

## **Ghosts of ethnic strife haunt Ghana ahead of elections**

Wednesday, 23 May 2012

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When Ghanaian parliamentary hopeful Ursula Owusu toured the capital Accra to watch voters register for December's elections, events took a turn for the worse at one of the downtown markets she visited.

"I heard people saying 'leave this place, leave this place, what are you doing here? ... The next thing I knew was pah, pah - slaps from behind," said Owusu, a candidate for the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP).

Pointing to a cut on her face, Owusu alleges she and her team were set upon by around 20 "heavily built men" wielding broken bottles and hurling stones. She said she took shelter in a local shop until NPP security guards came to rescue her.

The incident last month was the latest in a series of stand-offs between rival groups that highlight the tensions simmering within a country hailed by Barack Obama as a model of African democracy. Some fear they could taint Ghana's image as one of the continent's investment hotspots.

Ghana has seen democratic elections decide its leadership no fewer than four times since the last military coup in 1981, a rare feat in a region where power is still just as often determined by the bullet as by the ballot.

This time, President John Atta Mills will bid for a second term in the December polls. His National Democratic Congress (NDC) will also take on its arch-foe the NPP for control of the national parliament and the job of ensuring the West African country makes the most of its 2010 debut as an oil exporter.

Ghana's politics are, by the standards of neighbours such as Cote d'Ivoire or Nigeria, dull. But at election time, the ethnic roots of the two main parties creep out into the open - as they did with disturbances that marked Mills' poll win in 2008.

Owusu says she was taking a keen interest in voter registration after hearing reports that locals with names linking them to the Akan ethnic group were being prevented from signing up in the central Accra district of Odododiodioo.

The Akans have ties with the central Ashanti region that is the stronghold of support for the NPP - creating the basis of a political rivalry with Accra's Ga community and the Ewes of the eastern Volta region from which the NDC draws much support. Owusu's allegation that her attackers were NDC supporters is unproven -- the party denies it -- as are the accusations of her rivals that she visited the market simply to stir up trouble. But whatever the truth of the incident, it has only

strained the atmosphere further.

"We're declaring war in Ghana today," Kennedy Agyapong, a firebrand deputy for the NPP, declared on his private radio station a few days after the Owusu episode.

"They started it in Accra, We'll start it in Ashanti," he said, calling on Ashanti locals to "beat and slash" Ewes and attack any Gas who had settled there. Agyapong was arrested and now faces preliminary charges of treason over his outburst.

The Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (Codeo), which deployed more than 600 observers to watch the registration process, said one stand-off in an Accra suburb involved rival gangs brandishing machetes and clubs. Isolated cases of violence were reported in the Ashanti city of Kumasi 250 km (160 miles) north.

"There were heated confrontations as a result of direct interference in the process by political activists, particularly aspiring parliamentary candidates, who have no business to be at the centres in the first place," said Codeo's John Larvie.

Preliminary data showed 12.75 million voters registered in all, compared to 12.4 million on the list used for the 2008 elections. While most Ghanaians have accepted the figures, some members of the two leading parties are still disputing them.

Many observers remain confident that, just as in 2008, Ghana will manage to put the genie of ethnic rivalry back in the bottle and so avoid the fate of countries such as Kenya, whose 2007 polls led to an explosion of deadly communal violence. But Ghana has had its share of bloodshed in the past - for example in 1994 when the escalation of a feud between northern tribes led to 5,000 deaths – and some say the strong ethnic card in politics means an ever-present potential for trouble.

"The ethnic undertones ... could degenerate into ethnic conflicts if politicians continue to whip up ethno-centrism," said Theophilus Richardson, a policy analyst and lecturer at the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration.

Richardson said a failure to keep a lid on the tensions in the coming months could tarnish Ghana's attraction to investors who, according to the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre, doubled foreign inflows to \$1.2 billion last year.

They have already been unnerved by the 15-percent dive of the local cedi currency since the start of the year to record lows of around 1.90 to the dollar as the rapidly expanding domestic economy sucks in imports.

Religious leaders, traditional rulers and civil society groups have urged the country's politicians to tone down their rhetoric and some radio and television stations have threatened to ban the worst offenders from the airwaves.

"We should avoid unethical and sensational reportage, especially at this time, and most importantly ensure no politician uses us to fuel reprisal attacks," said Bright Blewu, General

Secretary of the Ghana Journalists Association.  
The writer filed this analysis from Accra

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