations, and other actors are adapting their communication strategies to use these platforms to educate and mobilize voters. Interlocutors expressed concern, however, that political parties are deploying social media teams to promote false information, fuel tensions through inflammatory posts and comments, and threaten or intimidate opponents. Civil society organizations including Dubawa, the Media Foundation for West Africa, and Penplusbytes are training journalists, monitoring media outlets, and conducting fact-checking to help counter these negative trends. Several media outlets have also established their own fact-checking desks, and the NESTF has established a media monitoring operation.

The EC, the National Commission for Civic Education, some media outlets, and civil society organizations are making concerted efforts to inform and mobilize voters. However, Ghanaian stakeholders expressed concern that the limited amount of funding available is hindering efforts to adequately reach and inform all Ghanaians. In its first pre-election observation report, CODEO warned of low levels of voter education and other election-related activities in the constituencies the group observed.

Civil society and media actors have tried to engage political parties and candidates in debates, which, in past election cycles, have allowed voters to compare the policy solutions offered by candidates. At the time of the assessment, it was not clear if voters will be afforded this valuable opportunity to question and compare the platforms of the major presidential candidates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1**  Media, working in collaboration with civil society, should amplify efforts to create platforms for candidate and inter-party debates and discussions of issues of national interest. Political parties and candidates should take advantage of opportunities to participate in moderated public debates, town halls, or other events to engage directly with voters.
- 2**  The National Media Commission should call on media outlets to provide equitable airtime to women journalists, women candidates, and issues important to women.
- 3**  Media outlets and journalists should renounce dissemination of disinformation and rigorously fact-check stories before publication for accuracy and authenticity of sources to avoid spreading misinformation.
- 4**  Parties should refrain from conducting or benefiting from disinformation campaigns that seek to deliberately mislead or confuse voters or suppress their participation in the elections.
- 5**  Ghana's development partners should expand their support for civic and voter education efforts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

IRI and NDI wish to express their appreciation to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which has supported this analysis. IRI and NDI are nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations that support and strengthen democratic institutions and advance freedom in the world. IRI and NDI have collectively organized more than 400 international observation missions or assessments to more than 65 countries. The Institutes' ongoing assessment of Ghana's electoral environment is being conducted in line with the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation.

For more information about IRI and its programs, please visit www.iri.org.

For more information about NDI and its programs, please visit www.ndi.org.

Authors:

IRI Board Member and former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Constance Newman; NDI Vice President, Shari Bryan; IRI Resident Program Director and Senior Technical Specialist for East and Southern Africa, Jessica Keegan; and NDI Senior Advisor for Elections, Richard L. Klein.

International Republican Institute

IRI.org

@IRIglobal

P: (202) 408-9450

E: info@iri.org

National Democratic Institute

NDI.org

@NDI

P: (202) 728-5500

E: media@ndi.org

