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ECONOMY AND GOVERNMENTAL DISORDER IN GHANA

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INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the background to the political instability¹ in Ghana which has led to the fall of three civilian governments and several coup attempts. The main objective is to demonstrate that the economy and its effects on major sections of the population are the primary factors in political instability. In this respect, problems such as concentration of administration, duplication of efforts, corruption of government officials, bribery, nepotism, incompetency and selfishness, which are often given as the causes of political instability, are secondary, and manifest through the poor performance of the Ghanaian economy.

The paper argues that the linkage between economics and politics has much to do with the re-occurrence of coups in Ghana. It is the ability of those in power to minimise socio-economic hardships which sets the pace and determines the life-span of governments.

Finally, the paper also deals with the linkage between the economy and its legacy of inequality that helps to translate political conflicts into class struggles and the realignment of socio-economic groupings which eventually bring about coups.

Ghana is a particularly good case to examine when trying to answer questions about political instability in Africa and the developing world generally. On March 6, 1957, Ghana became the first independent black African country after 113 years of colonial rule. Indications were that Ghana had a great promise for rapid development. Economically, the country was in good standing; the sale of cocoa had generated large reserves of foreign exchange; it had a large literate population and a good infrastructure. Politically, the country adopted a parliamentary form of government with the party in power having seemingly widespread support and consensus. In addition, there was a relatively low level of regional or ethnic conflict. From the conventional standpoint, Ghana had all the characteristics or ingredients for modernising successfully. From another standpoint, Ghana held great promises; it was the champion of anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggle; its leaders had a broad pan-African outlook; and it embarked upon a socialist experiment, after 1961, which the international left watched with hopeful eyes. But the warning signs of economic, political and social troubles were there and had been there for a long time for anyone who wanted to recognise and heed them:²

In any case, Ghana's vision as black Africa's "shining star" was shattered in 1966 when the ruling government of Nkrumah was overthrown in a military coup. The National Liberation Council (NLC), the new military government, ruled until 1969 and handed over power to a civilian government with Dr. K.A. Busia as the Prime Minister. In January 1972, Busia's government was overthrown and the National Redemption Council (NRC), formed by the armed forces, became the new government. Its name was later changed to the Supreme Military Council (SMC). The head of this council was overthrown in September 1978 and replaced by another coup which established the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) led by Flight Lieutenant Rawlings. On September 24, 1979, power was passed from the military to the civilian government of Dr. Hilla Limann and the

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People's National Party (PNP). The army struck again and overthrew Limann's government on December 31, 1981, and brought back Rawlings as the new head of state.

Ghana has been independent for only a short time (1957-83), but it has witnessed a number of changes in the governing mechanism of the country. The big question is why so many political unrests in so short a time? There is a competing array of theories and hypotheses on the causes of instability in the political science literature.³ The first school of thought, which may also be classified as a grand theory, sees the role of the military as a function of system disequilibrium. The theorists tend to stress societal and structural weakness, institutional fragility, and low levels of political culture which act as a magnet to pull the armed forces into the power vacuum.⁴ The thrust of this class of theories is that developing or modernising societies are susceptible to political instability. Thus, O'Connell laments "the inevitability of instability" in post-colonial Africa.⁵ This is so because these societies are rapidly modernising and undergoing social change without concomitant mechanisms to manage the tensions resulting thereof. In short, military interventions signify failures or decay of the political system.⁶

The second school of thought relies on the organisational attributes of the military. The organisational school attributes to military hierarchies certain characteristics of professionalism, nationalism, cohesion, esprit de corps, rationality, efficiency that compel it to move into the political arena, to rescue the nation from corrupt and inefficient politicians.⁷ In essence, the military is viewed as the best possible agency of modernisation because of its organisational capability.⁸ In order to prevent societal disintegration the only organisation imbued with professionalism has the duty to step in as redeemers or liberators. In short, "Soldiers in mufti" (Nordlinger, 1970) are the most effective agents of modernisation.⁹

Coups may be caused by rivalries, ethnic conflict, and grievances within the military itself. In Ghana, grievances by junior officers against the officer corps have been cited as reasons for several attempted coups (especially against military governments) during public trials. Following this trend of thought, Decalo offers another thesis that personal grievances and ambitions are the key to explaining military coups, including the 1966 and 1972 coups in Ghana.¹⁰ Though the available evidence does not seem to support these two cases in Ghana, Decalo gives convincing evidence for personal ambitions in the coups of Idi Amin in Uganda in 1971 and Bokassa in the Central African Republic in 1965. To these may be added the 1981 coup in Ghana. In this instance, Rawlings depended on his previous popularity among the masses in Ghana to stage the coup to "bring the people into decision-making."¹¹

Another school of thought on military coups advances the corporate interest of the military as the major explanatory variable. According to First, when the military intervenes, "whatever its declaration of noble interest, it generally acts for Army reasons."¹² Using data from the 1966 coup in Ghana, Price convincingly argues that the military acted to safeguard its corporate interest.¹³ Apart from Price, Dowse and Bebler have cited corporate interest of the army as motivations for coups in Ghana.¹⁴ Actually, after his overthrow in Ghana in 1971, Dr. Busia described Acheampong's coup as an "officer's amenities coup."

Lastly, Price offers another explanation for coups. In his view, the training process undergone by the officer corps of many of the new states is such as to produce reference-group identification with the officer corps of the ex-colonial power and concomitant commitment to its set of traditions, symbols and values. Such

identifications affect the world view and ultimately the behaviour of these officers in their relations with civilian authorities and in their capacity as governmental leaders should they accede to power.¹⁵ Beginning from a different premise altogether, Fitch and Oppenheimer have observed that the NLC members had an "entirely different frame of reference — Anglo-Saxon."¹⁶

Though most of the explanations of military interventions are theoretically rich, when applied to the Ghanaian situation they fail to account for the recurrence of coups in the country. In short, the available theories fail to account for the major factors that create the "coup situation" in Ghana. Beginning from this premise, this paper treats political instability as a complex phenomenon which is derived from a historically shaped articulation between economic forces, over which the country has little control, and the internal social structure. The army, then, intervenes simply because an internal realignment of classes usually takes place which sees the present regime as no longer capable of coping with the interplay between the international and local economies, on the one hand, and the social tensions that arise out of the interplay, on the other.

In this paper an attempt is made to elevate economic variables to the forefront of political analysis and treat them as a prerequisite to political instability. While several writers have hinted at the economic factors, economic explanations of political instability have not gained a wide following among political scientists. There are, however, a few exceptions. For example, in an article, Bennett argues that "events in Ghana seem to show that economic crisis, in and by itself, may be the only precondition necessary for intervention."¹⁷ In assessing the issue of political stability (or instability) in Ghana, Hitchens concluded that changes have come because of government inability to cope with economic problems.¹⁸ Other scholars like Kraus, Rothchild and Gyimah-Boadi, LeVine and Chazan, and Dowse have all alluded to a relationship between Ghana's economic crisis and the recurrence of coups in the country.¹⁹ In a study of five African countries (Ghana included), Nelkin arrived at a similar conclusion. First, she admitted that there were many issues which prompted military actions such as political and regional antagonisms, corruption, authoritarianism, and the personal ambitions of officers in static ranks. Then she went on to conclude that "the issues which best account for the ease of military access to power, relate to economic circumstances and their social consequences."²⁰

In all of the successful coups in Ghana, the leaders have alluded to economic problems in their first broadcasts to the nation. Coup leaders are correct in citing the economy as the major factor in political instability, albeit the inability of military coups to improve the economic situation. When the NLC took over power in 1966, they declared that they had no political ambitions and that once the economy was rehabilitated they would give way to a properly elected democratic administration.²¹ The NLC handed over power in 1969. However, it is difficult to see how they rehabilitated the economy since the armed forces were back again in 1972 to "redeem the country from economic and political mismanagement." "The declared object of the take-over by the NRC government was to save the country from imminent disaster."²² Interestingly, even the deposed governments do not try to discount the economic factor. Nkrumah reluctantly admitted it when he accused the "imperialists" of exerting an economic squeeze on Ghana to topple his regime.²³ Similarly, in a letter to the chairman of the NRC the deposed Prime Minister, Busia, stated that the coup had come at a time of very great economic difficulties.²⁴

Rimmer reported that the Ghanaian economy had lost its innocence by 1964, two years before Nkrumah's government was overthrown.²⁵ Since then there is ample

evidence to show that the persistence of military coups has something to do with the continuous crisis in the Ghanaian economy. By the time power was transferred from a military to a civilian government on September 24, 1979, the Ghanaian economy was reported to be 'in its worst shape since independence 23 years ago.'²⁶ During Limann's civilian administration (1979—1981) Ghana's economic conditions continued to deteriorate without any relief in sight.²⁷ Thus, in the two years of the Limann administration, Ghanaians found their confidence and great expectations of the future gradually lessening.²⁸

THE ECONOMY

The basic character of the Ghanaian economy was developed during the colonial period. For example, in 1952, a 'Report on the Financial and Physical Problems of Development in the Gold Coast,' stated:

If we were forced to sum up the Gold Coast economy in one word the word we would choose would be "fragile". The second main economic weakness is, of course, that earnings of foreign exchange depend mainly on one commodity — cocoa.²⁹

Through colonialism, Ghana became firmly integrated into the world political economy. However, it was not until the post-colonial period, i.e., during Nkrumah's regime, that the deep-seated nature of Ghana's economic, and hence social and political, problems became apparent to all.

During the first four years of independence, the Ghana government did not make any serious efforts to restructure the colonial economy. Nkrumah, in the early years, practiced a policy of "governmental passivity and reliance on foreign capital for industrialization."³⁰ This strategy has been described as "competitive coexistence".³¹ Fitch and Oppenheimer have observed that balance of payments problems and inability to attract foreign investors forced Nkrumah to abandon this strategy in favour of more government involvement in the domestic economy.³²

Nkrumah's policies to restructure the economy revealed the structural constraints on rapid development and brought to the surface the country's economic problems. The monoprop economy was unable to generate the needed funds for development, as evidenced by the chronic trade imbalance and budget account deficits from 1959—66. During this period Ghana's foreign exchange reserves also dropped by 60%. Faced also with a decline of about 61% from 1965 in the world market price of cocoa, the government resorted to massive borrowing, both externally and internally, to finance an ever-growing budget deficit. Large annual doses of deficit financing, together with an expansionist monetary policy and a slow growth of output of basic consumer goods, compounded the difficulties inherent in excess-demand and inflationary pressures. By the end of 1964, Ghana's annual debt was \$974 million and the rate of inflation was about 30%.³⁴ In addition, growth in the Gross National Product began to decrease from an average of 4.8% before 1962 to 2.8% in 1964 to 0.2% in 1965.³⁵

The NLC pursued three main goals.

1. The restoration of budget stability;
2. the balancing of foreign trade; and
3. the consolidation of foreign debts.³⁶

Its strategy was simply a stabilisation programme to curtail public spending and impose severe restrictions on imports and external borrowing. These measures were successful in reducing inflation by 50% between 1966—67, but this was done at the

expense of greater unemployment and slower economic growth.³⁷

The Busia government continued with the basic economic strategy of the NLC. In order to stimulate growth, the government resorted to liberalisation of imports. This policy helped to flood the market with goods and reduce inflation. Unfortunately, reduced foreign exchange earnings due to the fall in world cocoa prices in 1971, plus the effects of import liberalisation, contributed to balance of payments difficulties which prompted the government to reintroduce stringent restrictions on imports and foreign exchange transfers.³⁸ By the end of 1971, Ghana's foreign exchange reserves were almost depleted; the account had dropped from a peak of \$299 million in 1958 to only \$38 million, a decline of about 87%. Moreover, Busia's government was unable to convince the creditor nations to reschedule repayment of Ghana's debts which amounted to more than \$1040 million.

In view of the state of the economy in 1972, the NRC announced a programme known as "Self-Reliance." According to the NRC government, if Ghana was to attain the goal of economic development it would have to rely exclusively on its domestic resources.

As a corollary the government launched a full-fledged agricultural policy — Operation Feed Yourself. The government hoped that the success of the programme would contribute to the growth of the general economy by increasing income and employment and easing the balance of payments problems, as well as relieving food shortages.

The Operation Feed Yourself programme went off to a good start, largely as a result of wide receptivity by the Ghanaian people. The government could boast of some initial successes and, in 1976, General Acheampong told *West Africa* (March 15, 1976) that his "government's reputation would always be associated with Operation Feed Yourself." By the time the NRC/SMC was overthrown in a coup in 1979 it had completely lost its reputation; Operation Feed Yourself had been a major failure. The performance of the Ghanaian economy had worsened. For example, the national consumer price index (1963-100) stood at 226.7 in 1972 and the local food index at 259.4. By August 1977 the national consumer index had risen to 1,729.2, with the largest increase in local food, 2,677.9. In three years, 1975—1978, inflation of local food prices soared to 190.4%.³⁹ Acheampong's economic performance is best described by a budget statement released after his replacement in July 1978. The budget statement noted the following indicators:

1. A rate of inflation estimated at over 100%;
2. a decline in the Real Gross Domestic Product since 1974;
3. a gross imbalance in the external accounts, with reserves "at a very low level";
4. a rise in net credit to the government from the banking system of finance budget deficits from Cedi (c) 17 million in 1973 to c 781 million in 1977 (in 1977, \$ 1.00 — c 1.15);
5. a jump in the money supply from an average rate of increase of over 80% per annum;
6. a worsening of the net foreign exchange reserves (by January 1978, a deficit of nearly c 151 million was recorded); and
7. an accumulation of short-term debt obligations estimated at c 403.4 million as of April 30, 1978.

Eight years of military rule did not help change the basic structure of the Ghanaian economy. In fact, on the eve of Ghana's return to civilian rule in 1979, Kraus observed that the economy was in a near state of collapse and that the fate of

the successor civilian government rested heavily upon its ability to reverse eight years of economic stagnation and chaos.⁴¹ Before it was overthrown on December 31, 1981, the government of Limann, like its predecessors, demonstrated its inability to find a solution to Ghana's economic problems.

It must be noted that political instability in Ghana has the characteristics of a class struggle. The struggle, however, is between the political and the economic elite. The political elite consist of senior military officers, senior bureaucrats and politicians. The nature of political conflict within these groups has much to do with the duration of governments in Ghana. In other words, the cohesiveness of changing coalitions within this elite determine which specific group gets political power. Military coups in Ghana merely shift political power from one elite coalition to the other. For example, Owusu has observed that the NLC coup facilitated a transfer of power from the CPP coalition to the "old establishment — the old elites of chiefs, professional men, wealthy traders, senior civil servants, who had lost political power to Nkrumah's new coalition at independence."⁴²

The economic elite play an invisible, nevertheless very crucial role in Ghanaian politics. They support selected groups within the political elite based on their anticipated benefits. Perhaps the most important aspect of this group is that they seem to be on the side of every ruling government. "It generally supported the CPP under Nkrumah and supported the Progress Party at the 1969 election, less because of the party's anti-socialist image than because it seemed likely to win. As time passed and economic injury grew, its enthusiasm for the Progress Party diminished very markedly."⁴³ Needless to say, Acheampong, Akuffo and Limann all received similar treatment from the economic elite. Together with the political elite they are responsible for the flow of resources going to the bulk of the people. Unfortunately, since the economic elite is not equally accountable to the people, it does not have to worry about the question of legitimacy. Economic hardships and measures to fight them proportionately affect the masses who are economically handicapped. Since more than 60% of all wage-earners are employed in the public sector, their grievances are, therefore, directed toward the government and its leaders. Moreover, the more than 20 percent of the population who are unemployed look hopelessly to the public sector for jobs.

Within the political economic structure of the country, the masses are at the receiving end. What they receive from the elite is a mere fragment the national cake. In 1972, when the military overthrew Busia's government, economic inequality was cited as a major justification:

The Ghana Armed Forces believe that the principle of One Man One Vote is meaningless unless it is linked up with the principle of One Man One Bread (sic). A government which operates on the basis of One Man Ten Bread (sic) for the broad masses of the people is unjust, and unjust rulers do not deserve to be sustained by any theoretical conceptions of democracy. As you all know, dead men have use of only one type of box — not the ballot box.⁴⁴

Several years later Ofosu-Appiah, in a tribute to Busia, responded to the NRC charge above.

By 1976 Acheampong had made it possible for millions of Ghanaians to have no loaves; and by 1977 thousands of Ghanaians were dying of hunger or suffering from malnutrition. Perhaps Acheampong's statement really was true only of his government, since it gave the dead men their boxes and turned Ghana into a graveyard.⁴⁵

Two factors determine the economic benefits reaching the masses: the actual performance of the economy and decisions made by the political and economic elite. Since they (the masses) form the bulk of the population, governments try to legitimise their rule through their support. The support they give to any government, in turn, is exchanged for economic benefits. In Ghana, the political base of most governments is quickly eroded because the anticipated economic benefits for the people do not materialise. As Austin observed, "if there is a pervasive concept in Ghanaian politics it is that of "patronage" or "clientele". Ghanaians give their support to those who can look after them."⁴⁶ Within the political structure those who desire to control the machinery of power feed on the frustration of the masses. Recently, the lower class seems to have a new hope in Rawlings.

Once the masses are frustrated, they withdraw their support for the government. Over the years, mass discontent with the government has appeared in several forms, including strikes, work stoppages and demonstrations by workers, students and market women; indifferent attitude toward public service and public goods; and refusal by farmers to plant, harvest, or deliver their crops to the market. Withdrawal of support for the government weakens its claim to legitimacy and sets the stage for a new round of power struggle among the political elite who feed on the socio-economic frustration of the masses.

The elite's perception of mass frustration precipitates coalitions and realignments among the political elite in search of a substitute government. In situations where government policies adversely affect some sections of the bourgeois class, the chances of a coup become even greater. Though the military is at the forefront of all coups in Ghana, it is argued that it is always an alliance between the military and other groups in the political elite that overthrows existing governments. For instance, Dowse has argued that the immediate effect of the 1966 coup was to put the clock back to about 1951 and 1957 and to reverse the electoral results of those years.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

Before Nkrumah became prime minister in 1957 his message to the people was very simple: "seek ye first the political kingdom and all other things shall be added unto thee." People joined the Convention People's Party (CPP, the ruling party) because through it was seen material benefits as a result of progress and development.

After independence, however, Ghanaians became aware of the hollowness of their expectations. By 1961, Ghanaians had become tired of vain statements on "paradise-benefits of industrialisation" of which they could see no physical signs.⁴⁸ By 1965, the CPP had withered away because economic hardship had reached its peak and tensions and frustrations had attained unbearable heights. Acute economic situations forced the government into "erratic" courses in both foreign and domestic policies which finally gave the armed forces an excuse to take over power.

The coup climaxed a long period of economic deterioration which had systematically eroded Nkrumah's mass support. Though the government's activities had alienated most of the senior bureaucrats and many politicians, its basic support among the masses remained intact until after 1961. In 1961 when the first austerity budget was introduced, there ensued spontaneous strikes and demonstrations by commercial employees, civil servants and market women. The foundation of Nkrumah's support had begun to crack. Persistent inflation, unem-

ployment, acute shortage of goods and services all combined to cost Nkrumah whatever support he had left. The sudden decline in the world market price of cocoa by almost 25% in 1965 was the straw that broke the camel's back. The 1966 budget was largely a response to the declining revenues and deteriorating economic conditions. While the government was frantically searching for a solution to these problems, the competing elite could sense the desperate search of the "proletariat" and the "masses" for a new messiah. Thus, when the government was overthrown soon after the introduction of the 1966 budget there was nothing but joy in the country.

Busia's Progress Party Government was not as fortunate as its predecessor civilian government; it did not take long for the government to lose its support among Ghanaians. It is interesting to note that both Nkrumah and Busia were overthrown immediately after stringent economic measures were introduced, in each case after a fall of more than 20% in the world price of cocoa. At the time of the 1966 and 1972 coups, Ghana was in the midst of IMF negotiations for major loans. In the latter part of 1965, IMF wanted a devaluation of the Cedi, reduced government spending and increased exports. Nkrumah refused, a coup occurred in early 1966. In December of 1971, Busia yielded to the same IMF demands and devalued the Cedi by 44%; he too was overthrown.

The first major group affected by Busia's economic policies were university students. The confrontation with the students began when the government introduced the Student's Loan Scheme to require students to pay for their education after graduation. Secondly, the government, in trying to bring efficiency into the civil service, dismissed a sizeable number of civil servants, including senior officers. When one of the victims, E.K. Sallah, appealed to the courts against his dismissal and won, Busia refused to reinstate him and snubbed the judiciary. Furthermore, in the last budget before being overthrown, the government's policies adversely affected certain sections of the political elite. Senior officers in the armed forces and the bureaucracy were asked to give up most of their exclusive amenities. Thus, when the Prime Minister called for a devaluation of 44% of the Cedi, the bureaucrats and the military took advantage of his slipping support to change the government.

The Busia government developed a very negative attitude toward the Trade Union Congress (TUC). First, the government refused to raise the minimum wage as demanded by the unions. Instead, it imposed the National Development Levy, with the explicit aim of shifting the tax burden for rural development from farmers to workers. Secondly, a government order froze the assets of the TUC under a New Industrial Relations Bill. The withdrawal of support by students and urban wage-earners coincided with the frustration of cocoa farmers. When the government was unable to pay for the farmer's cocoa in 1971, they quietly withdrew their support. The government's political base had been shattered, and the time was therefore ripe for another change of government.

When the National Redemption Council (NRC) took over power from Busia, it did not construct a political base. The initial support of the government, however, was broadly due to the politically unpopular measures the previous government had undertaken. Moreover, out of patriotism for the country there was a lot of enthusiasm for the Operation Feed Yourself and Self-Reliance programme. More importantly, these two measures did not have any immediate adverse effects on any segment of the population.

Unfortunately, the government ran out of steam by 1975. By 1979 the economy was in complete disarray with inflation estimated at 116%.⁵¹ Performance of the economy was so poor that even the bourgeois class was hurting. Lastly, the government lost whatever justification it had for the 1972 coup when it devalued the Cedi by 139%; it was the same people who had replaced Busia after a devaluation of 44%.

The coup that toppled the NRC/SMC government was precipitated by a national uprising. For the first time mass withdrawal of support was very open, loud and even violent. Widespread dissatisfaction with the management of the economy led to frequent strikes by students, taxi drivers, nurses and teachers. When the economic conditions began to seriously affect the life styles of the elite groups, they joined the popular uprising to bring down the government. In 1977, the country's lawyers, engineers, and other professionals went on strike, and forced the government to promise to hand over power to civilians within two years. Time ran out on the government. A team of junior military officers, led by Ft. Lt. Rawlings, toppled the military government of the Supreme Military Council (SMC), formerly known as the National Redemption Council (NRC).⁵²

Barely thirty months after it had handed over power to a popularly elected government, the military was back in power, claiming the civilians had failed the people. The leader of the latest coup, not surprisingly, was the same Ft. Lt. Rawlings who handed over power to Limann in 1979 after he overthrew the NRC/SMC in that same year. It is not hard to understand why the people abandoned Limann so soon. The Ghanaian economy has broken down. With the economy as it is today, Rawlings will surely need more than mere promises of a people's revolution to stay in power for long.

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16. Fitch and Oppenheimer. *Ghana-End of an Illusion*, p. 4.
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19. See Kraus, John. "The Political Economy of Conflict in Ghana". *Africa Report*, March-April 1980, p. 9-16, "The Return of Civil Rule in Nigeria and Ghana", *Current History*, March 1980; "Arms and Politics in Ghana" in Claude Welch, (ed.) *Soldier and State in Africa*, p. 154-221; Rothchild and Gyima-Boardi. "Ghana's Return to Civilian Rule", *Africa Today*, 28, 1:3-16; Chazan, N. and LeVine, V. Politics in a Non-Political System: The March 30, 1978 Referendum in Ghana; *African Studies Review*, April, 1979, p. 177-207; and Dowse, Robert. "The Military and Political Development", pp. 213-246.
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