

# POLITICAL VIGILANTE VIOLENCE IN GHANA

## *Its Human Rights Implications*

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### ABSTRACT

*The primary goal of this paper is to consider the incontrovertible links between political vigilante violence and human rights violations in Ghana. In particular, it pays attention to the ways in which politically-related violence thrives. To achieve this, the paper will be guided by the following research objectives: First, to explore the nature of political vigilantism in Ghana's Fourth Republic. Second, to analyse the human rights issues in political vigilantism within this period. Drawing mainly on experiences of general elections of Ghana's Fourth Republic, the paper purposes to interrogate the scale of political vigilante violence in Ghana. It contends that there is an intricate link between political vigilante violence and human rights. The paper relies on frustration-aggression theory to consider the ways in which the desire to gain political power leads to rivalry and eventually to violence.*

**Keywords:** political vigilantism, human rights, Ghana, democracy, violence

### INTRODUCTION

Ghana is widely acclaimed for its democracy and good governance. It is thereby dubbed as a social laboratory for certain liberal experimentation in sub-Saharan Africa, including democratic governance (Nugent 1995, p. 16). After decades of military takeover, Ghana has since 1993 attained a considerable feat in organising eight successful general elections that have culminated in three successful transfers of power between the two dominant political parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) in 2001, 2009 and 2017.

Notwithstanding these remarkable democratic strides, Ghana's electoral processes have suffered a series of worrying setbacks. Of even more concern is the fact that all the eight general elections and other by-elections and re-runs have witnessed varying levels of politically-sponsored violence. Through the years, government use of security agents to intimidate the electorate has been largely condemned, yet the situation persists (Graphic 2019; Kwakofi 2019). While political vigilante violence has not translated into significantly widespread conflict, incidents of such violence are perturbing especially when issues of human rights violations are taken into consideration. These events leave some pertinent questions unanswered: Why is it that despite the comparably significant strides made in its democracy, episodes of political vigilantism continue to occur during and after elections in Ghana? What is the scale and nature of political vigilantism in Ghana? How does political vigilante violence in Ghana frustrate the protection and promotion of human rights?

In this paper, we consider ways in which politically-related violence thrives, exploring its human rights implications and focusing on Ghana's Fourth Republic. To achieve this, the paper will be guided by the following research objectives: First, to explore the nature of political vigilantism in Ghana's Fourth Republic. Second, to analyse the human rights issues in political vigilantism within this period.

Drawing on the experiences of the last two general elections of Ghana's Fourth Republic, the paper purposes to interrogate the scale of political vigilante violence in Ghana. The paper contends that there is an intricate link between political vigilante violence and human rights. The paper relies on frustration-aggression theory to account for the ways in which the desire to gain political power leads to rivalry and eventually to violence.

### FRUSTRATION-AGGRESSION THEORY

This paper employs the frustration-aggression theory to provide a context for appreciating clashes between opposing political forces under Ghana's Fourth Republic. The frustration-aggression theory draws a link between frustrating episodes and aggressive responses (Breuer & Elson 2017). Largely credited to the integrated study by Dollard et al. (1939) on aggressiveness, the theory has been influential in many fields of study. This theory provides a psychological insight into the way in which aggressive behaviour emanates from the frustration of goals. Frustration-aggression suggests that aggression is only one of many different forms of frustration. Dollard et al. (1939) suggested that aggressive inclinations happen whenever humans or animals experience frustration.

Frustration, the theory suggests, is a built-up tension that occurs when efforts to reach a goal are blocked. Dollard et al. (1939, p. 1) observed that as the urge to

attain a goal is thwarted by external factors, people experience frustration which can lead to aggressive behaviour. They further suggested that 'the occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration and, contrariwise, that the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression' (ibid.). Contrary to the dominant understanding of frustration to mean an emotional feeling, Dollard et al. (1939, p. 7) employed it as 'interference with the occurrence of an instigated goal-response'. Frustration-aggression has been a useful theory in relation to scholarship on scapegoating, suggesting that frustration provides a motivation for aggressive behaviour toward the object of frustration. As frustrated people cannot unleash their accruable frustration, they channel it to a convenient social target.

Following Dollard et al., scholarship has paid significant attention to the relation between frustration and aggression. Berkowitz (1983) and Scott (1948), among others, have generally applied the theory to the behaviour of animals. Breuer et al. (2015, p. 126), in applying it to humans, for example, have noted that 'an unfavorable outcome (i.e., losing) can increase postgame aggression, whereas trash-talking by the opponent had no such effect'.

The frustration-aggression theory is usefully employed in this paper to account for episodes of political vigilante violence in the Ghanaian public domain, and particularly the social-political context where political parties compete for scarce political power and influence. As we demonstrate, blocking young foot soldiers from attaining a political goal can, and often does, result in vigilante violence. The theory is useful in framing political vigilante violence (aggression) as a result of hindering a political party's ability to attain political power. We demonstrate how the foot soldiers in a political party feel frustrated when expectations which are formed and motivated by promises made by ruling governments and opposition parties are not met in their bid for political power. We show how this frustration-aggression, emanating from unfulfilled promises such as job opportunities and political appointments, is manifested in violent actions adopted by these party vigilante groups.

The frustration-aggression theory is also employed to account for the incidence of violence in democratic and competitive societies where political parties compete for scarce political power and influence (their objective). We use it to demonstrate how these parties eventually shift their focus from political power and influence and try to limit each other's ability to win political power through brutal and violent means. We thereby demonstrate how this situation leads to antagonism referred to as political vigilantism, and how political parties employ the scapegoating mechanism. In doing so, moreover, we pay heed to the ways in which the individual's fundamental human rights have been violated and abused during electioneering activities in Ghana. Furthermore, we deploy

the frustration-aggression theory to elucidate how this vigilante violence occurs in both intra-party and inter-party competitions in Ghana, something which is lacking in existing academic studies.

The increasing rate of unemployment among graduates in the country has, very often, been a key trigger of frustration. Most of the youth who are recruited by parties as foot soldiers are either unemployed or underemployed. These unemployed youths tend to engage in activities such as bodybuilding as a subcultural lifestyle and livelihood option, which is where political parties identify them and employ them as personal bodyguards. These bodyguards are then used to engage in offensive electioneering activities, an area which offers room for further academic interrogation.

### POLITICAL VIGILANTISM

In Africa, political vigilante violence is not uncommon as elections frequently experience incidences of violence (Adolfo et al. 2012; Kovacs & Bjarnesen 2018; Taylor 2018). Studies have noted that violent episodes characterised 60% to 80% of the elections held in the continent between 1990 and 2008 (Lindberg 2006; Strauss & Taylor 2009). Other studies report that violent pre-election incidents occurred in 81.48% of the elections held between 1997 and 2009, and at least one such incident occurred in 65.7% of the elections held in the same period (Daxcecker 2012). According to Mares & Young (2016), 48% of all voters from 33 nations surveyed during the fifth round of the Afrobarometer survey reported having concerns about electoral violence.

As noted, a variety of factors account for these occurrences, ranging from poor leadership to a desperate desire for political power. Höglund (2009), for instance, contends that a key motivation for vigilante violence in the continent has been the desire to influence the outcome of elections. In most of Africa, as elsewhere, political actors view elections as a path to achieving and maintaining political power. Höglund identified three main elements that influence political vigilante violence: the nature of politics, democracy, and election processes. Höglund asserts that the culture of impunity, the heavy reliance on patron-client relationships for political power, and participation in the politics of violent actors, collectively yield political vigilante violence. The nature of democracy itself, she notes, can encourage violence because of the competitive environment that elections create. Moreover, the election procedures (system management and design) encourage political actors to behave violently.

In a related study, Balcels (2015), has noted that institutions act as a platform for using violence and justifies why violence should be used to influence electoral processes and results. Institutions contribute to election violence by favouring

some candidates over others. While institutional design and development are a useful means for empowering some groups, they have been identified as a potential mechanism for stifling others. In many parts of Africa where the legal structure governing election management bodies grants the incumbent significant control over the electoral commission, the incumbent and its allies tend to take advantage of that control (Hafner-Burton, Hyde, & Jablonski 2014). In addition, Omotala (2010) claims that the neo-patrimonial nature of African states, the nature of power struggle, the deployment of the military in the democratisation process, and feeble democratic structures, among other factors, play a significant role in the continuous resort to political vigilante violence.

However, the impact of political vigilante violence on the democratic process is still a topic of ongoing scholarly discussion. Its impact is felt in many facets of the African political economy, jeopardising the legitimacy of governments and frustrating political participation as well as the advancement of fundamental rights (Omotola 2010; Sosu 2021). In Angola, Cote d'Ivoire and other parts of the continent, political vigilante violence, disguising itself in ethnic and other tensions, has led to war. The literature suggests that by weakening the bonds of representation between voters and elected officials, political vigilante violence has had a negative impact on the democratic consolidation of African nations (Burchard 2015). Political vigilante violence has, in various forms, undermined the core tenets of democracy; and as citizens begin to link elections with predictable patterns of violence, their interest in and support for democracy ultimately dwindles (Sosu 2021).

Political actors variously employ violence for different reasons including deterring rivals, forcing minorities to vote or preventing them from doing so, and motivating their followers by instilling in them the belief that an election is a must-win affair (Boateng 2021; Dercon & Gutierrez-Romero 2012). The increasing use of intimidation to drive away people perceived to be 'hostile voters' during voter registration drives has been identified as a significant feature of political vigilante violence in Africa (Burchard 2015).

### POLITICAL VIGILANTISM IN GHANA

The sustainability of Ghana's democratic gains since its Fourth Republic is a telling indication that elections and multi-party system have gradually been recognised as a cardinal means to legitimately attain and transfer political power (Asekere 2021). In doing so, the 'foot soldiers' who are young party supporters between the ages of 18 and 35 have been a crucial means of carrying out election mobilisation, campaigning and other political engagements. These young party workers are mostly uneducated or poorly educated and are typically unemployed

or underemployed. While some hold membership cards from political parties, the majority are devoted supporters of just one candidate (Bob-Milliar 2014). These foot soldiers are used mainly by political actors to undertake certain tasks for their political parties and/or candidates. In particular, foot soldiers have been useful in the organisation of anti-government demonstrations and political mobilisation, especially in relation to party rallies and canvassing support for political candidates.

In Ghana, the deployment of 'macho men', large and well-built young men who are principally employed as political mercenaries, has been a critical challenge in the public domain. In a clientele environment where it is believed that the party in power utilises its position of authority to award favours, the foot soldiers of political parties commonly base their behaviour on the notion of reciprocity and the provision of personalised goods (Bob-Milliar 2014). According to Gyampo et al. (2017), these young members of vigilante groups operate on the assumption that public office holders are wealthy and hold significant authority and will distribute the state's wealth to them once they are in office. These factotums go beyond the call of duty to gain and maintain power for their political elites, and accordingly think they deserve jobs and the advantages that come with possessing authority. Because of this, these party mercenaries resort to any strategy necessary to take advantage of opportunities, resources, and state assets. Their illegal behaviour, particularly during elections, has sparked tension and animosity in Ghana's public domain. Both Ghanaians and non-Ghanaians who care about the country's peace and stability are beginning to understand that these groups and the patrons who support them pose a threat to the democratic development of the nation.

The numerous incidents of political vigilante violence in general, and in the reruns and by-elections in Ghana since 1992, have been beset by wanton violations of human rights. Typical examples include the August 2009 incident of Akwatia. In this by-election, 23 people were injured during the violence, mainly by gunshots, and knife and stone wounds (*Peacefmonline* 2009). Similarly, the Chereponi electoral violence which occurred in September 2009 has also been a cause for alarm. In this particular case, four people were shot while over a dozen more sustained various degrees of wounds from stone-throwing (*Daily Guide* 2009). The case of the Atiwa electoral violence which occurred in August 2010 also typifies the ways in which political vigilantism impedes Ghana's democratic credentials and the associated human rights abuses and violations (Takyi-Boadu 2010). The electorate's rights to vote, to freedom of speech, the right to life, and freedom from all forms of discrimination and other inhumane treatments were threatened, abused and violated. Additional mention can be made of the July 2015 Talensi incident in which various forms of human rights abuses were recorded, including destruction of properties, assaults and life-threatening injuries.

Similar incidents occurred in revenge when the NPP lost power to the main opposition party NDC in 2009. These notorious incidents include the ousting of district chief executives (DCEs), managers and staff of state institutions such as the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) and National Youth Employment Programme (NYEP) (Armah-Attoh 2017). The intractable nature of these episodes of political vigilante violence was validated in 2017 when NPP-affiliated vigilante groups, identified as the Invincible Forces, Delta Force and Kandahar Boys, marred the smooth transition process by engaging in a series of unlawful invasions, seizures and the forceful control of public assets and facilities. These and other situations prompted the passage of the Vigilantism and Related Offences Act, 2019 (Act 999). This Act seeks to disband political party vigilante groups; to proscribe acts of vigilantism in the country; and to provide for related matters.

Given that previously political vigilantism was not accorded the special attention it deserves, on 31 January 2019 Ghana experienced a major and devastating incident of electoral violence when a group of political thugs suspected to be emboldened by the national security operatives invaded the Ayawaso West Wuogon (AWW) Constituency by-election (Gyesi 2019; Dumenu & Adzraku 2020; Sosu 2021). During this by-election there was a shooting incident which led to many injuries and clashes between supporters of the opposition and supposed national security operatives. The irony is that ruling governments, which are expected to protect their citizens, tend to use party and state security apparatus to perpetrate violence against their own citizens. The Ayawaso West Wuogon (AWW) Constituency by-election on 31 January 2019 offers a good illustration of how violence characterises Ghana's electoral system. This incident offers a meaningful starting point from which to interrogate human rights and the national security concerns.

Studies suggest that political vigilante groups have evolved as a result of increasing electoral fraud and the inability of security agencies to provide adequate protection during general elections. For example, a study conducted by Edu-Afful and Allotey-Pappoe (2016), noted the ways in which political vigilante groups in Ghana have emerged as a response to incidents of theft and the destruction of ballot boxes, violence, and the inability of security agencies, particularly the police service, to provide adequate security, especially during electioneering periods.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a qualitative content analysis and archival design augmented by interviews. Data was collected from primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources of information include online published articles on political vigilantism under the Fourth Republic of Ghana, newspaper reportage, magazine and

committee reports. The data collected from the archives were supplemented with primary data in the form of face-to-face interviews with some identifiable political vigilante group leaders. This was essential not only in verifying the data collected from archival sources but also to obtain first-hand information from these key actors in political vigilantism in Ghana. It also made it possible for us to seek clarification on existing news items about the activities of the vigilante groups of which they are part. Media reports on vigilante violence were drawn and subjected to qualitative content analysis.

To ensure an understanding of the nature of political vigilante violence, the paper was concerned with illuminating the motives of political vigilante violence in Ghana's Fourth Republic. The data gathered from reports, news articles and interviews with purposively identifiable vigilante group leaders revealed that political vigilante violence occurs as a result of the following: violation of identity; violence as a mechanism to restore peace; electoral violence as an alternative livelihood; inter-generational, intra-electoral violence; and the ecstasy of violence.

## POLITICAL VIGILANTE VIOLENCE IN GHANA

Below we discuss some of the pertinent issues concerning political vigilante violence in Ghana in four broad themes: violation of identity; violence as a means to restore peace; alternative livelihood option; and intergenerational violence.

### *Violation of Identity*

While political vigilantism occurs due to many factors, a key reason for its occurrence is the violation of identity. Research has demonstrated the manner in which vigilante groups have become a useful means of political mobilisation as well as the preservation of electoral prospects (Kyei & Berckmoes 2021). In Ghana, such groups are believed to be formally emboldened by high profile political actors and/or groups. Thus, violence towards political opponents is not a new phenomenon. The analysis of political vigilante violence discusses the ways in which the preservation of identity and violence are interlinked. Well-established studies suggest that the violation of identity is crucially taken to justify violence in general (Sen 2006). Political vigilante groups pride themselves not only on their ability to protect their political interests but also on how they defend themselves against external attack.

A distinctive instance of this is the Kumasi Circuit Court episode. In April 2017 the Ghanaian media reported on how a group of thirteen young men, all political vigilantes, were arraigned before the Kumasi Circuit Court for offensive misconduct as described above. The group had opposed President



Akuffo Addo's appointment of George Adjei as the Ashanti Regional National Security Coordinator by aggressively ejecting Adjei from his office (*MyJoyOnline* 2017; *Starfmonline* 2017). The group asserted that Adjei was unknown to them and that they would prefer the president to appoint someone they can relate to (*MyJoyOnline* 2017). When the matter was sent to court, the presiding judge, Mrs Mary Nsenkyire, remanded the thirteen into prison custody on 20 April 2017. A group of their supporters, however, invaded the courtroom freeing their colleagues, the thirteen detainees. The situation attracted widespread condemnation from individuals and local and international organisations ((*Africanews* 2017; *Frimpong* 2017).

Media accounts (*Starfm* 2017; *Citifmonline* 2017) described the scene thus:

the group vandalized some court properties, and almost assaulted the Judge, Mary Senkyire. The judge had ruled that they be remanded to appear before court on the 20th of April, 2017 after charges of conspiracy to assault a public officer and causing unlawful damage. The 13 were detained in connection with the group's raiding of the Regional Coordinating Council on March 24, 2017, where they were alleged to have assaulted the newly appointed Ashanti Regional Security Coordinator, George Adjei. After the judge's decision to remand the suspects, the members said they were not going to allow the ruling to stand, and demanded that the 13 leave the court with them.

According to the media, the gang would have assaulted the judge as well had it not been for the timely intervention of the police. This event leaves some questions unanswered: crucially, how does this act translate into a violation of identity? According to the Indian economist and philosopher, Amartya Sen (2006), violation of identity justifies violence. The group felt that their identity as the powerhouse of the ruling New Patriotic Party had been violated. First, their wish had been denied through the imposition of someone they considered a stranger to the party as regional coordinator. Second, by arresting and detaining some of their members, the group felt insulted and appeared to be weak. Interviews with some vigilante group leaders reaffirmed their belief that violation of identity justifies violence. This position clearly emerged in the interviews. An interviewee who had previously participated in political protest and vigilantism recounted that political provocation is a key factor accounting for vigilantism:

*It is annoying when people remove or deface your aspirant's posters; some use dirty engine oil to paint your aspirant's face for whatever reason I don't know. Sometimes too you will receive threatening messages. If you don't respond with equal measure, they will see you as weak.*

Another interviewee indicated that when this happens and the suspect is none other than the direct opponent, they seek revenge for these actions, very often resulting in violence towards the opponents. During electioneering, people take advantage of the political field and its activities to insult and tarnish the hard-earned reputation of others. In such situations tempers often flare up and this may lead to electoral violence. In this regard, one informant stated that:

*people who do not qualify to even talk to you take advantage of the campaign, especially on phone-in radio and television programmes to make all manner of invective and impertinences just to make you look bad in the face of people. In fact, some aspirants also pass comments that incite their followers to engage in violence during election time. If you fail to respond this gives the impression that you are weak and your opponent can take advantage of that.*

The implication is that the decision of the court to remand the thirteen members of the group as narrated above was interpreted by the group as a violation of their identity. Hence the violent acts by the group to defend their identity. If this interpretation is allowed to pass, then, as will be seen later, it will pose threats to fundamental human rights in Ghana.

Indeed, a key finding in the study showed that there is a sort of triumphant glee in violence. Interviews with some vigilante leaders indicated that they were ecstatic when they could defeat their opponents and 'scatter their plans'. According to informants, they resort to violence to prove to their opponents that they are not as weak as the opponent may think.

One informant indicated that:

*Sometimes people tell us that some people have come to take their voter identification numbers that they will call them to vote for them on the election day. When we hear this, we go and attack those people and stop them; when we successfully stop them, we become excited. Most of the time it is not easy, it tend [to become] into serious violence.*

Another informant stated that:

*During elections, some people offer material incentives to the electorates to convince them to vote for them, especially in the villages, others too in an attempt to assist proxy voters vote for their candidates, meanwhile that is not what the proxy voter asked the person to vote for. When this happen and we are able to stop them we become happy.*

### *Violence as a Mechanism to Restore Peace*

While studies have painted a bleak picture of political vigilante violence, it has ironically been justified as a useful mechanism to restore a fractured peace in society. In the heat of the controversy generated by the Delta Force saga, as narrated previously, on 30 March 2017 the media reported that a leading member of parliament (MP) for the ruling party, Kennedy Agyapong, warned the National Security Minister, Kan Dapaa, to refrain from effecting any arrests or prosecution of the members of the vigilante group (Obour 2017). Seen in this light, it may be said that the sole concern regarding violence is the manner in which it fractures the peace of society.

Violence is sometimes presented as a means of restoring social harmony. Violent perpetrators believe that after the violence is over, peace will be restored. Of greater interest is that information gathered on political vigilante violence reveals that political vigilante groups believe that they safeguard their political party by preventing real and impending physical violence. The problem, however, is that in the case of vigilante violence these people are not mandated authorities to ensure or bring about the supposed peace. Rather, they create some form of chaos. A report by the Emile Short Commission, established under Article 278 of the 1992 Constitution to investigate the events and related violence during the Ayawaso-West-Wuogon by-election on 31 January 2019, for example, stated that:

*While there was some semblance of security provided within the Ayawaso on the said day of the elections, the otherwise reasonable arrangement was abruptly disrupted by the SWAT team who, though [they] were not part of the arrangement, arrived on the scene unannounced.*

In an interview with some vigilante group leaders, it emerged that electoral violence is not as bad as is perceived. Rather, it is a mechanism to restore social interest in peace and order, and also to promote free, fair and transparent outcomes of elections, a matter about which scholars disagree. The legal and human rights concerns have been that peace cannot be provided by illegal or unlawful means. In the opinion of an informant, their presence as a vigilante group deters others from travelling the path of violence during elections:

*As for me, I don't understand why people talk about us, because what we are doing is a way of bringing peace; during electoral period, we prevent people from engaging in violence. Even though people think we are a violent people, we rather protect situations from erupting into violence.*

Furthermore, an informant disclaimed the assertion that peace gives way to violence in society. He is convinced, however, that their presence (i.e., that of the vigilantes) alone deters people from violence during elections.

*Sometimes you'll have the information that the opponent is hiding somewhere with ballot papers trying to stuff the election. When we hear that, we go there to 'scatter' them to bring peace. Sometimes, some people will be planning to come and scatter the stronghold of a political party, but what happens is that among them one person may leak their plans to the other party to send people to go and guide there before they arrive. When this happens, since those guiding the place are not police and we too are not police, we try to clash with those guiding there. But the police sometimes come in to restore the peace.*

This account echoes the Ayawaso West Wuogon episode in which supposed National Security operatives attacked a member of parliament and other residents of the area. This group claimed that they did so because they wanted to restore peace and calm. We see, then, a very limited understanding of how the illegitimate means of restoring peace can and actually does lead to violence. The vigilante activities lead to a violation of the electorates' voting rights, which in essence results in low voter turnout. While the informants' appreciation of peace agrees with the description of Johan Galtung on negative peace, there is an obvious danger when such understanding is allowed to pass.

### *Electoral Violence as an Alternative Livelihood*

Global efforts to mitigate electoral violence have been complemented by attempts to bridge social inequalities and other material advantages which pander to violent tendencies. This paper presents participation in political vigilante activities as an alternative livelihood option. As the example of Kennedy Agyapong warning the National Security minister cited above shows, vigilante groups execute the plans of their political party with the understanding that once their party succeeds in taking office, they will be well compensated, economically and politically. The frustration of the youth and denial of certain material advantages have thus been identified as a fundamental principle underlying the youth's involvement in political vigilante violence (Tweneboah & Clotney 2022). A key finding of this study largely ignored in existing literature is that political vigilante violence occurs as a means to an alternative livelihood. Contrary to accounts that suggest that political vigilante groups are fuelled by political parties, it emerged that some of these groups are not affiliated to any specific political party but rather they exist as what we refer to as 'electoral violence entrepreneurs'.

These 'electoral violence entrepreneurs' exist as entrepreneurs outside of the dominant political groups. They engage in providing protection for groups or individuals who need their services. They are largely energetic and socially, economically, and politically marginalised youth who depend on their strength as 'capital'. This finding supports the relationship between frustration resulting from unemployment and violence among the youth as pointed out in the work of Appadurai (2013). According to Appadurai, while the youth might not necessarily have essential skills, as the state claims, they have 'assets' as well as 'dreams'. 'These assets and dreams are being constantly turned into strategies' (Appadurai 2013, p. 1). The major asset of the youth in this context is their youthful exuberance (energy). To achieve their dreams, the majority of the unemployed youth resort to illegal activities including insurgencies, joining violent gangs, drug trafficking, vigilantism and other illicit activities which lead to violence in society (Kingston & Webster 2015; Kramer 2000; McAra & McVie 2016; Soyer 2018). In explaining the nature and activities of one of the groups, a participant and a leader of the group insisted that:

*Oh! As for us we are not affiliated to any political party like the Delta Force, Kandahar and the rest. No! no! I will say we are independent.... We don't get any support or instruction from any politician. We are actually into protection of individuals and groups.*

He maintained that his group was initially into body building and fitness, but sometimes they are approached by people who want protection when they organise events such as weddings, funeral celebrations, parties etc. and they anticipate that there may possibly be disturbances. After some time, he said, they became popular, because of their strength and efficiency.

*So I remember that one day during the 2012 election I had a call from Hon. XYZ that he wanted to meet me at a particular restaurant. When we met, we discussed so many things and he told me that he wanted to give me an assignment.*

According to this participant, after a lengthy discussion his host told him that he had had information that some groups were coming to town to register and so he wanted him [the informant] to be vigilant in order to prevent them from doing so. A few days later, he said, he had a phone call that some people had arrived claiming to be from the town were in fact from another place.

*I called one of my boys and asked him to verify, and when he went there it nearly resulted into a fight because the leader of that group didn't understand why*

*they should be questioned. So, my boy called me and I rushed there with three of my boys...to cut everything short, the fight became serious, as you can see from my hand here! That was the day I had this mark [scar] and this one too.*

With only four of his boys and himself, he claims, they defeated the entire group and drove them away. Because he was not affiliated to any party, people were initially surprised, but he was not concerned because he and his group were paid anyway by the party that hired them. This episode marked the beginning of his engagement with political actors as they started using his group. In 2012, for instance, they worked with both political parties (NDC and NPP) during the campaign activities, making sure no individuals or groups caused any violence. In the 2016 elections, however, they worked for only one political party 'because they paid us well', he said. He noted that sometimes 'they will send us to different constituencies and even regions for "operations'. On some occasions, he recounted, they even paid for their own flights to protect some important people. But after the election, he complained:

*Hon. XYZ was not minding me again. He did not fulfil any of the promises he made to me and my people. On one occasion, somebody hit me with a heavy block, in fact the entire block was broken into pieces but I managed to survive. When Honourable heard this, he called me to find out how I was doing but that was all. He never fulfilled any of the promises including facilitating the recruitment of some of my boys into the security agencies like the police, prisons, fire service and military. Because of that, during the 2020 election, I changed my mind when I realised Honourable was using me for his own gains.*

Because of his group's popularity in going to other regions for assignments, a politician from a different party invited him to join his team, to which he agreed. He quoted a price of GH¢2000.00 a month which the politician agreed to pay and 'this is where I have been working for some time now', he said. This participant concluded: 'Even though I protect a politician, my duty and support are not towards his party. I have told my mother and my sisters that they are free to vote for whoever they want'.

This account, as noted above, challenges the popular view that all electoral vigilante groups are politically affiliated.

### *Inter-Generational, Intra-Electoral Violence*

A key finding of the paper is inter-generational-intra-electoral violence. While conflict between rival political factions abounds, there are several instances of violence within the same political party and between the older generation and

the younger ones, between the top hierarchy and the masses – who are often referred to as the foot-soldiers. In particular, irregularities during the selection process have been one of the main reasons why conflict and violence occur. Data gathered from news articles and interviews suggest that there is inter-generational, intra-electoral violence in the political field in Ghana. These include attacks on party offices, burning of vehicles and homes of party officials, and locking up party officials, etc. (Adomonline 2020; *Starfm* 2019).

This finding corroborates the Techiman South constituency incident where an NDC secretary was beaten up by thugs during an executive meeting. There had been a disagreement during a meeting with other party executives where those who were unhappy with the outcome of the meeting engaged in a scuffle, resulting in the secretary, Suleman Brempong, being assaulted (Nukunu 2021). Interviews with some vigilante group leaders revealed electoral conflicts between the youth wings and the party elders. According to them, this has to do with ideological differences. An informant commented that sometimes even within the same party, there are violent incidents between the elderly and the youth. Most often the suggestions by the youth are not taken seriously and this triggers intra-party violence. This informant complained thus:

*Some party elders hold on to the old ways of winning elections forgetting that time changes, when we tell them, they will say we don't know how they suffered to build the party. For instance, while we the youth are saying they should provide us with resources to campaign, some elders will say we should gather the money and share it on the election day, meanwhile, on the election day, some greedy people will keep the money to themselves and if you are not lucky, the party will lose the election.*

Supporting this claim, another participant indicated how he became a victim of intra-party vigilantism. According to him, during the 2020 Assembly election, a leading figure in his political party informed him that they should support a particular member of the Assembly. Meanwhile the informant and his fellow members had different allegiance and preferences and therefore supported different aspirants. It became necessary, therefore, that they should go to the Honourable member. He narrated his story thus:

*We went there and discussed a lot of issues, but when we came back, some people were not convinced, so when they heard that Honourable gave me money to convince them, four of them attacked and assaulted me. I will blame the MPs because sometimes, they will tell you that 'support me, when I win,*

*I will help you'. Maybe for the first time you will support him but the help won't come. Then another person within the same party contacts you that 'I will help you'. Maybe immediately he gives you money, you will realise that the one who couldn't help you will go to the FM station and pass some comments that also generate intra-party violence.*

## POLITICAL VIGILANTISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

This section addresses a central goal of this paper: human rights concerns in political vigilantism in Ghana's Fourth Republic. We observe that political vigilantism has direct effects on the rights of the electorate. This section discusses how political vigilantism affects a wide range of human rights including voting rights, the right to life and to human dignity.

### *Violation of Voting Rights*

The right to vote is widely recognised as a fundamental human right as it is the means through which citizens can influence governmental decision-making. Internationally, Article 21(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Right (UDHR) states that 'Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives'. Article 21(2) further asserts that 'Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country'. The right of people to express their will is also recognised under Article 21(3): 'the will of the people shall be the basis of authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures'. At national level, Article 42 of Ghana's Constitution (1992) grants every citizen of Ghana of eighteen years of age or above and of sound mind the right to vote and be entitled to be registered as a voter for the purposes of public elections and referenda. Yet enjoying this basic right has been a challenge for most people, as vigilante violence creates certain impediments to many voters.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the Fourth Republic of Ghana has been characterised by pockets of electoral violence and insecurity leading to injuries, and in some cases, loss of lives. For instance, when violence broke out during the August 2009 by-election at Akwatia in Ghana's Eastern region, 23 people were injured. A report by Ghana News Agency (2009) revealed that the victims suffered mainly from gunshots, knife and stone wounds. Similarly, during the runup to the Chereponi by-election in the Northern Region in September 2009 four persons sustained gunshots wounds while more than a dozen



sustained multiple wounds resulting from stone-throwing by irate party youth (*Peacefmonline* 2009). The case of the Atiwa electoral violence which occurred in August 2010 is another instance of the ways in which political vigilantism frustrates Ghana's democratic credentials and its human rights standards. During this period, there were grave human rights abuses and violations. For example, according to media reports Kofi Bremang 'arrived at the police station with blood all over his body, complained that he was beaten and hit with clubs by suspected NDC goons' (Takyi-Boadu 2010).

The implication is that while every citizen has the right to express their will through voting, the majority of the electorate do not exercise their franchise due to electoral violence. For example, the 2019 report from Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) showed a generally low voter turnout in the Ayawaso West Wuogon by-election. The report noted in part that at most polling stations observed, only few voters trickled into polling stations from time to time for fear of being attacked. CODEO's observation corroborated the official voter turnout figure for the polls which stood at 19.83% (Zurek 2019). A whopping 80.17% of the electorate did not participate in this particular election. This situation can be partly blamed on the incidents of violence that ensued during the by-election. In their final report on the Ayawaso West Wuogon Constituency by-election, CODEO (2019, p. 3) observed that the election was characterised by violence and intimidation, as follows:

*[The] intimidating presence of masked security persons at some polling stations in the course of Election Day: In some cases, these masked security operatives who wore khaki and black attire loaded themselves in vehicles and hovered around polling stations for a while before leaving. Some observers indicated that the mode of driving by some of these security operatives, even around such polling stations, appeared quite reckless or dangerous. Some of the polling stations where these masked security operatives were sighted by observers included Opposite A&C Shopping Mall (East Legon), Restaurant C 23/29 (Okponglo), Meteorological Service Mpehuasem (Okponglo), Little Flowers Montessori Prim and JHS (Dzorwulu), Bawaleshie Primary School 1&2 and Akuafo Annex (Legon).*

This report confirms how political vigilantism has led to the violation of voting rights in Ghana's Fourth Republic and how it threatens its democratic governance. The implication is that any attempt to use political influence to interfere in elections is a fundamental breach of the rights of the electorate in particular and Ghanaians at large.

### *Right to Life and Human Dignity*

Another key concern is that political vigilante violence not only limits political participation but also, to a large extent, deprives some people of their right to life. It is a fundamental principle of human rights that no one must deprive the life of a person arbitrarily or unlawfully. Because of the crucial importance of this right, states are dutybound to take appropriate steps to ensure that the right to life is protected, and to investigate arbitrary or unlawful killings and punish offenders. Article 13(1) of Ghana's Constitution of 1992 states that 'No person shall be deprived of his life intentionally except in the exercise of the execution of a sentence of a court in respect of a criminal offence under the laws of Ghana of which he has been convicted'. The state has a duty to respect and protect the right to human life and human dignity.

Despite these provisions, electoral violence in Ghana's Fourth Republic has claimed many lives. For example, in Ghana's 2020 general election, the Ghana Police Service report indicated that over sixty episodes of violence occurred. About twenty-one of these events were a result of electoral violence, six of which involved gunshots leading to the death of five persons. Media reports indicate that the victims who lost their lives suffered mainly from gunshots from the security officers who were expected to protect them.

The father of an 18-year-old boy killed during the violence that rocked the Techiman South constituency during the 2020 general elections, recounts that he was able to see video recordings of the incident and the evidence indicated that the security personnel were shooting directly into the defenceless crowd (Hawkson 2021). The father had sued the government, seeking a total of GH¢25 million in compensation for the loss of his son.

### CONCLUSION

Over the years, there have been many reported cases of Ghanaian political vigilante groups, mainly youth, engaging in violent acts. These include the forceful seizure of public toilets after a change of government, vandalising or locking up party offices to demand attention, disrupting court procedures, forcefully removing appointed personnel from their offices, and removing ballot boxes during elections. This paper has, therefore, demonstrated how these situations lead to the antagonism which informs episodes of political vigilante violence. In doing so, moreover, we have paid heed to the ways in which such actions frustrate the protection and promotion of certain fundamental human rights, especially electioneering activities in Ghana. Deploying the frustration-aggression theory, we have elucidated how the Ghanaian youth have deployed political vigilante violence as a means to an alternative livelihood, asserting their identity in society.

We have paid heed to the manner in which political vigilante violence occurs in both intra-party and inter-party competitions in Ghana, something which is lacking in existing academic studies.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, this paper recommends the following:

First and foremost, there is the need for *the intensification of public education*. The paper has revealed that people engage in political vigilantism as a mechanism to restore peace. We recommend that public education should be intensified on what constitutes peace and the effects of political vigilante violence. A holistic approach to understanding the concept of peace would serve a milestone in dealing with political vigilante violence in Ghana. Peace education should be encouraged at all levels of formal education in Ghana.

Second, there is the need to *prioritise youth employment opportunities*. It emerged in this paper that the youth engage in political vigilante violence as an alternative livelihood. We therefore recommend that the government and private developers should provide these young people with sustainable job opportunities to enable them to channel their energies into productive ventures.

Third, we propose *adherence to party principles*. This paper has revealed that inter-generational, intra-electoral violence yields to serious political vigilante violence in Ghana's Fourth Republic. In view of this, we propose the need for political parties to ensure effective and strict compliance with their party constitutions and also to open up spaces to accommodate innovative ideas and suggestions of the party youth wings.

Fourth, we recommend the need for the *prosecution of electoral and offenders*. A key finding in the paper is that there is a sort of joy or ecstasy in violence. Citing information from some vigilante leaders, we have indicated that these vigilante groups become happy when they defeat their opponents and 'scatter their plans'. Yet, given its grave human rights implications, we recommend that political parties should report all suspects of electoral misdeeds to the appropriate authorities, especially the Ghana Police Service, for further investigation and prosecution to deter others and also avoid electoral violence and its negative consequences.

Fifth and finally, *voting as a right* must be respected at all times and at all costs. The findings of this paper show that political vigilante violence affects a wide range of human rights including voting rights and the right to life and human dignity. To reaffirm an earlier proposal by Sosu (2021), we therefore recommend that political actors across all divides should see voting as a right and not merely a means of acquiring political power. This would not only strengthen the strict adherence to national and international human rights standards, but also allow for the democratic consolidation of an emerging democracy like Ghana.

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