

West Africa Report: Ghana

The Challenge of Chieftaincy and Ethnic Violence – A Challenge to Peace in Ghana

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Summary

Ghana is not at war; yet to describe it as a peaceful state would be to overlook the disconcerting trends in security. Apart from the rising high profile and sophisticated crimes, chieftaincy and ethnic violence remains a pervasive danger to security. Such prolonged and unresolved violence has the potential to serve as a staircase to radicalization. In the last 7 years West Africa has served as a sustained epicentre for radicalization and terrorist violence, with the sub-region alone recording over 7,200 fatalities.

Ghana's strong interaction with and proximity to Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and Mali, coupled with rising youth unemployment, political vigilantism and other local incidences of violence, have provoked fears that Ghana could become a new frontier for radicalization and terrorism. But the successful management and resolution of the ongoing chieftaincy and ethnic conflicts can serve as a game-changer in sustaining the peace and stability of the country.

Introduction

Strong economic gains coupled with political stability in the last 27 years have reinforced Ghana's reputation as a peaceful and stable country in a turbulent region plagued by civil wars, terrorism and coups d'état. In the last 7 years, however, West Africa as a whole has served as a sustained epicentre for radicalization and terrorist violence, with the region recording over 7,200 fatalities. Boko Haram alone constituted over 6,600 of those fatalities.

Regrettably, underneath Ghana's peaceful narrative is a dark underbelly of deadly violence involving various protagonists. Among these, chieftaincy and ethnic violence remains the single biggest source of violence. Chieftaincy and ethnic conflicts pose the most direct and pervasive threat to peace and security in Ghana, with over 352 unresolved chieftaincy conflicts nationwide. Between 1981 and 2018, chieftaincy and ethnic violence accounted for over 12,744 fatalities¹. While this statistic is disproportionately skewed by the 1994 Nanumba-Konkomba War, it reveals the destructive and devastating effect such conflicts have had on the human resource of the nation.

Even today, conflicts regarding chieftaincy disputes have led to heinous incidents. Just in the month of July 2019, unknown assailants wielding machetes invaded the palace of Nana Kwasi Agyemang IX, Omanhene of Lower Dixcove, setting barrels of fuel and several boats on fire, even detonating dynamite as the assailants continued their destruction. While police are still investigating the incident, the attack highlights the significant violence that can be encouraged by chieftaincy disputes. The failure to prosecute and punish perpetrators of such violence often emboldens such acts. Such situations are expected to inspire further violence due to the absence of deterrent traditional or state measures for the perpetrators.

Many of these from resistance to the disregard for court and contestation over heir to a skin or stool. instances result in youth barbaric murder of some involved. The regular perpetrators and victims consequences for future development. Youth tend to develop an enduring culture of violence over time.

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The challenge of chieftaincy and ethnic violence has been the biggest challenge to peace in Ghana. The destructive and destabilizing roles associated with the institution of chieftaincy brings into question the role of the institution in modern governance practices. Whilst constitutionally recognized, there are growing anxieties over not only legitimacy but the credibility of the institution in building peace and national cohesion. The continuous existence of unresolved conflicts can build a pervasive culture of violence, creating dysfunctional societies with dire consequences for a youth who grow into such violent environments. Such dysfunctional societies have a proclivity to produce a culture susceptible to radicalization and violent extremism and can serve as a conveyor belt to terrorism. Violent extremism and terrorism thrive in an environment of chaos and weak social structures.

What is dangerous is that Ghana's strong interaction with and proximity to Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and Mali – all theatres for terrorist violence, coupled with rising youth unemployment, political vigilantism and other local incidences of violence, makes the country's vulnerabilities worse. This has

¹ WACCE Security Research, 'Challenge of Chieftaincy and Ethnic Violence', 2018

led to predictions as well as fears that the country could become a new frontier for radicalization and terrorism in West Africa.

This is not to imply however, that Ghana is doomed to collapse. Avoiding this eventuality requires deepening the culture of resilience against violence, respect for human rights and institutions of justice delivery, creating sustainable jobs, ensuring adequate social infrastructure development and developing enduring partnerships for peace, inter-agency coordination and intelligence sharing.

Luckily, there have been promising strides in the reconciliation of these disputes. After more than a decade and a half for instance, the country celebrated the resolution of one of the biggest chieftaincy crisis with the installation of Yaa Naa Abukari Mahama II, King of the Dagbon Traditional Area in Northern Ghana.

The Dagbon Chieftaincy Crisis claimed in excess of 40 and maimed many more lives and its resolution points to the potential peace that is attainable in Ghana with sustained and inclusive efforts. It provides both an opportunity and hope that the many outstanding conflicts could be resolved amicably. However, it requires Ghanaians to deliberate and active in their strides toward peace. Resolving such crisis requires significant leadership and diplomacy and above all, a willingness by all parties to respect the peace proceedings and outcomes of court rulings. It is a long road, but one that is within reach.

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