

The Politicization of the Government/ Labour Relations in Ghana (1982-1992)

La politisation du gouvernement / relations de travail au Ghana (1982-1992)

Walida DJEBAILI

University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria

walida120@yahoo.fr

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Abstract

Unless authoritarian and repressive, no government in the world can claim to succeed without the support of its labour force. To be at logger heads with such a powerful partner merely means a blatant failure of any policy whatever. In the Ghana of the 1980s, this was no exception. The present paper sets out to underscore the pivotal role the Trade Union Congress played in the democratization process that gave birth to the Fourth Republic in 1992 through an intense union-state clash. Initially a labour organization whose main task was to protect the rights of the workers, the syndicate found itself driven into a political conflict with the ruling government of the time, the Provisional National Defence Council. The violations of the labour rights by the government and the backed-up International Monetary Fund reconstruction programme were the main sources of the labour grievances.

Keywords Trade unionism- Ghanaian politics- workers' rights- labour political action.

Résumé

À moins d'être autoritaire et répressif, aucun gouvernement au monde ne peut prétendre réussir sans le soutien de sa main-d'œuvre. Être aux prises avec un partenaire aussi puissant signifie un échec flagrant de toute politique. Au Ghana des années 1980, cela n'a pas fait exception. Le présent article vise à souligner le rôle central que le Congrès des syndicats a joué dans le processus de démocratisation qui a donné naissance à la Quatrième République en 1992 à la suite d'un intense affrontement syndicat-gouvernement. Initialement une organisation ouvrière dont la tâche principale était de protéger les droits des travailleurs, le syndicat s'est retrouvé entraîné dans un conflit politique avec le gouvernement au pouvoir de l'époque, le Conseil Provisoire de Défense Nationale. Les violations des droits du travail par le gouvernement et le programme de reconstruction soutenu par le Fonds Monétaire International ont été les principales sources des griefs des travailleurs.

Mots clés : Syndicalisme- politique Ghanéenne- droits des travailleurs- action politique ouvrière.

Introduction

Power military seizures had become a striking trait that characterized the political scene in Ghana all along the 1970s. Indeed, the country witnessed frequent and short-lived coups that largely impeded political stability, economic prosperity and social welfare. Every time the junta took the reins of power, it promised to hand it shortly over to civilians; nevertheless, and on account of mismanagement, corruption and a failure to a real commitment to national interests, the country had to start all over again. However, the close of the decade marked a turning point in the history of Ghana. The 4 June Revolution of 1979, a harsh military campaign against corruption, malpractices, and social injustice broke out to significantly change the course of things. After a brief unsuccessful transition to civilian rule, the architects of the revolution launched what was to be the last military overthrow in the country, followed by 19 years of political stability that Ghana had not witnessed since the Nkrumah days in the 1960s.

The new government of Ghana, the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) assumed office on December 31, 1981 under the leadership of Jerry John Rawlings, a young military pilot in the Ghanaian Air Force. Under the slogan “power to people!” the revolutionary leader addressed Ghanaians on the radio to define his goals:

“Fellow Citizens of Ghana, as you have noticed we are not playing the National Anthem. In other words, this is not a coup. I ask for nothing less than a revolution, something that would transform the social and economic order of this country... We are asking for nothing more than to organize the country in such a way that nothing will be done from the Council, whether by God or the devil, without the consent and the authority of the people” (Nugent, 1995: 15).

Soon national reactions flooded in from all sides. Over the next few days following the takeover, huge popular demonstrations took place in the capital Accra and elsewhere in the country in support for the PNDC. The new government seemed to have secured a substantial mass support. Less enthusiasm was however felt in the ranks of professional classes (ex-politicians, wealthy farmers, and businessmen) who apprehended a violation of human rights and individual liberties. But the new leader showed early signs of political intelligence and skill. To enlarge support for his government, Rawlings included sections of the society that had been excluded by former regimes from the decision-taking apparatus, namely the trade unionists, the students, the urban unemployed, the farmers, the military rank and file, the petty traders, and the wage labourers in rural areas. This, he understood, would help his government stand against the

danger that lurked from opposition inside and outside Ghana. He was firmly decided to declare a merciless war on political abuse to purge the society of its ills through a real democracy that would rely on direct popular participation in the decision-making process. His government was there, he asserted, to primarily protect the rights of the common people, not of those whose rights were already secured by important political positions. Such a speech clearly found echo among Ghanaians, and history proved later that there was more than demagoguery in the man's discourse.

1-The Emerging Union-State Clash

After the first enthusiasm had passed, the new government of Ghana had to admit the dramatic situation into which the country was plunged. It was indeed faced with an economic dilemma that it had to handle carefully but effectively, for this was to determine the failure or the success of the PNDC. But, although Rawlings showed an uncompromising adherence to integrity and other moral values, he did not have a golden key to unlock the door to an economic miracle. He inherited an economy on the verge of collapse and the situation was alarming.

The national economy continued the dramatic drop in its major exports of cocoa, mineral resources and timber. In 1981, one year before the PNDC took the reins of power, the world price for cocoa plunged to £590/ton against £2900/ton in 1977. Gold production dramatically dropped to 333.095 fine ounces against 900.000 fine ounces in 1962, and diamond from an annual 3 million carats in the 1960's to 1 million in 1982. In the same year, the production of bauxite fell from an annual 300.000 metric tons in the 1960s to 173.000 metric tons. Finally, timber exports recorded the low sum of \$21.6 million compared to \$130 million in 1973. At the end of the year, foreign exchange in government coffers fell to the spectacular value of \$33 million at a time when the external debt of the country continued to rise sharply (Opoku, 2010: 80).

By the end of 1982, the crisis had reached its highest peak, and the government had to take urgent and resolute measures to prevent a deeper fall in the abyss. After a vain attempt to obtain aid from socialist countries which these were either unwilling or unable to provide, the Rawlings administration was forced to admit that the socialist orientation did not yield the expected results. A profound change was thus needed, and soon reference to external assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) became recurrent in the leader's rhetoric.

As expected by the PNDC, vehement protest against such a change in tone arose. Rawlings was accused of betraying the revolutionary ideology at a time when famine threatened Ghana. When he finally embarked on an IMF and World

Bank-backed up reconstruction programme, the man lost an important support: the working mass represented by the Trade Union Congress (TUC). To ask a population that had already tightened its belt to the last hole to accept the pegging of wages (a decision taken without consulting the TUC) was simply inconceivable. The measure was one of the prerequisites of the new reconstruction plan. The TUC chose to avoid open confrontations with the government but warned against the disastrous economic servitude to which the international financial institutions would lead the country. Workers, the labour leaders alerted, would be highly penalized by the IMF conditions: labour retrenchment, privatization, trade liberalization, removal of government subsidies on essential goods and social service (Matthew, 235-63:1991). By the end of the decade, the total loss of jobs in the state sector was remarkable. The government, the TUC accused, was simply selling the country to the West.

An atmosphere of extreme labour malaise predominated among the labour unionists as the 1980s moved on. The TUC faced the imperative duty to preserve workers' confidence in the organization, a confidence that started to fade away as workers' frustration grew deeper and resentment stronger. In fact, job cuts, declining salaries and retrenchment from the state sector generated a feeling of great insecurity, a concern that the TUC increasingly found difficult to allay. One main function of the syndicate was to protect workers from layoffs and assure their termination benefits in case of divestiture, but due to cash shortage, the government was unable to totally pay those benefits. The TUC found itself in an intricate position.

2-Labour and Politics: the Indivisible Issues

On assuming office, Rawlings had never set a precise date for power handover to civilians, nor did he openly reject the idea. He affirmed it was a mere matter of time which was necessary for economic recovery, but the TUC had doubts about the man's intentions and as time went on, the relationship between the syndicate and the government got increasingly strained. By the mid 1980s, the PNDC could no more rely on the support of the labour, a prerequisite for the survival of any democratic administration. The hostility of the workers who were thrown out in the streets as a result of retrenchment from the state sector promised future trouble for Rawlings (Gyimah-Boadi, 328-43:1990).

The TUC's resentment grew mainly from the government's IMF and World Bank-backed up programme but not only. The conditionalities of the scheme related to the privatization of national economy, the retrenchment policy, the cut in workers' salaries and the drastic reduction of expenditure on social services were rejected en bloc by the TUC. But tensions had an additional origin of no less

importance. The government did not consult the organization on crucial public policies related to labour concern. Decisive issues like the payment of end of service benefits and the right to form unions which had been tightly limited were decided upon without the consent of the TUC. This added fuel to an already explosive situation, and the syndicate got inexorably locked in a power struggle with the Rawlings administration.

The politicization of the government/labour relations became clear by the close of the 1980s. The TUC, initially an organization whose main role was the protection of the workers' rights, counted now among the most powerful political opposition forces in Ghana. The government was already facing the anger of major social sections like the students, the professional bodies and even the religious movements in their quest for political change. The TUC was now firmly pressing the government for the organization of elections for the people to democratically choose a civilian government. Its engagement in politics for democracy was illustrated with the publication of "Contributions of the Trades Union Congress to the Debate on the Future of the Country" in 1992 in favour of a return to multipartyism. The change in the speech tone of the TUC was remarkable. The General Secretary of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, L. G. K. Ocloo, made it clear that labour and politics could not be dissociated:

"We cannot be concerned about strengthening democracy inside our union without being concerned about democracy.... The people of Ghana ... reserve the historical right to determine how their affairs are run and who governs them.... We must exercise our democratic right to choose our rulers" (Kraus, 83-121:2007).

A different behaviour was from then on recorded in the policy of the TUC in Ghana. The role of the organization was no longer limited to its initial duties, the syndicate got now deeply involved in a struggle with the PNDC, a struggle that was not necessarily fought through the usual means of demonstrations and strikes, but rather by resorting to a permanent hostility and protest regarding the right to be consulted about economic issues affecting the workers. The scope of the TUC's objectives was now enlarged to demand a return to democratic civilian rule and multipartyism (Thomson, 197: 2000).

The government had serious reasons to fear the union which it considered as a danger. The latter had a remarkable capacity to mobilize support among different sections of the Ghanaian society, namely the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT), the Ghana Registered Nurses Association (GRNA) and the

Civil Servants Union (CSU). The danger for the PNDC was amplified by the simultaneous activism of other key social groups like the Ghana Bar Association (GBA), the National Union of Ghanaian Students (NUGS) and the Christian Council (CC). In a country like Ghana where more than 70% of Ghanaians are Christians, religion was an instrument of great popular influence and mobilization on which the government exercised a strong control on the grounds of national security safeguard. In addition, the TUC expressed its firm desire to preserve its autonomy from the state, but obviously no military government was willing to tolerate that. After the coup, the working mass was of an inestimable support for Rawlings, but as time went by, restrictive legislation (repression, strictly controlled political activism, and pressure on leaders to avoid strikes) alienated this strong pillar from the people in office.

The economic situation of the country continued to decline, and difficulties for the new government were compounded by a severe drought in 1982-83, and continuously unavailable cash. At last resort, the IMF and World Bank reconstruction scheme had finally been adopted with three main conditionalities: a spectacular devaluation of the national currency by 90% against the dollar, a liberalization of prices and privatization of nearly all the sectors of the economy. One immediate consequence was the striking restriction of the government role in business and social services. The hostility of the TUC grew higher and workers' support for the government was greatly undermined. Tensions amplified, strikes spread in the country and the government responded violently by jailing leaders and forcing others whose political actions it feared to flee Ghana.

The power struggle that opposed the TUC to the government continued as the 1980s went on. Rawlings sought to tighten the stranglehold on the labour leaders by whatever means possible. The media, on which the PNDC had a firm control, were used to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the union's leadership. Open attacks on the organization were frequent on TV channels, radio and newspapers. These were efficient tools to spread (often wrong) information about the TUC. The latter could not retaliate; censorship denied it the right to a public response. In addition, the government resorted to a divide-and-rule tactic to break up union solidarity, but the TUC refused to give in to these intimidations. The leaders were more than ever firmly decided to challenge Rawlings and his administration.

The drought and the massive devaluation of the national currency, the Cedi, plunged Ghana into the abyss. Famine threatened the population as the devaluation dramatically impacted the national purchasing power of workers, not to mention the unemployed. In 1984, the TUC demanded an increase in the minimum wage and a reduction of primary commodities' prices without delay and

threatened to launch a large-scale strike in case the government refused. The latter was under high pressure from the IMF and the World Bank for privatization, retrenchment and currency devaluation (Ninsin, 5-20:1993). The measures, no matter how prejudicial they were, were in their majority necessary to recovery. Nevertheless, a 60% increase in minimum wage was decided, but later reduced, to the great frustration of the TUC.

3-The Growth of the TUC's Pressure for Political Change

The situation continued to regress and inflation deprived the population of the minimum daily needs. The TUC intensified its struggle against government policies through a successful and large labour mobilization. In a parallel direction, Rawlings continued to accuse the union leaders of politically motivated activity, hence resort to arrests and harassment of the militant leaders persisted. It became increasingly clear for the TUC that its battle to protect the rights of workers could only go hand in hand with a return to democratic rule, and it seemed there was a good chance it may change the course of politics in the country. It continued its request for a return to constitutional rule by the end of 1988, and declared this was the sole way to stop the military government in its campaign of trade union transgressions.

The TUC went even further in its battle against the government and took a step it considered hitherto political and therefore none of the concern of a workers' organization. It asked the government to immediately clarify the situation of the detainees under the PNDC Law 4 on Preventive Custody. This law, which no court in Ghana could question, allowed the government to detain indefinitely without trial individuals suspected of subversion. The TUC asked the PNDC to decide either of their guilt or innocence. It accused the government's security agents of spreading terror which inhibited all forms of expression and deterred civil liberties from evolving. It was hinting particularly at the freedom of press which was greatly controlled by the government through the Newspaper Licensing law. The TUC asked the PNDC to annul it for it prevented popular debate on the nation's objectives and policies (Nyarko, 80: 2015).

The issue of the detainees warned the government of a mounting danger from the labour leaders. Rawlings could no more turn a deaf ear to their increasing involvement in the political scene, nor were his police forces a sufficient instrument of repression. The TUC, which was now asking for free presidential and parliamentary elections to install a democratic government at the head of the country, insisted on other issues it viewed essential to a true democracy. It emphasized notably the right to freedom of expression, association, movement and trade union .Paramount importance was also given to the separation of

powers, the legislative, the executive and the judiciary. The latter, the TUC asserted, had to enjoy total and unconditional freedom of exercise in its work, and no other institution could interfere with its prerogatives. A clear reference was made to the multiple transgressions judges had been victims of in Ghana. Many of these demands were later to be incorporated into what was to become the new constitution of the Fourth Republic of 1992: article 21 (d) granted the freedom of assembly including freedom to take part in processions and demonstrations, and article 21 (e) granted the freedom of association including the freedom to form or join trade unions and other associations, national and international (Panford, 152:2001).

Submitting demands was regarded as insufficient for the TUC. It decided therefore to reinforce its actions by moving to a physical participation in the next steps that gave shape to the new constitution. The organization aligned with the groups which were to form the Constituent Assembly that would debate the draft of the new constitution and examine the views of Ghanaians on it. The TUC joined those groups which asked Rawlings to submit the contents of the new constitution to a popular test via a referendum. What people thought of the draft was essential to the success of the new government. The TUC was firmly decided to play a significant role in the political scene and contribute to the return to democratic rule in Ghana. This role which was highly effective as the future constitution was to retain most of the TUC's demands, one of capital importance was to confine the presidential terms to two years maximum as a guarantee of true democracy. This particular point had put an end to the everlasting presidential terms that were so common in Ghana since the Nkrumah regime (Oelbaum and Sandbrook, 604-46:1997).

Pressure for an immediate return to constitutional rule continued to rise not only within the TUC but within other political circles too. By mid 1990, the emergence of the Movement for Freedom and Justice demanded all barriers to free speech and free political activity be removed. This multiplied the difficulties for the government which had to finally take steps towards political change. By early 1991 it laid out a programme for a return to democratic rule though the ban on a free press and multipartyism was kept. The framing of a new constitution started with a view to organizing free elections a year later. The TUC was obviously relieved to see such changes, and despite its deep involvement in this political battle, its leaders made it clear that this was only a means to protect their organization against government violations, it was not an end in itself. The TUC was not interested in joining political parties nor did it intend to hold any office in the new political system. It was a trade union organization and so would it remain. Its primary function was to preserve the rights of the workers in Ghana, and for

that, to have a loud voice in policy debates was a sine qua non. Indeed, and from the 1992 presidential and parliamentary elections, the labour organization kept a close watch on the bills that came before the National Assembly, in addition to a strong presence in debates over labour legislation: the minimum wage, taxation, and free trade zones. As time moved on, the TUC's power grew stronger and its capacity to threaten the government to protect workers' rights greater, due mainly to its involvement in the political battle which it fought against the government of Rawlings.

Conclusion

Like any other union movement in the world, the TUC in Ghana was primarily meant to preserve workers' rights and articulate their interests. To fulfill its commitments, it had to be an important partner in the government's decision-making apparatus. Nevertheless, the Rawlings administration showed an early unwillingness to consider the labour organization as such. In an atmosphere of political opposition on the part of the union to the IMF recovery plan, the relationships between the TUC and the government grew increasingly tense, leading to a clearly declared conflict. The syndicate found itself dragged into a political battle which it regarded as the unique means to retain its institutional autonomy to exercise its duties. Frustration boiled over and protest increasingly mounted not only against the government's policies which the TUC regarded as a mere commercial transaction to sell Ghana to the West, but also against the flagrant violations of the union rights. These were described by the authorities as politically motivated aspirations. But the repressive policies of the PNDC failed to prevent the TUC from largely contributing to a major political change in the country, the return to civilian rule, and the birth of the Fourth Republic in which numerous demands of the labour union had later been incorporated.

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