

THINKING OF PEACE, DEMOCRACY AND POLITICS OF INSULTS IN GHANA: THE PARADOX OF FREEDOM AND CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

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Abstract:

Ghana is perceived as a peaceful country in a volatile region and prides itself of becoming a middle-income country in a foreseeable future. Considering the political climate of Ghana as opposed to other countries in the West Africa-sub region including Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone among others, Ghana can be said to be a 'small heaven' in a conflict endemic sub-continent. Having experienced most coup d'états and political summersaults after independence in 1957, Ghana is now a democratic country and regulated by the Republican Constitution of 1992. The liberalization of the airwaves, coupled with the practice of multi-party democracy, has given the citizenry the opportunity and freedom of speech and freedom of association.

However, a critical observation and monitoring of the events in Ghana in recent times have revealed that, due to freedom of speech, the political landscape of the country has become a theater of most vitriolic insults especially from politicians and their cronies which poses threat to the democratic peace enjoined in the country.

The position of this paper is that unless pragmatic and concrete efforts are made to transform the political landscape of Ghana, the democratic freedom of the people will gradually but steadily trap the country to a state of insecurity.

Key Words: Peace, Democracy, politics of insults

Introduction

Like most societies around the globe, Ghana is perceived as a stable a country in a volatile region. Considering the political climate of Ghana to other countries in the West African sub-region including Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea among others, it will not be out of context to conclude that Ghana is indeed a 'small heaven' in a conflict endemic sub-continent.

Having experienced most coup d'états and political summersaults after independence in 1957, the country is now regulated by the Republican Constitution of 1992 (Ghana's Constitution). The formation of political parties and the practice of multi-party democracy to some extent have given the citizenry the opportunity to join any political party of choice and the exercise of franchise. The institutionalization of the local government and administrative system (decentralization) coupled with the liberalization of the airwaves has encouraged and broaden the participation of the masses in decision-making in matters that affect their interest.

To ensure the attainment of peace, security and stability, Ghana has established various regulatory and adjudicating bodies including the police, the military and the adversarial courts. Besides, other adjudicating bodies including the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice and Labour Commission have been established to ensure that the fundamental human rights of the individual are not trampled upon by any person or body as enshrined in the 1992 Republican

Constitution. The philosophy is to ensure that law and order prevail in the country and that no groups of individuals take the law into their own hands so as to plunge the country into chaos.

Thomas Hobbes, a 17th century political thinker could be right when he argued that, the absence of social control in a society was a recipe of chaos and anarchy (Beilharz, 2000). A regulated conduct is considered a healthy practice for the over-all growth and development of any human society at any given time. One thing which is certain is that, every society that has ever existed has recognized the need for laws. These laws may be unwritten, but even pre-industrial societies had rules to regulate the conduct of the citizenry (Gulliner, 1979).

Regrettably, the seemingly efforts made by Ghana to maintain peace and stability is steadily threatened by democratic ethos of freedom of speech. The political landscape of the country has become a theater of most vitriolic insults especially from politicians and their cronies. The simple pointer is that the peace enjoined in the country has been taken for granted by many Ghanaians, culminating in the culture of violence.

The position of the paper is that, peace cannot be acquired automatically neither can it be implanted by any external body. It has to be primarily planted and nurtured by the people concerned. The paper posits that unless democratic value of freedom of speech is regulated by its sister principle of responsibility/duty, the freedom of speech as enjoined in Ghana could breed culture of violence and robbed the peace of the country. The paper therefore sought among others to examine the extent to which politics of insult, an off shoot of freedom of speech which is embedded in democracy, poses threat to the peace of Ghana.

The paper is structured into four broad headings/sections. The first section is devoted to the introduction. Section two looks at the concepts; 'peace', 'democracy' and 'politics of insults' as well as their interconnectedness. Section three focuses on the methods and techniques employed in gathering and analyzing data. Section four captures the conclusion and suggestions made as part to promote and maintain democratic freedom of speech in Ghana without necessarily breeding the culture of violence.

Conceptual Definitions

This aspect of the paper focuses on the explanation of the key words relevant to the study. In this regard, peace, democracy and politics of insults have been discussed. The purpose is to fine-tune our understanding of these concepts and their implications as they manifest in our contemporary political lives.

Peace

The concept peace has become a household word in our conflict endemic world. Peace features prominently in political campaign messages, religious songs, prayers and libation. Interestingly, the concept lacks a universally accepted definition. However, like many theoretical terms such as happiness, harmony justice, and freedom, peace is something we recognize by its absence (Barash and Weber, 2009).

In some quarters, peace is equated to the absence of conflict, for that matter war. Pacifists agree to this conception of peace (Oliver, 2008). Those who view peace from this narrow perspective (negative peace as proposed by Galtung), tend to associate the absence of violence (conflict behaviour) with the absence of conflict. This in most quarters and over the years has been the popular understanding of peace.

Peace is a broad term and spans beyond the purview of the ordinary person. As indicated by Edwin Stettinius in 1945, the then US Secretary of State; *'The battle for peace has to be fought on two fronts. The first front is the security front, where victory spells freedom from fear. The second front is the economic and social front, where victory means freedom from want. Only victory on both fronts can assure the world of an enduring peace'* (quoted in, Brown *et al*, 2007:1).

Many people on the other hand view peace from the angle of justice. Justice in a sense is equated to that of fairness. By implication, a peaceful environment is the one in which individuals are fairly treated (in terms of relations and opportunities) regardless of their ethnic origin, political affiliation, social status or economic standing among others. Discrimination, marginalization and all forms of ill-treatment in this regard are seen as fruits of an unjust society.

Conversely, justice is conceived by many from the retributive stand point. That is, visiting the evil doer by evil. As stated by St. Augustine (cited in Twumasi, 1985:11), 'Punishment is just for the unjust'. The fundamental idea is that the criminal must not go unpunished. Those who view peace from this perspective assume that, society cannot enjoy the desired peace if individuals are left to do whatever pleases them to the detriment of the masses. The establishment of courts and prisons (criminal justice system) may underscore this view of peace.

Judging from the above explanations, on a more expanded form; safety, welfare, justice, prosperity and respect can be seen as essential ingredients of peace. In this regard, peace in a sense may be construed as a state of being devoid of destruction, fear, harm, threat, or physical attack. It is a broad term which covers human development in the area of human rights, political freedom and opportunity to lead a long and healthy life, as well as environmental and other aspects of sustainability. Oliver (2008) indicates, in contemporary context it is clear that any discussion on peace as opposed to war and conflict must also connect with research and policy on development, justice and environmental sustainability.

It must be emphasized that, peace is neither acquired nor achieved automatically. It has to be planted and nurtured by the people. In the words of Eleanor Roosevelt in a Voice of America Radio Broadcast; 'It isn't enough to talk about peace; one must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it; one must work at it' (SDA Adult Sabbath School Teachers Bible Study Guide, January-June 2010, p.41). In the view of Bennett (1991), a statement of goals for an organization guarantees nothing toward the fulfillment, and if the goals have real importance or significance for the welfare of the humankind, the process of fulfillment is of greater value than the verbalization of aim. In simple parlance, peace has to be conceived and hatched through action.

Democracy

The term democracy has become so notorious in contemporary political discourse. Given its notoriety and expansive usage, there is a sense that democracy can include every political systems and regimes. The essence of this part of the paper is not to engage in this endless academic war pertaining to the specificity of the term. Nonetheless, it is important for us to understand the term from its original sense, dynamics, usage and practice in contemporary times.

Oquaye (2004) has pointed out that, democracy has become prescriptive phenomenon. It stretches from boundary of a goal, a reality to an illusion, resulting in the justification of any kind of regimes ranging from Nazism, Fascism, Liberalism, among others, to be democratic. A healthy understanding of the term will be helpful in clearing any misapplication and misconception held about it by people in recent times.

Democracy is derived from the word 'demokratia' from 'demos the Greek word for people and 'kratia' which means power or strength. In its Greek derivative, democracy means the actual and direct participation of the citizens (excluding women, children, slaves and foreigners) in public affairs in the Greek city-state (Oquaye, 2004). In simple parlance, democracy in practice was not the rule of the people but the rule of the section of the people even if the section was the wide majority. Democratic process took in the form of physical gathering in which the citizens took decisions, made laws and delegated day to day management to the officials who reported or accounted to the assembly.

Contemporary usage and practice of democracy which focuses on the rights and freedoms of the individuals as well as the collective interest of the state (common good), calls for re-thinking of

democracy. It is against this background that Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy as government of the people, by the people and for the people has gained much currency.

Oquaye (2004) however has expressed various sentiments about Lincoln's definition of democracy. He contended that Lincoln's conception invokes every idealistic situation imaginable, and that the definition is bedeviled with difficulties. Perhaps only the expression 'government for the people' does not beg for clarification as it may be taken to mean a government in the people's interest, for their benefit. He opines the expression 'by the people' does not tell us in what sense this is to be understood or the means of achieving that objectives. It is enigmatic to observe a government which has come to power by the barrel of the gun insisting that it is government by the people. He noted 'government for the people' could have several meanings; (i) it may connote a self-government as opposed to a colonized people; (ii) a direct democracy; (iii) conversely that the people are the object of government, that they are governed; (iv) that the government belongs to the people; (v) that the government is chosen and guided by the people; (vi) that the government is responsible to the people; and (vii) that the government emanates from the people in the sense that it derives its legitimacy from the people's consent. He views democracy as a system of governance connoting freedom to elect one's own representatives, directly and without hindrance. A legitimate government based on consent and rules in the interest of the people.

Oquaye's view of democracy has highlighted the nature of relationship that has to exist between citizens and the ruler in any meaningful democracy. The understanding is that any political system claiming to be democratic should afford the citizens the freedom to elect their own leaders who in turn serve the interest of the citizens, individually and collectively. More so, the relationship between the citizens and the ruler is legitimately regulated.

Windsor (2007) opines that democracy is about electoral processes and all that is necessary for elections to be fair and meaningful; free association, free speech, and an independent and professional news media. It involves a broad range of vital institutions including the judiciary, a meaningful legislative body, and security forces that defer to the authority of elected civilian leaders whose purpose is to serve and protect the people. Democracy is also about laws and behaviour that reflect democratic values, which means respecting internationally recognized human rights; protecting minority rights in addition to majority rule; tolerating ethnic, religious, linguistic and political diversity; and ensuring freedom of expression. Wilson asserts that although democracy is not a panacea for all ills, it is essentially associated with achieving lasting success in reducing both poverty and insecurity.

It is evidently clear that there is a striking link between democracy, peace and stability. Urdal (2007) argues that a lack of political right (democracy) may constitute as motive for political violence, that, highly democratic societies are the most peaceful. This point buttresses the assertion that authentic democracies generally promote stability and prevent violent confrontation both within and between states.

The discussion above suggests that contemporary societies cannot think of meaningful peace without re-thinking of democracy. In the words of Windsor (2007), no society ever reaches the ideal, but to abandon the pursuit of a democratic society because it is hard to achieve is a mistake.

Politics of insults

Politics of insults has gained root in our political discourse especially in Africa. However, the serious challenge is that, there is little literature or virtually none on the term 'politics of insults'. An understanding of the twain terms 'politics' and 'insult' is necessary to enable us arriving at a working definition. This in effect will also help us to analyze its implication on the peace of a given country.

Politics affect every facet of our lives. As humans, regardless of our social and economic status, as well as the geographical location in which we find ourselves, we engage in some sort of discussion on politics in our everyday lives. We concern ourselves with issues including: local roads,

schools, systems, supply of water, elections, security of the environment, and news of war among others (Bluwey, 1993).

Aristotle explained that man is a political animal in that he lives in organized human communities or collectivity with regulated relationships and takes decision that affects his very life. Politics is thus, a human property (Heineman, 1996; Britannica online Encyclopedia).

From the foregoing explanation, it can be deduced that, the term politics implies the following: (i) participation in public decision, (ii) the power of a state (iii) position or political office/political appointment, (iv) about a regulatory body known as the government, (v) involves institutions, example; parliament, judiciary, court, etc.

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (p.741) explains insult as a rude or offensive remark or action to offend. The same dictionary (p.979) explains offend (the verb form) as to make someone angry or upset, unpleasant or to hurt feelings. The Cambridge Advanced Dictionary (664) equally defines insult as an offensive remark or action, or to do something that is rude or offensive.

To Curle (1995), violence is something which does harm to people; harm in the sense of words, deeds, or situations which damage the ability to develop fully the human potential for feeling, creation and happy maturity (1995). From Curle's explanation of violence, insults could be interpreted as violent acts as they aim to offend a person.

On the basis of the explanations above, politics of insults could be explained as a political climate or environment clamoured with verbal expressions which are meant to attack, provoke and dehumanize a person especially political opponent, which has the tendency to illicit negative reaction or response in the form of verbal attack or physical violence. In this vein, all forms of provocative speech, hate speech, inciting speech and indecent words which tend to belittle, criminalize and condemn political opponents are conceptualized as politics of insults. Democracy is founded on the principle of mutual respect. In a situation where freedom of speech is used as a weapon to scandalous political opponents or inciting political supporters to act in a violent manner, is a first sign that democracy is at risk, a recipe of chaos and insecurity.

Politics of insults is inimical to peace as it creates dis-unity, foster strong sentiments and galvanized faction building among citizens. The infamous Rwanda genocide for instance might have had its own root causes (Allan, 2007; Hintjen, 1999; Meadow, 2009; Kellow and Steeves, 1998). Nonetheless, they all acknowledged the fact that the hate speech (call to fight, kill, defend, *inyenzi* meaning cockroach, etc.) perpetrated on the Rwanda Radio, especially Radio-Television Libre des Mille Collines (RTLML), did contribute in deepening animosity and fuel the violence in which several people were massacred with impunity.

Authentic democracies may avoid violence, for that matter, war. Yet, the seeds of peace have to be sown and nurtured by the people as they are not achieved automatically.

Methodological consideration

The objective of the paper was to explore the extent to which politics of insults as embedded in freedom of speech has eaten into the Ghanaian political landscape and how such political climate poses threat to the peace of the country. On the basis of the objective of the paper, data sources were mainly secondary and gathered through critical review of some speeches made by some members of the executive, the legislature and other leading political figures/politicians on the Ghanaian media (especially the radio), as they mainly serve as the platforms for politicians to chastise their opponents. The justification for such selection was that these personalities hold influential positions in the country, and for that matter, any speech made by them carries more weight and has much influence on the populace. In order to get a broader view and understanding, other literature works pertaining to democracy and peace, as well as the media and violence, relevant to the topic were equally reviewed. The study took place between June, 2011 and December, 2012.

The study was basically qualitative in nature. In view of this, data were analyzed by using the technique of thick descriptive. It is expected that in future a more in-depth quantitative studies will be conducted by other researchers to establish the actual or otherwise correlation between freedom of speech and violence in the country.

Discussion and findings

The discussion focuses on the extent to which politics of insults in the name of freedom of speech has gained root in the Ghanaian political landscape and how irresponsible freedom poses threat to the peace in the country. For want of space, only some verbal expressions made by some leading politicians in Ghana have been selected and analyzed.

The Paradox of Freedom and Culture of Violence

How can democracy present both freedom and violence at the same time? Data gathered have revealed that democracy presents both freedom and culture of violence as experienced in Ghana. With a chequered political history since independence in 1957, Ghana is now democratic and peaceful. The liberalization of the airwaves coupled with the abolition of the criminal libel law, has broken what authorities refer to as the 'culture of silence' in the country. The average Ghanaian now has the freedom to express himself in any matters of political interest which was considered unthinkable in the military regime. Ironically, such freedom is gradually breeding impunity and culture of violence in the country. All forms of deadly pronouncements, blatant incitement and reckless resort to hate speech by leading politicians and their supporters are peddled on the media especially the radio. As these medium have the power to influence their listeners, any suicidal speech made in the country cannot be underestimated, bearing in mind the role of the media in the Rwanda genocide.

In the Ghanaian political context, a political opponent is largely considered as a sub-human who needs no recognition and sympathy. Mutual respect, a basic ingredient of human security is virtually out of the vocabulary of most people both young and old. According to Nelson-Jones (2003), respect from the Latin 'respicere' means 'to look at'. That is, looking at others as they are and prize their unique individuality. If Nelson-Jones assertion of respect is to go by, then Ghanaians with their abusive political language and intolerance are mainly beating the drums of violence. For a former president of Ghana, John Rawlings to ironically referring to a fellow president John Agyekum Kufour as 'Ata Ayi' (a notorious armed robber in Ghana) without any justification, was not only unfortunate as lamented by Abrefa Damoa and many Ghanaians (modernghan.com, 2010) but points to how politics of insults have deeply rooted in the Ghanaian political culture.

The political landscape of Ghana has become theater of most vitriolic insults and intolerance. Given the political landscape of Ghana, the 2012 National Patriotic Party (NPP) Presidential Candidate Nana Akufu Addo Dankwa remarked, 'All die be die'. This has become a major slogan among people of political divides in recent times (www.peacefmonline.com, July 6, 2012; Joy News TV, July 21, 2012; General News, July 2, 2012). Even though, a section of the Ghanaian populace has condemned such unguarded pronouncement as unfortunate as it calls for the party supporters to defend themselves, the reality is that it is a reflection of the deadly path chosen by politicians and their cronies which ought to be reversed to save the country from any catastrophe.

Most Ghanaian media houses have become platforms for politicians and their supporters to dehumanize, criminalize and condemn their political opponents (GNA, 2012). A weekly monitoring of 31 radio stations by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) before Ghana's Parliamentary and Presidential elections in December, 2012, using Intemperate Barometer, revealed that, hardly a week passes by without political leaders and their supporters engaging in politics of insults in the form of; provocative remarks, call to fight or violence, promotion of disunity, and 'expression connoting tribal slur', among others. For instance, between April 8th and 14th, 2012, twenty-nine (29) indecent expressions were recorded on 15 radio stations across the country with the NPP and the NDC considered the worst offenders (myjoyonlin.com, 2012).

The proliferation of politics of insults and its ramification on the peace of the country has attracted condemnation and comments from various personalities and bodies including the Ghana Journalist Association, the National Peace Council, Religious Bodies, Civic Forum Initiative (CFI), the Vice President John Mahama Dramani-now the President of the country among others, calling for an end to such intemperate behaviour (GhanaWeb,2012; Ghana News Agency (GNA), 2011 and 2012; myjoyonline.com, 2012; CFI, 2012; OSIWA,2012).

The study had revealed that most politicians in the country have taken the democratic peace enjoyed in the country for granted. On the 8th of December, 2012, while presidential and parliamentary elections were still in progress, the NPP Secretary General, Kwadwo Owusu Afriyie reportedly organized a press conference in Accra and apparently charged the party supporters to celebrate as the Party's presidential candidate, Nana Akufo Addo Dankwa was in the lead in terms of votes cast, an indication that he has already won the presidential election. Such expression was offensive and deadly bearing in mind the consequences of self-proclaiming victory as witnessed in Kenya between incumbent president Kibaki and opposition leader Odinga in 2007, as well as in Cote d'Ivoire between the then president Gbabgo and the current president Quattara in 2010. The provocative speech made by the NPP could have elicited more violent response or reaction from the supporters of the other political parties which could have marred the whole electoral process and the peace of the country. It was therefore not strange when the National Peace Council immediately condemned such behaviour, describing it as unfortunate and premature. The Council noted that such pronouncement could have likely plunged the nation into chaos (GBC News, December 9, 2012; CITIFMONLINE.COM, December 9, 2012). What made such proclamation strange was that all the political parties which contested the 2012 elections were privy to the Political Parties' Code of Conduct which mandated the Electoral Commission (EC) as the only legitimate body to declare electoral results (IEA, 2012; C.I 15, 1996). Yet, the NPP went ahead in declaring itself the winner of the presidential election.

The sense of decorum has eluded many Ghanaians, an indictment of the country's democracy. It is recorded that the NDC Secretary General, Asiedu Nketia, apparently referred to John Rawlings, a former president of Ghana and founder on the NDC as a 'barking dog' (myjoyonline.com, August 11, 2011). This offensive remark needs much to be desired. The question is, if not freedom of speech in the name of democracy, what can best explain the appalling behaviour of most politicians and their supporters which of late has clamoured the political live of Ghanaians? Ken Agyapong, Member of Parliament (MP) was reported to have issued a strong warning on Oman FM, a radio owned by him to the effect that, he has declared war with immediate effect. He also warned of serious consequences at Odododiodoo in Accra within 20 days and warned the national security to take note. He claimed the police have failed in their duty to protect the citizenry (myjoyonline.com, July, 2012). The Honourable MP's pronouncement was dangerous and raised a serious argument about freedom of speech. His claim of the ineffectiveness of the police to protect the citizenry if true, suggests that, a democratic state with weak institutions can itself invent the opportunity for people to foment violence.

Conclusion

Even though Ghana enjoys some amount of comfort and peace as a result of democracy, the study had revealed that irresponsible freedom of speech has resorted in all forms of negative verbal expressions especially peddled on the media and the radio in particular. Such development has exposed the weakness of the country's democracy. Lessons learnt from Rwanda genocide suggests that, politics of insults as deeply rooted in Ghanaian politics challenge the peace in the country and if not curtailed, can trap the country into insecurity. Freedom of speech is a fundamental right but it is not absolute and can therefore not be used as a weapon of destruction.

On the basis of the findings, the under-mentioned points are recommended as part of measures to promote peace, democracy and freedom of speech in Ghana without necessarily engendering culture of violence.

- The Electoral Commission of Ghana (EC) should be legally empowered to withdraw the candidacy of politicians whose pronouncements are considered seeds of destruction
- There should be a regulatory framework that could enable the courts to find leading politicians and their supporters who use abusive words on their political opponents
- The media should be encouraged to blacklist any politician who uses the media as platforms to abuse any political opponent. In the same vein, any media house found guilty of allowing its medium to be used as a platform to scandalous any political opponent should be strongly sanctioned. This demands that the Ghana Media Commission should be empowered to play its role as a monitoring and regulating body
- Politics of insult is a sign of democratic decay. In view of this the necessary institutions especially the police and the court should be reformed/depoliticized to enable them play their protection and law enforcement, and regulating role to the letter so as to avoid a situation where people take the law into their own hands.
- In a pluralistic society like Ghana with different value systems and views, religious and political affiliations, it is imperative for people to learn, appreciate, respect and tolerate one another. The National Council for Civic Education (NCCE) and especially leaders of the various religious faiths, have to embark on rigorous education to impress upon the citizenry to learn to live and tolerate one another in such a multi-cultural social system.

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