

Save Ghana

Election Monitoring in Ghana

Project Completion Assessment

One of the most closely followed elections in Africa has been the presidential and parliamentary elections in Ghana held in December 2008. Ghana returned to democracy in 1992, and since then there have been four closely contested elections between the two main parties, the National Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), with several other parties participating. For the past eight years, the government has been headed by President John Kufuor of the NPP. Prior to that the NDC had been in office with President Rawlings. In December 2008 the NPP candidate was Nana Akuffo Addo, and the NDC candidate was John Atta Mills, who had been Vice President under Rawlings. Pre-election polling pointed to a closely run election – a prediction borne out by events.

In September the PTF received a proposal from the Northern Ghana based civil society organization Sustainable Aid through Voluntary Establishment – SaveGhana, to monitor the elections against fraud and corruption in two Northern constituencies, Sissala East and Sissala West. These are districts in Upper West Region close to the Burkina Faso border and are among the poorest districts in the country. After reviewing the operational plan and checking references, the PTF decided to extend a grant of \$22,557 towards the project, with SaveGhana covering an additional \$13,000 out of its own resources.

Three parties (NPP, NDC and PNC - Peoples' National Convention, which had won the seat previously) decided to contest elections in Sissala East, with two additional parties in Sissala West. As elections drew near, it became likely that there could be no outright winner of the presidential race (the Constitution requires an absolute majority) and that a run-off might be needed.

SaveGhana began by drawing up training materials and recruiting volunteers. Together the two constituencies were scheduled to have a total of 125 polling centres, and Save Ghana enlisted 150 volunteers, so that each polling centre could be covered by at least one monitor with two assigned to potentially contentious locations. A two day training workshop was held in November in which Save Ghana, assisted by Electoral Commission staff briefed volunteers on their role. The latter were required to sign a declaration of neutrality and trained in the roles of the electoral commission, security staff and voters, and given a checklist against which to report conduct of election, including reporting irregularities, so that these could be tabulated by SaveGhana coordinating staff.

The volunteers were given a final briefing on 5 December, and deployed across the two districts on 6 December ready for elections on 7 December. Polling centres opened at 7.00am, by which

time voter lines were already forming. After closing at the end of the day, ballot boxes were counted and the results taken to collation centres where the results were tabulated. SaveGhana observers watched the counting at the polling stations, tabulated the figures and then sent them to colleagues in the collation centres to ensure the right totals were arrived at.

Nationally, however, there was no outright winner in the presidential balloting, necessitating a run-off, scheduled by the Electoral Commission for 28 December. This posed a problem for SaveGhana since it had not been budgeted for, and the PTF could not extend the grant. In the end, SaveGhana decided to monitor the run-off in a sample of 25 polling centres, by assigning 30 volunteers, with two in the most critical locations. Prior to the run-off, the volunteers receive refresher training.

In Sissala West a total of 16,266 votes were cast against 23,357 on the electoral roll, with the NDC presidential candidate, with 8,392 votes, in the lead. In Sissala East it was the other way around, with 18,848 votes out of a possible 27,597 cast, with 10,315 for the NPP candidate. The results were declared just after at midnight in one constituency but only at 7.00am the following day in the other, which heightened popular tension over the results, though this was defused by security officers.

As the world was to learn, former Vice President John Atta Mills of the NDC won by a hairbreadth, and after a short delay caused by logistics problems in the Tain district in Brong Afromg Region in the South, the Electoral Commission declared Mills the winner, and Ghana has experienced its second alternation of government since the restoration of multiparty democracy.

Through the lens of SaveGhana's observers in Upper West region, both the main and the run-off elections, though hotly contested, were seen as generally free, fair, transparent and peaceful. Across both constituencies and in both the main and run-off elections there were irregularities noted in monitors' reports, such as voting of minors, lost or inconsistent ID cards, and some attempts by party representatives to pressure voters. Also, during counting some irregular ballots were detected and rejected. In the main, though, these were isolated irregularities and Ghana avoided the rampant vote rigging experienced by some other countries in the region. Fraud and corruption was limited and detected, and in the main voting went as planned, even though it took two rounds of voting to find an outright presidential winner. Doubtful ballots were rejected.

PTF asked SaveGhana to draw lessons from this experience. The main conclusion was that Ghana got the basics of managing elections right. In particular:

- The Electoral Commission was genuinely impartial, adequately budgeted and well organized. It had updated the electoral roll, and materials were distributed ahead of time so that all polling centres opened on time (or very soon thereafter).
- The security forces played their assigned role, which was to provide a policeman at each location, both police and military details at the collation centre in each constituency, and

a rapid intervention force in case of trouble (it was needed in one location), but not to interfere in the voting process.

- Ballots were counted quickly and results announced before tension could build up.
- Although there was pressure from party representatives, voters were aware of their democratic rights and were determined to vote as they wished.
- Even though his party's candidate had narrowly lost in the run-off, the outgoing President, John Kufuor, called on all Ghanaians to accept the Electoral Commission's determination on who had won.
- There was a collective sense that Ghana should demonstrate it could carry out a fair and efficient electoral process.

SaveGhana had some specific recommendations for the Electoral Commission (such as more time for registration, improved identification processes, and more voter education). But the main story in Upper West Region (and nationally) was that the principal actors had played their intended roles. The Electoral Commission managed the process well, the media was free to report (and did so responsibly), security was effective, candidates were able to campaign freely, and incumbency was not abused by the ruling party. While the outcome in Sissala East and West might not have been significantly different if the monitoring had not taken place, SaveGhana's monitors undoubtedly reinforced a collective belief that the democratic process should be followed. Thus they added to the transparency and integrity of the electoral process. They also provided an in depth picture of the electoral process in one Region in Ghana to complement the broader brush endorsement of international observers. From PTF's fraud and corruption perspective, the project showed that, while some irregularities still occurred, they were immediately corrected. The institutional processes to ensure free and fair elections worked.

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