

Blood on the Ballot: Election Violence in Ghana

Political polarisation, vigilante groups and the security agencies' excessive use of force have fed the turmoil.

In the decades since Ghana's transition to democracy in 1992, the West Africa country has built a reputation for peaceful elections and orderly transitions of power.

But the deadly violence Ghana has experienced in its last two rounds of voting have raised concerns over the state's commitment to safeguarding its citizens. Experts warn that political polarisation, vigilante groups and excessive force by security agencies have fed the turmoil.

Most recently, the December 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections saw the deaths of at least six people. Several youth-led protests descended into violence, while clashes between groups loyal to the main National Democratic Congress (NDC) and New Patriotic Party (NPP) caused further unrest.

The violence played out despite widespread commitments from political groups and government agencies following criticism of their actions during the previous round of voting in 2020.

In those elections, clashes between party supporters, vigilante groups and security forces across the country left at least eight people dead.

In response, promised reforms had included enhanced oversight, impartial security deployment and specialised training in crowd control.

Yet despite widespread calls for justice, no significant prosecutions have been made for the killings.

"Justice delayed is justice denied," said security analyst Richard Kumadoe. "The state's failure to hold individuals accountable for election-related violence sends a dangerous message that impunity is tolerated."

Kumadoe warned that this absence of accountability not only perpetuated a cycle of violence but also eroded public trust in institutions meant to uphold the rule of law. He said that perpetrators needed to be prosecuted and jailed, and victims and their families compensated.

Relatives of those killed and injured agree that justice is essential.

"We need to remember their names, their dreams, and their sacrifices," Zainab Mahama, whose 18-year-old son Abdallah Ayaric was killed in 2020. "Only then can we build a future where no one has to die for democracy."

Ayaric, an electrician, was killed alongside another man amid protests over alleged vote rigging in Techiman South, a critical swing constituency.

Witnesses recounted how armed men in uniform shot dead the two men and injuring seven others, with video footage widely shared on social media showing them firing directly into the crowd.

"He was my only son," Mahama told IWPR. "He wanted to become a teacher, but they took him from me. For what? Votes?"

In June 2021, the director-general of the Criminal Investigation Department Isaac Ken Yeboah said that five suspects would stand trial on charges of murder and possession of firearms without lawful authority related to the Techiman shooting. However, nobody has yet been prosecuted.

Youth Agents of Change

A majority of Ghana's population is aged 25 or under, and youth-led organisations such as the Coalition for Peaceful Elections have campaigned to educate voters on the dangers of violence and the importance of civic engagement.

"We can't sit back and watch our future be destroyed," said Ama Asiedu, a 24-year-old activist affiliated with the non-partisan youth #FixTheCountry movement, told IWPR. "It's up to us to demand better from our leaders."

But experts believe that central to Ghana's election violence has been the proliferation of vigilante groups affiliated with political parties, often composed of unemployed young men.

These groups are used to intimidate opponents, disrupt voting and protect party interests.

In 2019, a commission of enquiry was set up to look into violence that broke out during a January by-election in the Greater Accra region in which nearly 20 people were injured.

This led to the passing of the Vigilantism and Related Offenses Act of 2019 which sought to dismantle and outlaw such groups.

However, enforcement has been weak and these activities have persisted; many of the groups [rebranded](#) to escape the law but continued to operate.

"The politicians use us and dump us," Amadu, a former member of the Delta and Invisible vigilante groups in Accra, believed to be affiliated to the NPP, told IWPR. "They promise jobs, but after the elections, we're left with nothing."

The 37-year-old, now a dispatch driver, said that he was recruited as a jobless youth before the 2016 general elections. He claimed that he assured a job at the presidency if the party won the election, promises which were never fulfilled.

Peace Agreements

Post-election reports from international observers have called for Ghana to put in place comprehensive reforms to strengthen electoral processes and prevent future violence.

Following the 2020 bloodshed, the NPP and NDC signed accords facilitated by the National Peace Council and religious leaders, pledging to avoid inflammatory rhetoric, resolve grievances through legal channels, and discourage youth involvement in violence.

Civil society organisations, such as the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and the Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG), also launched voter education campaigns to counter incitement and promote peaceful participation.

Kumadoe argued that a collective effort was needed to address the root causes of election violence, with civil society, religious leaders and traditional authorities playing an active role.

“We as a country must fast track our policies to hold political parties to peace pacts - and not just signing them, and that ends it,” he said.

Despite commitments made following the 2020 elections, the lead-up to the 2024 vote also saw an increase in attacks on journalists, activists and opposition supporters.

In 2023, a coalition of media bodies in Ghana’s media [demanded the repeal](#) of “repressive” laws that they claimed allowed journalists critical of to face prosecution.

Radio stations critical of the government reported threats and intimidation, while several journalists and media outlets were attacked.

In 2024, the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) even issued a media blacklist against politicians who assault media workers.

Promised Action

John Dramani Mahama of the NDC won the December 2024 elections with 56.4 per cent of the votes, beating the incumbent NPP’s Mahamudu Bawumia.

Within days of his swearing-in, Mahama instructed investigations be launched into both rounds of election violence. He issued a statement describing the bloodshed as leaving “a lasting scar on our democratic process, and justice must be served for the victims and their families”.

Mahama also called on the inspector general of police George Akuffo Dampare to form an investigative task force to focus solely on these killings.

But Kwaku Asare, a fellow at the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), said that the police themselves needed to take responsibility. The lack of earlier action was disappointing and had led to a culture of impunity that has allowed these incidents to persist, he continued.

“It is the Ghana police service's primary mandate to investigate matters of public concern, such as election-related fatalities,” he explained, adding that the delay in addressing these cases raises questions about institutional independence.

“The police should not wait for the president to come and tell them to investigate the death of somebody. That is something we pay them to do. If they are not doing it, then we need to ask why. Were there political pressures on them? If so, we must hold those responsible accountable.”

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