Civil Society Organizations and Political Party Electoral Engagements: Lessons from the 2008 and 2012 General Elections in Ghana

by

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Abstract

This article discusses how civil society organizations (CSOs) in Ghana have influenced the election campaigns of emerging political parties. Through parliamentary and presidential debates, CSOs have brought the electorate and the political parties together to discuss the most pertinent socio-economic electoral issues that needed political attention. The 2008 and 2012 election interactions between the electorate and the political parties instigated by CSOs have enhanced the deepening of Ghana's democracy because they and political parties now recognize each other as a partner rather than as an adversary. Nevertheless, government's apprehensions about CSOs as opposition persist. Hence, this paper observes that sustainable CSO electoral interactions with political parties will require CSOs to maintain in the sphere of political neutrality.

Introduction

The global wave of democratization in the early 1990s has led to profound changes in the politics of West Africa. Apart from dethroning the authoritarian leaders, the political reforms have stimulated relative economic growth and decentralization of state power to the sub-national governments howbeit limited. Along with these have emerged arenas, outside of the family, the state and the market is where people have associated to pursue their particularistic objectives (Robinson & Friedman 2005; Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Whitfield, 2002). According to Kamstra and Knippenberg (2013:14), 'this social sphere has been occupied by voluntary organisations such as clubs, associations, social movements and informal networks of different sizes with diverse purposes known as civil society organizations (CSOs).'

The rise of these CSOs has increased the level of awareness of democratic accountability of the government to the governed. For instance, the loud voices of some powerful CSOs in West Africa have thwarted illegitimate moves by some power-hungry leaders to subvert their state constitutions. In Cote d' Ivoire and Senegal, incumbents' attempts to manipulate constitutional provisions to elongate their stay in power were met with CSOs' resistance. At their instigations, the media have probed the incipient regimes, reported abuses and amplified the voices of the marginalized in society (Gyimah-Boadi 1996 & 2004; Diamond 1999; Obadare, 2005; Williams & Young 2004).

Beyond these activities, Opoku Mensah (2009:5) has noted that CSOs are 'engaging in a web of relations, that are cross-cutting with diverse set of actors, and contributing to the discourse and practice of African development.' Notably, since 2000, the CSOs have extended their activities to the electoral arena, including building collaborative relationships with political actors as a means of creating a new democratic culture based on trust rather than antagonism (Meja, 2011; Gershman, 2004; Obadare, 2005; Williams & Young 2004; Whitfield, 2002). Despite this, the empirical account of democratization in Africa and Ghana in particular is lacking on CSOs' association with political parties. As Diamond (1996:230) rightly hinted, 'the literature on democratization is still dominated by the 'eighteenth-century idea of civil society as in opposition to the state.' This study, therefore fill the lacunae by examining CSOs' attempt to influence political parties to promote, at least, electoral democracy in Ghana. The salient issues worthy for investigation are: What is the nature of CSOs in Ghana? How have CSOs fostered interactions with the political parties? In what ways has the cooperation between the two groups fostered the deepening of democracy? What challenges persist despite civil society and political parties' cooperative relationship? What lessons can be learned from the Ghanaian experience of CSOs and political parties' interaction for long term democratic progress in Africa? The study argues that institutionalized civil society organizations have created platforms for engaging in collaborative relationship with political parties to deepen democracy in Ghana.

Civil Society-Political Party Nexus

Arguably, civil society and political party relationship is complex and lacks intellectual consensus (Heinrich, 2005). What seems to explain the vexed relationship is what the Georgian political scientist, Ghia Nodia described as "civil society narcissism" (NDI 2004). He observed that the relationship between civil society organizations (CSOs) and political parties is characterized by mutual suspicion. For a long time, CSOs and their external donors have felt uncomfortable dealing with partisan organizations such as political parties. CSOs have been skeptical of political parties because they regard them as representing only a part of the political spectrum (Heinrich, 2005; NDI 2004). CSOs' anti-party attitudes have been expressed in commentaries that view politics as something dirty, divisive, and politicians as corrupt who pursue selfish objectives. In the same way, political parties' worldview of NGOs is that they are 'greedy opportunists who seek after Western funding, or feckless idealists who talk a lot and state general principles but are out of touch with political realities' (NDI 2004:2).

Notwithstanding the accusations and counteraccusations by the two organizations, their individual activities facilitate the process towards democratic consolidation. For instance, Ware (1996), Mainwaring and Scully (1999) have emphasized the indispensability of political parties to the extent that without them, modern democracy is impossible. They have postulated that the establishment of democratic rules and norms only come about through the process of managing multi-party competition. Linz and Stephan (1997) have further shown that, stable and successful party systems remain the primary source of cleavage that leads to institutionalization of peaceful class conflict and political competition. Advocates of civil society such as Diamond (1996) and Gyimah-Boadi (1996) have also noted that, in authoritarian societies where political competition is restrained, civil society often acts as surrogates for political parties by advocating and defending human rights as well as giving voice to underprivileged citizens.

However, it is important to emphasize that, the democracy-functions of CSOs and political parties are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are mutually interdependent (Gershman 2004). For instance, it has been contended that while CSOs can represent specific needs and interests, it is only political parties that can translate the overwhelming actions of society into national decisions. Again, in relations to political parties, CSOs cannot make the trade-offs and compromises necessary for assembling broad coalitions that can produce a governing majority. Thus, it is political parties, rather than CSOs that seek for political power and form government. Similarly, while CSOs can initiate a democratic transition, it is through political parties that the process can be consolidated. At best, CSOs can provide assistance to the institutionalization of a democratic political process (Heinrich, 2005; NDI 2004).

Other scholars have acknowledged the interconnectedness between CSOs and political parties. For instance, political parties have often been regarded as a part of civil society because citizens and society are their immediate constituents (Diamond 1999; Gershman 2004; Chazan & Rothchild 1988). Robinson and Friedman (2005) have also noted that CSOs are closely linked to political parties and the state through ideological affinity. They have observed that, cooperation with civil society enables political parties to obtain feedback on voters' preferences. Therefore, a split between CSOs and political parties can lead the latter to lose touch with the citizens and thereby jeopardise vertical accountability. Furthermore, it has been argued that, CSOs' effectiveness in projecting their policy demands largely depends on how they are able to act as interest groups to lobby political parties. Some scholars have even claimed that the provision of information, technical assistance and civic education on democratic values by CSOs are important means by, which they reach out to political parties (Ozler and Sarkissian 2011; Diamond 1999).

It is believed that cooperation between CSOs and political parties can produce important outcomes for good governance and democratic consolidation. For instance, in reviewing democratization in Africa, Opoku-Mensah (2009) has observed that collaboration between CSOs and political parties can help legitimize the public realm, establish democratic culture, build state capacity for democratic governance, and increase partnerships for service delivery.

He also opined that by cooperating and engaging with the state, CSOs could gain attention within the circles of power, and even obtain some influence in the policy-making process. It is further contended that when the state engages with CSOs, government can gain some expert advice for its policies and thereby, benefit from the general legitimacy that a vibrant civil society lends to a political regime (Whitfield 2002). Opoku-Mensah (2009) has further shown that, in some parts of Africa, CSOs have become integral parts of policy development frameworks and processes that hitherto had been limited to state actors.

While CSOs and political parties' cooperation is necessary for democratic consolidation, a number of studies have revealed inherent complexities. In several African countries, CSOs are still viewed as 'standing in opposition to the state' and 'enemies of the government'. Therefore, CSOs' collaboration with the state is seen as an aberration, and a sell-out of the normative principles that define the distinctive character of civil society (Opoku-Mensah 2009). The problem is exacerbated by the lack of an explicit understanding of the real nature of the relationship between CSOs and political parties, and how the two groups can work together to deepen democracy (Obadare, 2005; Gershman, 2004; Chazan and Rothchild 1988). In consequence, state-civil society relationship remains precarious because the CSO sector is structurally weak relative to the state. In their current state, CSOs lack the capacity to influence and entrench meaningful changes in African states (Opoku-Mensah 2009; Ozler and Sarkissian 2011; Kamstra and Knippenberg, 2013). The prevailing imbalance in state-civil society relations that weigh heavily in favor of the latter can lead to the re-emergence of dictatorial regimes in Africa (Mercer 2002; Gyimah-Boadi 1996). Despite these apprehensions, it is important to emphasize that there is no generic model that can adequately capture the detailed CSOs and political party relationship. This is because, largely, the relationship depends on the political contexts, which vary depending on the country, regime and government (Gershman, 2004; Gyimah-Boadi 1996; Obadare, 2005).

Research Methods

This study adopts the qualitative method based on the afrobarometer survey method.[1] It carried in-depth face-to-face interviews on 40 respondents comprising 5 Members of Parliament (MPs) having different ideological and party attachments, 10 senior party executives, 7 CSOs activists (belonging to the highly institutionalized organizations), 3 donors (STAR-Ghana, Oxfam, Busac Fund) and 15 independent individuals from academia, media, chiefs and religious practitioners using semi-structured questionnaire. In addition, a focus group session for 20 informants with diverse backgrounds was carried out in order to validate the views obtained through the elite interviews. These sources were supplemented with desk research on the theoretical imperatives of CSOs and political parties and the possible obstacles that are inherent in the complex marriage. Because of the lack of funding for this study, the researcher depended extensively on the data collected by the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana for the CDD Oxfam project "engaging civil society in electoral processes for the improvement of people's life: lessons from Ghana".[2]

The Nature of CSOs in Ghana

The question that is considered in this section is whether there is strong correlation between the organizational complexion of CSOs and how political parties cooperate with them. This question is pertinent because of the claim that highly institutionalized CSOs that are perceived to be neutral of the political process are trusted by political parties, and therefore, will engage them in the electoral process. There is a general belief in Ghana that the highly established CSOs, i.e. those that have well developed institutional or organizational structure with demarcated lines of authority and accountability are relatively neutral of the partisan politics. When respondents were asked to indicate whether CSOs are partisan, some of the political parties' respondents said they were convinced that a considerable number of the CSOs are neutral of the political process (interview, National Democratic Congress and Convention Peoples' Party officials, Accra). They believe that an overwhelming number of the CSOs, particularly, the policy think-tank groups pursue nonpartisan programmes that are national in character and benefit. Also an academic, traditional ruler and media anchor indicated that the CSOs have independent existence and do not have affinity to any of the political parties even though their individual ideological orientations tend to coincide with some of the political parties' philosophy (interview, Kaakyire; Nana Ntim; Kofi Boamah, Accra).

The institutionalized CSOs in Ghana can be distinguished by their structure and the calibre of their staff. Their internal management systems are not only regulated by rational rules, but they are also governed by boards of directors composed of highly experienced and competent men and women of integrity in society (interview, Prof. Kwame Ninsin, Accra). Others such as the coalition-NGOs that are composed of networks of CSOs are managed by steering committees. The focus group participants identified the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD), The Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), IMANI Center for Policy and Education (IMANI) and Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG) as credible and trusted CSOs because they have well organized structures, and developed lines of authority. Also, the political parties' interviewees agreed that the Board of Directors of the CSOs are distinguished members of society. The daily activities of these CSOs are managed by an executive director. These CSOs are organized into departments based on their multiple activities. The few permanent staffs are in charge of the program development and implementation, and are responsible for creating the platform for their organizations to engage with the political parties. The political parties' informants confirmed the fact that the parties have worked closely with the highly institutionalized CSOs because they have demonstrated relative neutrality in their programmes (interview, NDC and NPP officials, Accra). However, the consensual view of the focus group participants was that only the boards of directors and staffs of the institutionalized CSOs have eschewed partisanship from their internal and external activities.

There is a general belief that the CSOs are accountable to their constituents. Because the international donors have insisted on regular reporting and submission of program proposals to the beneficiary groups, the CSOs have provided channels that allow their constituents to forward their feedbacks on their programmes for consideration. Indeed, the donors have not only demanded financial reports on their activities but also encouraged transparency in their overall undertakings. The COS' informants indicated that the beneficiaries of the CSOs' programmes are permitted to query and review their operations and activities. The Convention People's Party (CPP) informant agreed that due to the high level of transparency and accountability exhibited by the CSOs, the political parties have been trustful of their activities. In consequence, the political parties have dialogued with the CSOs on several issues, including ethnicity, chieftaincy conflicts, the environment and the electoral process. The CDD and IDEG's informants said that the political parties have responded to their election programmes by attending the workshops, roundtable conferences and seminars on governance, democracy and elections.

On the other hand, the less institutionalized CSOs have not attracted the maximum cooperation of the political parties. These sets of CSOs have organized around single individuals rather than board of directors. The People's National Convention (PNC) and Convention People's Party (CPP) respondents described the less institutionalized CSOs as 'family business entities'. They think that the major administrative and operational activities of the organizations are initiated and executed by the "owners". The lost or absence of a defined organizational structure allows the leader to depend on temporary staffs or volunteers to undertake ad-hoc activities. According to Gifty Mensah, a focus group participant, a substantially large number of the community-based organizations, including some faith-based NGOs and locally-based humanitarian and civic organizations that have mushroomed in recent years belong to this category of CSOs. Two respondents from academia and the media also said that the less-institutionalized CSOs lack political autonomy and tend to run bias programs, which suggest that some invisible political entrepreneurs are behind their operations. In particular, the CPP respondent remarked that the "one-man NGOs runs political programs". As a result of the perception that they are "political NGOs", the National Democratic Congress (NDC) respondent revealed that the political parties have shunned their programmes. Similarly, the Convention People's Party (CPP) informant admitted that the parties have distanced themselves from the activities and programmes of the partisan CSOs.

The rise of partisan NGOs predates the politics of Ghana's Fourth Republic. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the Ghana Bar Association (GBA), the Ghana Private Road Transport Union, Justice and Freedom Movement and Ghana Union of Traders Association, among others, pursued anti-government activities that depicted these CSOs as political non-state actors (Gyimah-Boadi, et al., 2000). In the post-constitutional epoch too, the 31st December Women's Movement (DWM) and the Danquah Institute have been pro-National Democratic Congress and pro-New Patriotic Party civil society groups respectively. According to the respondents from the media and traditional authority, the partisan programmes run by these CSOs reflect the identities of the personalities that are behind the organizations.

For instance, while the DWM is managed by the wife of J.J Rawlings (former president), the National Democratic Institute (NDI) is ran by a leading member of the New Patriotic Party. Recent developments have shown where some key figures of the CSOs have been appointed to political offices have confirmed their partisan orientation. For example, a leading member of the GBA, Ayikwei Otoo served as the Attorney-General in the New Patriotic Party (NPP) government, Ms Gloria Ofori Boadu, International Federation of Women Lawyers president contested an NPP parliamentary primary, and another member of FIDA (International Federation of Women Lawyers) has been appointed as minister in the current National Democratic Congress (NDC) government. The political parties' focus group participants suggested without authentic evidence that some of the CSOs serve as curriers for the transfer of campaign funds to the political parties. Also, a political science lecturer contended that some of the locally-based NGOs have indulged in politics by posing as defenders of either the government or opposition's actions.

CSOs and Political Party Electoral Collaboration

The more institutionalized CSOs have developed formal channels of interactions with the prominent political parties. In the 2008 and 2012 elections, the CSOs' interactions with the political parties occurred at the highest level. For instance, the IEA and CDD respondents said that the CSOs targeted the senior party officials who were involved in the making of the parties' key decisions, and granted them extensive access to their offices. The high-level interaction assured the CSOs that their elections' demands would receive the support of the political parties. A number of strategies were harnessed to draw the political parties into the CSOs' electoral orbit. Key among them was the dialogue and consultation engagements. This method helped the CSOs to obtain inputs from the political parties on a wide spectrum of the critical socio-economic issues that have devastated the lives of the majority of the people (interview, CDD informant, Accra). Some political parties' respondents explained that, 'understanding the issues from the political parties' perspective was necessary to arrive at a consensus on the fundamental issues of concern to both the CSOs and political parties' (interview, CPP and NPP informants, Accra). In the past, the political parties had accused the CSOs of resorting to the 'pick and choose' strategy in dealing with the most pertinent issues in the country. Therefore, according to the CSOs' respondents, 'the convergence of opinions through the dialogue window allowed the two groups to build consensus on the actual issues that should be addressed during the elections' campaigns' (interview, CDD, IDEG and IEA informants, Accra).

The dialogues and consultations' approach was beneficial to the two groups. Apart from forging unity of purpose and esprit de corps among the two interest groups on the election process, it signaled to their constituents that, 'democratic consolidation depends on CSOs and political parties' synergies' (Focus group consensual opinion, Accra). Furthermore, 'the civil society-political parties' dialogues helped to diffuse tension around the elections and dissuaded the political parties from pursuing violence-in-campaign activities' (interview Kaakyire Frempong, Accra).

Arguably, the reduction in the incidence of election violence in the 2012 owed much to the series of CSOs and political parties' dialogues in the months prior to the polls. For instance, the IDEG pursued aggressive dialogue sessions with the political parties on how to avoid violence in the elections. The IDEG's violence-free election dialogues came against the backdrop of rumors that some of the political parties were stockpiling arms and other offensive weapons to incite ethnic violence before and after the 2012 elections (interview, Kwesi Jonah, IDEG, Accra). The fear that violence will occur in the elections, therefore, encouraged IDEG to reach out to the political parties to discuss ways of averting violence. The IDEG-political parties' dialogue processes involved a series of meetings with other interest groups such as the security agencies, the Electoral Commission, traditional rulers and religious leaders to prevail upon the political parties to promote peaceful campaigns (ibid).

The IDEG regularized the election-dialogue agenda on its operational calendar by agreeing with the political parties to have a monthly meeting on the issue. The dialogues with the political parties were extended beyond the national level to the regions (interview, Kwame Ninsin, Accra). For instance, the IDEG organized a mammoth forum on the biometric registration in order to settle the confusion around its applications. The IDEG's forum allowed the political parties to brainstorm on 'the role of the biometric voter register in the 2012 elections' (interview, Kwesi Jonah, Accra). At the end of the forum, the aura of doubt and confusion around the biometric voter register had dissipated. The IDEG further carried out aggressive voter education, which involved training representatives of the political parties to comprehend the processes and procedures of polling. The political parties' respondents acknowledged the usefulness of the consultative forums. According to some respondents, 'the IDEG forums "united" the ruling and opposition parties for the sake of democracy' (Focus group consensual opinion, Accra).

On its part, the CDD developed a comprehensive election program, which involved a series of consultations with the key political parties. According to the CDD informant, 'the political parties' consultative forums brought the CDD and representatives of the political parties including the national chairmen, organizers, election directors and MPs together to design the campaign issues that should be projected in the latter's election campaigns' (interview, Abrampah, Accra). Indeed, 'one aspect of the CDD dialogue sessions involved the discussions of perceived national concerns that had not featured on the parties' election agenda' (interview, MP for Oda, Accra). The CDD used the platform to influence the political parties to prioritize the identified salient issues in their election campaign manifestos (interview, Kojo Asante, Accra).

Significant in the CSOs' electoral engagements was the role played by domestic peasant associations, which brought traditional farmers (one of the most neglected groups in Ghana's democratic development) and political parties in close contacts to discuss concerns with consultations and key stakeholders, including the political parties, the Peasant Farmers Association of Ghana (PFAG) which developed the "Farmers' Manifesto for Election 2012" that drew on empirical nationwide engagements with all the farmers' groups and the political parties (interview, Coordinator of the PFAG, Accra).

The process also involved carrying out several visits to the communities to meet the beneficiary groups to obtain first-hand account of the issues that challenged their survival (ibid). The Peasant Farmers Association of Ghana (PFAG) coordinator indicated that, the various farmers' groups and representatives of the political parties were invited to participate in the farmers' stakeholders' forums. The forums, which fostered interactions between the farmers and political parties, educated the politicians on the critical challenges that faced the peasants (ibid). It was hoped that the political parties would embrace the farmers' election manifestos and implement it in post-election policy decisions' (ibid).

The phenomenon of Presidential and parliamentary elections' debates have been CSOs' initiatives. Beginning 2004, the CDD has provided platforms at the grassroots levels to instigate debates among the political parties' parliamentary candidates. For instance, months before the 2012 elections, the CDD sponsored parliamentary candidates in 29 out of the 230 constituencies (interview, Kojo Asante, Accra). The debates were preceded with a series of workshops that aimed at school candidates on the key socio-economic and governance issues that were waiting for solution from the political parties (interview, Abrampah, Accra). The debates, which were held in Community Centers, largely in the rural districts, drew the participation of community-based organizations (CBOs), traditional leaders, and youths as well as the marginalized, to pose the critical questions to the parties' candidates. Also, the local debates allowed the large audience including the CBOs and the electorate to forward their local grievances to the political parties for inclusion in their campaign manifestos (ibid).

The IEA's Presidential Debate platform remains the most popular form of interaction between the CSOs and political parties at the highest (national) level. Since 2000, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) has motivated the political parties to participate in a national political debate on the most crucial and sensitive issues that the electorate looked for solutions. The face-to-face interaction gave the electorate the chance to listen to each of the candidates and made informed choices at the polls. To the extent that the IEA Presidential Debates were regarded as political contests between the presidential candidates, 'they were widely viewed as the barometer for measuring the chances of the candidates in the elections (focus group consensual opinion, Accra). They further served as the most significant means for holding the political parties and their presidential candidates accountable to the electorate. Consequently, the political parties spent time to prepare towards the exercise. Hence, the focus group praised the IEA's initiative as the most prominent example of CSO-political parties' engagement in Ghana's Fourth Republic.

Voter education and awareness on the election process and democracy generally is critical for democratic sustainability, particularly in emerging democracies such as Ghana. One of the commendable activities the CSOs undertook was the propagation of the parties' campaign manifestoes to the electorate. The CSOs organized series of media briefings, which allowed the political parties to inform the electorate about aspects of the contents of their manifestos.

Apart from relying on the traditional media-encounters (radio and television) to communicate with their constituents, they also resorted to the use of other forms of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in their interactions with the political parties. For instance, the CDD and the IEA used the social networks/media such as Twitter and Face-book to draw the political parties' attention to their election demands and elicited the formers' response on them. The feedbacks from the CSOs' media interactions with the political parties generated further debates on the salient election issues (interview, Ransford Gyampo, IEA, Accra).

Given that there are competing demands that groups make on parties during election campaigns, the CSOs have had to lobby the political parties in order to get their priority attention. For instance, the Universal Health Care Coalition (UHCC) lobbied the major political parties to get healthcare campaign issues onto the parties' campaign agenda (interview, Sidua Hor, Accra). Part of its game plan was to use pledge cards to obtain the consent of the parties to implement its health election campaign. The pledge card involved getting the political parties to make solemn commitments to implement the CSOs' election manifestos if they won the elections (ibid).

Without doubt, these CSOs forms of interactions with the political parties did not only promote inter-party debates aimed at getting the policymakers informed about the CSO's alternatives but also enabled the parties to learn from the electorates. The value of such open interactions was that the CSOs channeled their particularistic concerns to the political parties and their candidates. Focus group participants agreed that a number of post-elections' policy decisions by the successive governments originated from CSOs engagements with the political parties. For instance:

> The establishment of the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs in 2001 by the NPP government may be directly linked to the IEA 2000 Presidential Debate where women's groups challenged the parties' presidential candidates to address women and children issues that had received little policy attention. Also, in response to the concerns of the Fishermen Association during the 2000 elections campaigns, the NPP government created the Ministry of Fisheries in order to give vent to the specific issues of the fishermen and provide avenues for redressing them (Focus Group Opinion, Accra).

Civil society-political party interactions have been largely a two-way process. The parties have recognized the need to encourage cross-fertilization of ideas on pertinent national issues. Hence, in the attempt to integrate segments of the population and represent their perspectives in public policies, the political parties have mobilized CSOs' demands. Given that, CSOs represent an important sector of the population such as women, the deprived and disadvantaged groups; it has been a great incentive for the political parties to consider the formers' particularistic concerns in the designs of their campaign manifestos and programmes (interview, NPP Chairman, Accra).

As a respondent rightly noted, 'it was only by incorporating the CSOs' perspectives in the final products of the political parties' manifestoes that the documents achieved universality' (interview, NDC MP, Accra). As a result, since 2000, the CSOs have been among the principal guests at the launching of the political parties' manifestos. Furthermore, apart from receiving financial supports from some NGOs for capacity building, especially in the training of their agents to monitor the elections, the political parties have also included the CSOs in their public policy and budget making processes (interview, Ransford Gyampo, IEA, Accra). For instance, the government has included CSOs in the preparations and discussions of the national development planning documents. Whereas at the grassroots level, the opinions of the community-based organizations are sought in the preparations of the District Assemblies' development plans, at the national level policy research think tanks have been actively involved in the finalization of the national development plans (interviews, Ransford Gyampoh, IEA; Kofi Duah, IMANI; Catherine, Star-Ghana, Accra).

The discussions have shown that the search for viable solutions to Ghana's development problems and democratic challenges has been a concerted effort between the political parties and CSOs. It requires the combined energies of both the government and CSOs to achieve free, peaceful and fair elections (interview, Kwesi Jonah, IDEG, Accra). The CSOs have not only admonished the political parties to pursue peaceful campaigns but also provided the necessary educational instruments aimed at inculcating democratic values of tolerance, cooperation, and inclusiveness as means of promoting post-election political legitimacy in government (interview, Kwame Ninsin, IDEG, Accra). For instance, it was through the cooperation and collaboration with CSOs that the government could carry out successful national reconciliation after election 2000 (interview, Kojo Asante, CDD, Accra). The Ghanaian example is not the only case in West Africa. When the Tuareg's rebellion occurred in Mali, the government partnered civil society to promote national reconciliation. The Malian government at the time appealed to, and mobilized civil society in every region to create a consensus in favor of peace and reconciliation through a series of *Concertations nationales* starting in August 1994 that eventually led to the formation of the 1996 Timbuktu Peace Accord (Togola and Gerber 2007).

Challenges to Effective CSO and Political Party Engagements

A major drawback in the civil society-political party relationship is what has been referred to as the "autonomy boundary". The expectation that each partner should walk in the "tightrope" is the greatest obstacle to achieving effective civil society-political party partnership in Ghana (Focus Group Discussion, Accra). Indeed, while keeping to the friendship, CSOs and political parties are enjoined not to trespass on each other's unique territory. Thus, the relationship has been healthy only to the extent that each has kept its own distance. The identity/turf protection has been defended on the grounds that the two groups have distinct functions to discharge towards democratic consolidation, and the degree of success of the collaboration would mean preventing the subordination of CSOs' interests to that of political parties (interview, Kwesi Jonah Accra).

However, it has been extremely difficult to sustain a cordial marriage between the two interests groups. This is because the traditional government suspicion and distrust of the activities of CSOs have ranged on without abating. As a result, there have been accusations and counteraccusations directed against each other. For instance, the government has oftentimes accused the CSOs of instigating anti-government protests on issues such as allegations of corruption, environmental disasters, and healthcare delivery failures. In several instances, the government has expressed discomfort about the CSOs' advocacy on aspects of its economic policies, including awakening the people to demand accountability from the government (interview, Kwesi Jonah, IDEG, Accra).

The CSOs have suffered huge losses from government's poaching activities. Indeed, in fledgling democracies such as Ghana, 'CSOs are a talent pool that governments have had to draw upon' (NDI 2004:6). Since democratic renewal in 1992, and in particular 2000, when the journey to democratic maturation commenced, the government has consistently recruited its political elite from the resources/talents of the CSOs in the country. The government strategy of appointing some of the leading members of NGOs to serve in ministerial and other partisan positions has been a source of worry to many independent observers. Hence some vociferous CSOs such as the CDD has loudly chastised the government's appointing behavior on grounds that it could weaken the capacity of civil society to mobilize to demand accountability from the political leaders' (interview, Kojo Asante, CDD, Accra). The focus group participants expressed the same sentiments that, the practice could send the wrong signal to the CSOs that 'if you criticize or mobilize against the government, you risk getting a share of the juicy posts' (Focus Group consensual opinion, Accra). The government's strategy of disintegrating CSO through poaching is not peculiar to Ghana. Elsewhere in Kenya, many civil society activists went into government after the defeat of Arab Moi, thereby raising concerns about 'whether the support development agencies give to CSOs serve as a form of aid to a future democratic government' (NDI 2004:5).

Conclusion and Lessons

This study has indicated that both CSOs and political parties are key players in the promotion towards the consolidation of democracy. CSOs activities are complementary to the role of political parties in fostering political participation of citizens in the democratic process. By offering the platform for citizens' voluntary participation in associational life, CSOs serve as the arenas for learning democratic virtues of cooperation and unity. The various levels of civil society and political parties' engagements fostered unity on the critical socio-economic issues that concerned the people. The cooperation between the CSOs and political parties provided congenial atmosphere for the debate of the crucial national issues throughout the electoral processes. The observations are that: the relationship is sustainable within the context of mutual respect for each group's autonomy. This means that any attempt by political parties to subordinate CSOs' activities to the state will strain the relationship because 'there will be resistance from the former' (interview, Kwame Ninsin, IDEG, Accra).

At the same time, CSOs' programs ought to be supportive of what governments do rather than antagonizing government's perspectives. This is because governments' attacks on CSOs have been largely due to the accusations that the latter has acted to sabotage the policies of the former. Therefore, their collaborative ventures should not only stimulate confidence building and trust in each other but also serve as a vehicle for advancing peace and unity, particularly in post-conflict societies.

Inclusive policy-making is fundamental to sustainable democracy. Therefore, political parties' mobilization of groups' interests in society is effective to the extent that they incorporate civil society's perspective. When political parties' manifestos encapsulate CSO's developmental and governance concerns, there are greater chances of success for the initiative. Given the complexion of CSOs' constituents, particularly the underprivileged such as women, the girl-child, petty farmers, and the physically challenged, political parties cannot ignore CSOs' election demands that 'capture the overwhelming perspectives of the non-state actors.' The inclusion of NGOs' priorities in political parties' policy documents will not only add legitimacy to the government's policies but also facilitate their smooth implementation.

While political parties are encouraged to collaborate with CSOs, successful friendship depends on the ideals of political neutrality and autonomy from political controls, and unbiased relationship. The process of nurturing mutually beneficial relationship between CSOs and political parties will not achieve any positive outcome if the former pursues opposition activities against the latter. Therefore, CSOs that have their roots in certain political doctrines need to undergo orientation in order to act neutrally. Similarly, the effectiveness of the relationship between CSOs and political parties rests on their level of institutionalization. Only CSOs that have well established structures and operational lines of delivery of programs will attract the cooperation of political parties. The fact that the political parties rejected the less institutionalized CSOs is indicative that they must create institutional context for effective interaction with the political parties.

Endnotes

1. In Afrobarometer surveys, the sample is stratified by key social characteristics in the population such as region/province and residential locality (urban or rural). A random sampling is then conducted with probability proportionate to population size (PPPS). Respondents are chosen through four stages of sampling design, including stratify and randomly select primary sampling units; sampling start-points; choosing households; and the random selection of individual respondents. Only interviewers who hold a bachelors degree in social science and had undergone training are used for the data collection exercise (see www.afrobarometer.org).

2. The author was the principal investigator and consultant to the project. He submitted a comprehensive report to the Centre for Democratic Development Oxfam (UK).

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