

Policy Brief

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Ghana's Sixth Non-Partisan District Assembly Election

INTRODUCTION

Ghana passed the Local Government Act 462 in 1993, which created the District Assemblies. In contrast to the general elections, which rest on party politics, election to a District Assembly is non-partisan. This means that the choice of the local representatives, called assembly members, is devoid of party politics. According to section 7, subsection 1 of Act 462, 'a candidate seeking election to a District Assembly or to a lower local government unit shall personally appear before the electorate as an individual, and shall not use a symbol associated with a political party.' Therefore, individual entrepreneurs who want to serve as community leaders would not require the support or solicit the assistance of any political party. This also implies that the District Assembly election process is free from political influences and activities. Hence, the Electoral Commission, which manages the election process, has the mandate to direct candidates' campaigns and voters' mobilization. This means that the process from nomination to vote declaration is devoid of partisan activities. For purposes of clarity, section 7, subsection 2 of Act 462 unequivocally cautions, *inter alia*: 'a political party shall not endorse, sponsor, offer a platform to or in any other way campaign for or against a candidate seeking election to a District Assembly or to a lower local government unit'.

Scholars have long defended the non-partisan method of electing officers to local governments on grounds that it fosters communal unity and cohesion. They have argued that a non-partisan electoral process would ensure: that diverse groups living in the countryside are brought together to manage their own affairs without having to

be segmented by partisan politics; and that, local talents could be easily harnessed for local development, among others.

But many Ghanaians have raised questions about the relevance of holding to the non-partisan principle, as far as the election to the 216 Metropolitan/Municipal/District Assemblies is concerned. The critics have questioned the tenability of the non-partisan approach claiming that ‘man is a political animal’ and this makes it extremely impossible to adhere to the neutrality principles. This means that no matter the legal restrictions and penalties thereof, participants are likely to breach the non-partisan rule.

It is against this background that the Economy of Ghana Network (EGN) under the auspices of the Institute of Statistical Social and Economic Research (ISSER), on February 26, 2015, organized a roundtable on *Ghana’s Sixth Non-Partisan District Assembly Election*, to stimulate debate on the feasibility of running a non-partisan local government election in Ghana. The discussion probed the theoretical foundation that underpins non-partisan district assembly elections; examined the Ghanaian experience, and made recommendations for a competitive and participatory District Assembly election.

This brief highlights the important issues that formed the core of the discussions at the roundtable to serve as lessons to guide policy makers, practitioners and academics alike.

KEY ISSUES

- ❖ The non-partisan or no-party election contest is one in which:
 - Political parties are prevented from sponsoring or presenting a candidate;
 - Parties cannot endorse or campaign against a candidate;
 - Parties are not allowed to provide a platform for a candidate;
 - Candidates are not permitted to identify with political parties – all these features suggest that a non-partisan election process prohibits a candidate from articulating party and ideological positions.

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- ❖ The non-partisan local government election is supported by theoretical and empirical literature, including the arguments that it:
 - promotes greater voter participation;
 - prevents party elite/executives at the constituencies from controlling the assembly members;
 - eliminates patronage practices, which often lead to corruption of elected officials;
 - promotes local autonomy since the outcome of local elections is less likely to be determined by national or state political currents; and
 - brings less cost to candidates compared to parliamentary elections.

- ❖ As part of efforts to make the sixth District Assembly election process free from partisan and party politics, Ghana's Electoral Commission held common platforms at the electoral areas which showcased the competing candidates and gave them the opportunity to engage the electorate face-to-face to canvass for their votes. Also, in order to encourage local interests and promote unrestricted participation, no financial obligations were made on the candidates. Hence, all contestants filed their nomination papers free of charge.

- ❖ However, evidence from the 2015 election process revealed certain contradictions between theory and reality. For instance, the claims made in literature that non-partisan local government election stimulated citizen's interest and participation was not supported by evidence. The five previous District Assembly elections produced low participation as compared with the six partisan general elections. While the latter recorded some 70 percent voter turnout, the former hovered between 30 to 40 percent. Also, candidates' campaigns during the sixth District Assembly election (that was halted) were based on personality rather than issues – those issues that concerned the local people. This phenomenon occasioned the reinforcement of local cleavages, which did not promote lively mobilization of grassroots support in the election.

- ❖ Similarly, contrary to the rules of the game, party politics played a fundamental role in shaping candidates' campaigns and platform debates during the sixth District Assembly elections. For those who are in support of non-partisan District Assembly elections, the recourse to partisanship by some of the candidates, in their opinion,

misdirected the focus and purpose of the election. In other words, the partisan discourse tended to undermine candidates' ability to design a clear program of action to be followed by the community if they were elected into office. This implies that by projecting partisan orientations, the candidates succeeded in confusing the electorates who looked forward to electing a neutral but competent individual as community leader.

- ❖ Yet, many candidates that made the switch from non-partisan to partisan politicking methods believed that, the non-partisan balloting process would leave voters less informed, and less likely to vote. They felt that a non-partisan election was less competitive, and that the atmosphere for peaceful grassroots exchanges would gradually fade into oblivion. Hence, they instigated partisanship and party politics into the campaign, which largely involved, fostering party affiliations in their house-to-house campaigning and voter mobilizations efforts, including declaring their party affinities to the electorate. This group of people believed that some element of partisanship was necessary to make for a vibrant electoral process. The question is this – how long can Ghana continue to run a so-called non-partisan election, which at best, exists only in theory when the reality reveals absolute popular interest in a partisan local government election?

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The sixth, like the previous five local government elections, exhibited partisan tendencies. While political parties were seen throwing their weights behind their preferred candidates albeit subtly, some candidates, under the belief that their affiliation with their parties would enhance their prospects of winning the election, resorted to varieties of partisan strategies as means to influence the process in their favour. For instance, some candidates took their photographs with the background depicting their party colours, a total breach of Act 462. This is to say that the District Assembly election has become partisan despite its non-partisan orientation.

Consequently, it would be foolhardy to remain in the old tradition of running a non-partisan local government election. It would matter to the political elite to realign the

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legal provisions to the current realities. It will serve no interest or advance the course of democracy if the elite construct a law to ban parties from local government elections and then turn against it. It must be understood that democracy at the national level must always mirror local democracy. In other words, it makes no logical sense to run a partisan competitive national election and bar grassroots from choosing their leaders based on the same spirit partisanship.

Subject Matter Specialist:

This was put together under the direction of the subject matter specialist. It is based on a workshop at which Dr. Emmanuel Debrah, head of the Political Science Department, University of Ghana, presented on the subject ‘Ghana’s Sixth Non-Partisan District Assembly Election’.

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