

Chieftaincy and Partisan Politics: The Case of Agona Ashanti Traditional Area

Kwarkye Gyedu Thompson
Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University Denmark
Bispehavevej, 5 03 8, 8210 Aarhus V, Denmark

Abstract

The paper provides detailed analysis on chieftaincy in Ghana and their involvement in partisan politics from 1992 to 2010. The 1992 Constitution of Ghana debars chiefs from taking an active part in partisan politics. This constitutional provision as argued by many scholars, policy analyst and civil society organisations is to maintain the respect, neutrality and dignity of the institution. This notwithstanding, some chiefs have openly involved themselves in partisan politics. With this background, the study used largely qualitative research methods to examine why chiefs involve themselves in partisan politics and the effects of their involvement on sustainable development. The study found that, politicians play major roles in chiefs involving themselves in partisan politics. It was also established that it is in the right direction that chiefs are not allowed to participate in partisan politics even though it appears as an infringement on their political rights.

Keywords: Chieftaincy, Chief, Political party, Partisan politics, Agona Ashanti

1. Background to the Study

The institution of chieftaincy has displayed extraordinary resilience to political change in the periods before, during and after colonial rule in many parts of Africa (Odotei & Awedoba, 2006). Before the inception of colonialism in the then Gold Coast (now Ghana), chiefs performed legislative, executive, judicial, military and religious functions (Arhin, 2001; Odotei & Awedoba, 2006). In times of war, for instance, the capture of a chief necessitated the surrender of his whole army (Arhin, 1985). While maintaining law and order, adjudicating on cases and settling disputes, chiefs also served as a link between the living and the dead (Odotei & Awedoba, 2006). However, the introduction of colonialism brought new roles to the institution (Arhin, 1985). Chiefs during this period collected taxes, maintained law and order, settled disputes and adjudicated on minor cases albeit subject to supervision by the colonial government (ibid). These new roles many scholars have argued, not only limited the powers and functions of chiefs but also made them mere instruments of the colonial masters (ibid).

The period after independence was not so different from the colonial times as some government policies and programs were aimed at enfeebling the power base of the institution (Boafo-Arthur, 2003). Nkrumah, after assuming office led a crusade against some members of the institution. His decision to deal with chiefs stems from their perceived opposition to his party (The Conventions People's Party) (Arhin, 1985; Boafo-Arthur, 2003). Those chiefs who supported the party were elevated to paramount status while those who were perceived as opposing him were removed or had their status lowered (Boafo-Arthur, 2001). The Progress Party which came to power in 1969 after the military coup that toppled Nkrumah's government in 1966 restored some sort of calm in the institution. The 1969 constitution corrected the ills of the previous constitution. Article 153 of the constitution stated that 'the institution of chieftaincy together with its traditional council as established by the customary laws and usages is hereby guaranteed' (Ghana, 1969). This meant that the institution was given some sort of restoration and recognition. The independence of the institution did not last due to the overthrow of the Progress Party by the National Redemption Council (NRC) in 1972. While the NRC government recognised the institution, some chiefs had their status lowered while others had their status elevated (Boafo-Arthur, 2001). In 1979 when constitutional rule was re-launched, it re-echoed the relevance of the chieftaincy institution to the nation's development. The constitution guaranteed the institution and further declared that "... parliament shall have no power to enact any legislation which confers on any person or authority, the right to accord or withdraw recognition to or from a chief; or which in any way detracts or derogates from the honour and dignity of the institution" (Ghana; 1979). There was, however, a clash between the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) and the institution of chieftaincy until the constitutional rule was restored again in 1992.

2. Statement of the Problem

The back and forth of government meddling in the affairs of the institution as stated in the background to the research above coupled with the need to maintain the neutrality, respect and dignity of chieftaincy institution led to a further boost by the 1992 Constitution of Ghana (Boafo-Arthur, 2001). Although article 270 of the Constitution of the Republic of Ghana guarantees the institution of chieftaincy, it debars chiefs from taking an active part in partisan politics. Article 270 Clause 1 states "a chief shall not take part in active politics; and any chief wishing to do so and seeking elections to parliament shall abdicate his stool or skin" (Ghana, 1992). Notwithstanding the fact that the Constitution frowns upon the active participation of chiefs in party politics, some chiefs have declared

their supports for one political candidate or another and have gone to the extent of openly campaigning for them (Gyamfi, 2004). Though the framers of the constitution had historical antecedents in mind, most human right activist, constitutional experts and public policy makers have argued that the provision clearly violates the fundamental human rights of chiefs (Boafo-Arthur, 2001). The research, therefore, aims at uncovering chiefs' participation in partisan politics in the fourth republic of Ghana (1992-2010). The paper aims at explaining the major causes and likely effects of chiefs' involvement in partisan politics.

3. Research Questions

The research was guided by the following research question

- What are the overall cause(s) of chiefs' involvement in partisan politics?
- What major effect(s) does chief's involvement in partisan politics have on sustainable development in Ghana?

4. Literature Review

Scholars both within and outside academics have made enormous contributions in many different ways towards chieftaincy and what it stands for. In a very interesting work on chieftaincy in independent Zambia, Van-Binsbergen (1987) concluded that chieftaincy is obsolete and should be allowed to die as it has in many European countries where the remnants (monarchies) is not so visible in the 21st century (Van-Binsbergen, 1987). The reason Van Binsbergen (1987) notes are mainly because the institution today has no role to play in the democratic dispensation of many developing countries. This is coupled with the fact that the long-standing litigation that comes about as a result of succession to the throne has led to political unrest which has threatened the security of many developing nations (Arhin, 1985). However, Arhin (2001) has argued for the need to preserve the institution of chieftaincy. Chiefs, Arhin (2001) argues, are embodiments of the rich culture, organize the people for communal development and serve as a tool for national integration.

The relations of chieftaincy with the twist and turns of governments in Ghana before 1982, outlining the main features of traditional institutions and central governments immediately after independence have been examined by Boafo Arthur (2001). He concludes that the various constitutions of Ghana since independence has assured the existence of the institution and ensured that chiefs are significant development partners. Boafo-Arthur later argues that the main challenge facing the institution in recent times is the constitutional provision that bans chiefs from taking an active part in partisan politics, a challenge which has elicited a varied response from chiefs since the dawn of democracy in Ghana (Boafo-Arthur, 2001).

The contribution by Jonah (2003) on traditional authorities in local government participation draws the attention of the significant roles played by the institution in sustaining development at rural and local levels in Ghana. Even though chiefs seem to have lost power, they have adopted a number of methods in ensuring that their presence is felt. This is done by supporting preferred candidates to local government and parliamentary elections or by making sure their opponents are not elected into office (Jonah, 2003).

Gyamfi (2004) in his essay on main causes of chieftaincy involvements in party politics argued that the main reason why some chiefs tend to involve in partisan politics was the centralization of power and control of central government over finance and development agenda. He identified the major effects of chiefs in politics as but not limited to loss of respect, the inability of chiefs to maintain neutrality in peace building and conflict resolution, and the fact that meddling in politics may bring the institution of chieftaincy into disrepute.

5. Research design and population instrument

The study mainly relied on the case study method as its guiding framework because the study focused on one traditional area, Agona Ashanti Traditional Area in the Afigya Sekyere South District of the Ashanti region of Ghana. The study was based on an infinite population consisting of chiefs, the council of elders, constitutional experts, family heads and members of the general public. For practicality consideration, a randomized sample of fifty [N=50] respondents were generated from the aforementioned categories.

Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources of data included mainly structured and semi-structured individual interviews and questionnaires. The questionnaires were made of two parts. The first part looked at the bio data of respondents while the second part looked to answer the research questions above. Secondary sources of data included; newspaper publications, review of various constitutions of Ghana, journals articles and textbooks that showed chieftaincy and partisan politics among others. Data from the interviews were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

6. Findings

6.1 Causes of chiefs in partisan politics

The research wanted to find out what were the main factors that account for chiefs' participation in partisan politics. 55% of respondents agreed that chiefs enter into partisan politics for personal interest. This was followed by 39%

who agreed that chiefs enter into politics for the interest of their community hence the national interest. It must be pointed out that majority (56%) of chiefs interviewed argued that chiefs enter into politics for the interest of their community while 44% argued that chiefs enter into politics for their own interest. This clearly shows that there is a sharp difference between the views of chiefs and that of the members of the public concerning the reasons why some chiefs enter into partisan politics. The research, therefore, contends that most people who are not chiefs believe that chiefs enter into partisan politics for their (chiefs) own interest and chiefs, on the other hand, believe that they enter into politics for the interest of their respective communities. The majority of respondents (76% including 82% of chiefs interviewed) also agreed that politicians play active roles in luring chiefs into partisan politics.

6.2 Effects of chiefs in partisan politics

Of much interest to this research was to ascertain the effects of chiefs' involvement in partisan politics. The respondents were asked about the main positive and negative effects of chiefs' involvement in politics.

6.2.1 Positive effects

Majority of respondents (as many as 55%) agreed that chiefs' involvement in partisan politics will promote development in the area. They also agreed that chiefs' involvement in partisan politics will promote good governance. 12% of respondents also agreed that chiefs' involvement in politics is their political right and that it will protect the fundamental right of freedom of association of chiefs. We can, therefore, argue that most people believe that chiefs' involvement will enhance development, good governance and human rights.

6.2.2 Negative effects:

Majority of respondents (58%) including 60% of chiefs interviewed argued that chiefs' involvement in politics will make them lose their respect. Other factors that are the likely negative effects of chiefs in partisan politics were identified as; politicization of the institution of chieftaincy, division among the people and disintegrated institution. Majority of respondents agreed that the negative effects of chiefs' involvement in partisan politics outweigh the positive effects.

7. Discussion of findings

The research found out that most people are aware of the constitutional provision in the 1992 Constitution of Ghana that debar chiefs from taking an active part in partisan politics. This provision most respondents argued has little effect on the role chiefs' play in their respective traditional areas. The research also found out that both chiefs and non-chiefs blame politicians for chiefs' participation in partisan politics. The respondents perhaps based their arguments on the fact that some chiefs by virtue of their professional competence are allowed by the constitution to work in the areas where their skills are needed (Gyamfi, 2004). This notwithstanding, the likelihood for them to side with the incumbent government, in particular, makes it a difficult position. Another factor accounting for chiefs' participation in partisan politics was identified as the personal interest of chiefs. This is quite ironic because chiefs are supposed to represent the wellbeing of their people. But for non-chiefs to acknowledge that chiefs enter into partisan politics to seek personal interest even beyond national interest is an indication of changing values, perhaps of some of the chiefs (ibid). What is more interesting is that the shift of power from traditional rule to democratic government has not been identified as a reason for partisan politics. The response by both chiefs and non-chiefs had it that the change has had little impact on them.

Generally, the respect for the institution will deteriorate. In the same way, the traditional role of the chief will be seriously compromised and this will have a negative impact on chieftaincy. It is against this background that there exists an overwhelming agreement by the majority of respondents that chiefs should be limited by the provisions of the 1992 Constitution that debar the institution from taking an active part in partisan politics. Chiefs as dispute settlers can only achieve peace if they show absolute neutrality in their dealings and activities. Once a chief side with a political party, they risk the ability to resolve disputes and maintain peace, especially during a crisis. If peace remains elusive when chiefs identify with a political party, then respect cannot be guaranteed either (ibid). It will be extremely difficult for one to react positively to his chief who is also his political opponent.

8. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation

This research has tried to come out with some salient issues relating to chiefs and partisan politics. It looked at some of the major causes and likely effects of chiefs' participation in partisan politics. Politicians it has been established play significant roles in chiefs identifying with certain political parties. Politicians, the paper argues have used their position whether in a subtle manner or openly to lure chiefs into their fold so as to benefit from their influence over the directions of decisions in their communities. The major effects of chief identifying themselves with a political party are the loss of respect for the institution, politicization of the institution among others. It must be noted that partisan politics does not necessarily mean opponents are not respected among others, the reality in many developing democracies however is such that political opponents are seen as enemies hence the prestige we attach to the chieftaincy institution cannot be guaranteed if chiefs are allowed to participate in

partisan politics.

Article 276 (2) of the 1992 Constitution states that "... a chief may be appointed to any public office for which he is otherwise qualified." Much as this is a beautiful outlet for our professional traditional leaders to bring their experience and knowledge to bear on our developmental aspirations, it may also seem to be implying that a chief may disassociate himself from the policies of the ruling party if he is called upon to explain to the general public.

In view of the data collected and the conclusion drawn, I make the following recommendations;

- Adequate institutional measures should be put in place to enforce the constitutional provision that debars chiefs from taking active parts in partisan politics. This may include but not limited to establishment of a special court that trials chiefs that engage in partisan politics.
- A second chamber of parliament should be created and its membership should devoid of political parties. Their role should be to act as a body of specialist knowledge that scrutinizes in greater details bills passed by the first chamber. The second chamber should comprise chiefs and other traditional leaders. This will provide the opportunity for chiefs to air their views and to scrutinize government policies and programs.
- The National House of Chiefs should liaise with the Regional Houses of Chiefs to monitor the activities of chiefs in the regions so as to be kept informed of what chiefs are doing. The National House of Chiefs should also come out with a code of conduct which chiefs will have to abide by as far as partisan politics is concerned.
- Seminars, public fora and conferences should be organized periodically for chiefs regarding the content and interpretation of the constitution. Members of the chiefs' council should be allowed to participate in such programs for a better appreciation of the course of democracy and good governance.
- Finally, public education on the constitutional provision that debars chiefs from taking an active part in partisan politics should be done more effectively especially among rural, semi-illiterate and illiterates dwellers.

9. Areas for further research

Based on the key findings of this research the following areas are recommended for further research.

- The nature of collaboration between the institution of chieftaincy and local government institutions in Ghana.
- How traditional authorities are able to collaborate with development agencies to improve the living standards of the people.
- The forms in which chiefs involve themselves in partisan politics.
- The role of women traditional leaders in promoting development at the local level.

References

- Abayie-Boateng, K., 1998. The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana; An Overview.
- Arhin, K., 1985. *Traditional rule in Ghana: Past and present*. Sedco Publ.
- Arhin, K., 2001. *Transformations in Traditional Rule in Ghana: 1951-1996*. Sedco Pub Limited.
- Boafo-Arthur, K., 2001. Chieftaincy and politics in Ghana since 1982. *West Africa Review*, 3(1).
- Boafo-Arthur, K., 2003. Chieftaincy in Ghana: Challenges and Prospects in the 21st Century. *African and Asian Studies*, 2(2), pp.125-153.
- Boaten, B.A., 1998. Traditional conservation practices. Ghana's example. *Inst Afr Stud Res Rev*, 14(1), pp.42-51.
- Ghana, R.O., 1969. *Constitution of the Republic of Ghana*. Ghana Publishing Corporation (Print. Division).
- Ghana, R. O., 1979. *Constitution of the Republic of Ghana*. Ghana Publishing Corporation (Print Division).
- Ghana, R. O., 1990. *Constitution of the Republic of Ghana*. Ghana Publishing Corporation (Print Division).
- Gyamfi, A. P., 2004 Chieftaincy and partisan politics: Causes and Effects (unpublished long essay)
- Jonah, K., 2002. The Electoral Response of Ghana's Traditional Rulers to their Subordination and Alienation to Local Governance. *Local Government in Ghana: Grassroots Participation in the* pp.209-222.
- Odotei, I.K. and Awedoba, A.K. eds., 2006. *Chieftaincy in Ghana: Culture, governance and development* (Vol. 1). Sub-Saharan Pub & Traders.
- Van Binsbergen, W., 1987. Chiefs and the state in independent Zambia: Exploring the Zambian national press. *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, 19(25-26), pp.139-201.