

GHANA

Sola Tayo, FREELANCE JOURNALIST, WAS RECENTLY IN ACCRA



Following the Gentle Giant

Ghana's President John Kufuor has successfully promoted his country as a haven of political and economic stability, but as he comes to the end of his two terms in office, the cracks are beginning to appear. Can Ghana escape the election traumas that have been so destructive in Kenya and Zimbabwe?

t HERE ARE ASPECTS OF GHANA'S CAPITAL, ACCRA which are typical of many African cities. The monuments to the continent's heroes and the monolithic Soviet-inspired government buildings are standard pos-colonial symbols. However, it is the appalling traffic jams that are the true mark of modern day Africa. The queues can go on for what seems like a lifetime and then miraculously disperse with no explanation. Sitting in stationery traffic is a frequent occurrence in Accra and this sharply contrasts with the image of a fast growing city that the government is working hard to portray.

Accra is a city experiencing an economic and construction boom. The government has heavily courted foreign

investment and is now reaping the benefits. In the week I was there, the city hosted high profile international conferences on aid effectiveness and climate change and a scattering of smaller gatherings. Large conferences mean overbooked flights and hotels and a flood of foreign wealth into the hospitality sector.

REACHING FOR DREAMS

Ghana is often held up as an oasis of stability in West Africa – one of the most politically volatile parts of the world. Regional neighbours Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast have all been devastated by recent civil wars and uprisings, but mineral rich Ghana has remained peaceful and welcoming to tourists and investors.

Unlike many African countries, it has escaped being tainted by the ugly brush of corruption. Its ranking of sixty-ninth out of 180 countries in Transparency International's annual corruption perception index is not too bad when you consider that it is trailed by 32 other African states. However, this does not mean corruption is alien. It is widely documented that several Ghanaian parliamentarians – from the ruling and opposition parties – have been accused of graft and abuse of power.

President John Kufour has won praise for his 'zero tolerance' stance on corruption and has been credited with giving enhanced powers to anti-corruption bodies, but his creation of a self-regulatory Office of Accountability within the presidential offices angered many campaigners.

Ever since Kufour's New Patriotic Party came to power in 2000 he has pursued his goal of elevating Ghana to a middle income country by 2015. Depending on who you talk to, the dream is either within easy reach or decades away, but from the outside at least Ghana looks on track to achieve it.

It has not been an easy journey and the President has made many sacrifices along the way – his popularity being one of the biggest. In the early stages of his presidency he signed up to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) to secure a package of aid and debt relief.

This tested his popularity at home as the country struggled to conform to the strict conditions. Ordinary Ghanaians were confronted with increased fuel and water prices

and opponents of the initiative accused the President of making Ghana a slave to the IMF, but he persisted with the changes and remains convinced he did the correct thing.

SPINNING ON

Kufour's nickname, The Gentle Giant, is a testament to his imposing stature and measured demeanour. His critics argue that he is devoid of personality and consider him a bit dull. Face to face, he is courteous, polite and very softly spoken for a man of his size, but he lacks the flamboyance and eccentricity associated with his predecessor, Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings.

Kufour's media team is fiercely protective and treats the press with a mixture of disdain and indifference. The President himself is more relaxed, but it is immediately clear that he is not happy answering questions that may challenge the image of Ghana his government has spent years cultivating.

He is fond of his nickname and is very proud of his record on human rights and is also determined that the recent discovery of oil, which the World Bank says could go a long way to clearing Ghana's debts, will not turn his country into the region's next basket case.

Opposition groups accuse the government of over estimating the amount of oil found off the coast, saying there is no way the country is capable of producing 120,000 barrels per day, but the president is confident that Ghana will begin exporting as soon as 2010.

The President also possesses the gift of being able to put a positive spin on the most damning statistics. Ask him if Ghana's cocoa farmers get a raw deal and he will not necessarily deny it, but will make the point that they are now in a much better position than ever before. Mention Ghana's poor record on maternal health – one in 35 deaths – and he will reel off a number of recent government initiatives introduced to tackle the problem.

Interestingly, Kufour is not so candid on power sharing. During his chairmanship of the African Union he helped broker the power sharing agreement which ended Kenya's bloody political crisis. A similar model has been adopted in Zimbabwe and could offer a possible solution to the culture of political monopolies which grip many African states.

The President, however, is having none of it for Ghana, favouring instead the winner takes all option. He is confident that his party's candidate, Nana Akufo-Addo, will win next

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stature, but he is no Gentle Giant. He speaks with the passion and fire of a bygone era. Supporters of Kufuor dismiss Rawlings as a tired political has-been who refuses to accept that he is no longer in power. They accuse him and his family of being corrupt, pointing to his poor human rights record and warning that his party would re-nationalise institutions and destroy the economy.

Despite these worries, Rawlings remains very popular. His firebrand style of politics appeals to many Ghanaians who feel alienated from the government's technocratic style. When Rawlings campaigns in rural areas for his party's presidential candidate, John Atta Mills, he speaks about social injustices heaped on them by the government. He projects an image of a man of the people in a way that Kufuor cannot. It is this style of campaigning that many say will make the election result very tight – maybe leading to a run off.

month's elections and dismisses opposition claims they will be rigged in favour of his party.

When asked about the threat of ethnic tension boiling over in the way it did in Kenya, he makes the point that many of Ghana's religious leaders often pray together. He brushes aside suggestions that the main opposition will contest the result and demand a run off if they consider the election flawed.

FIREBRAND

Rawlings lives a short drive away from the presidential offices. He and his formidable wife, Nana, are strong supporters of the opposition National Democratic Congress. A few minutes spent in their company will unravel the governing party's vision for Ghana.

They talk about rising crime, the country's unenviable reputation as a major drug trafficking route, ethnic tension and unrest in the north of the country, a meteoric rise in the cost of living and inflation higher than the government's official eighteen percent. The Rawlings are also puzzled by the west's 'obsession' with power sharing and ask why nobody suggested such a thing to Al Gore after the United States elections in 2000.

Rawlings, like Kufuor, is imposing in

The governing party is fighting accusations of fraudulent behaviour levied by some opposition parties and the conduct of the National Electoral Commission is being called into question. The recent scandal over the authenticity of the electoral lists – revealed to be heavily bloated in some areas – has prompted religious leaders, opposition parties and trade unions to demand the Commission get its house in order and redraw the lists to ensure the credibility of the elections. The Electoral Commission is accused of failing to provide adequate information about voter registration and not dealing with its critics' concerns. In a nod to Nigeria's shambolic elections last year, opposition parties are accusing Government supporters of intimidating the electorate and bussing in non-resident voters to register in areas that are not strongholds of the ruling party.

It is difficult to predict the outcome of these elections. Tensions are running high between the ruling and opposition parties and the electorate is growing disillusioned with the rising cost of living. Some would argue this is simply a sign of these tough economic times. The one thing we can probably bet on, though, is that power sharing will not be an option.

