

REVIEW

WATCHING AN AFRICAN ELECTION

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On its release in 2011 Jareth Merz's documentary on the Ghanaian presidential elections of 2008 engendered a warm reception from critics. The *New York Times* praised its 'fleet footed, engagingly volatile' depiction of 'a political contest defined by higher hopes and even higher anxieties'.

Notwithstanding its 'colourful gallery of political insiders, including the candidates', the film's real triumph was in its capture of 'national mood', the *Times* correspondent noted (*New York Times*, 30 November 2011). 'Nimble and non-judgemental', according to the *Guardian's* reviewer in London, the film was only ostensibly about 'the tussle' between two parties.

'The real battle, though, appears to be between the past and the future, as the nation toils to shake off the dark days of neo-colonialism and embrace free, open and fair elections' (*The Guardian*, 24 November 2011).

'Political drama at its most compelling', reported Toronto's *Now Magazine*.

For this writer, in its final sequences Merz's film became 'a breakneck political thriller' (29 December 2011). Garnering similar accolades on the festival circuit, *An African Election* won a prize last year for the best African documentary. Deservedly so, too, for, even in this lively setting, turning the routine of electoral competition into political theatre required artistic accomplishment as well as political insight.

As the critics make clear, the documentary's dramatic tension is as much the result of skilful editing and calculated camerawork as it is the reflection of the intrinsic narrative excitement of the real events as they unfolded on the ground. Even so, though Merz's creation is a work of interpretation; as much artifice as reportage, his film represents a key source for any serious effort by outsiders to understand modern Ghanaian politics.

Imagine an attentive audience with an interest in African elections but whose members know very little about the intricacies of Ghanaian political life. It's not such an unlikely proposition. Here, in Ireland, at the university in which I teach,

I am using the film as the basis for a class exercise in an introductory course on African politics. For this project the students will assume the role of election observers, completing the kind of checklist used by real missions working in the field. So, what do I hope they will learn from a careful viewing of the documentary?

The first feature of this battle for the Ghanaian presidency is that it was vigorously competitive, with the main protagonists affiliated to two groups, both evidently mobilising tumultuous armies of enthusiastic supporters. There's an abundance of evidence to indicate systematic organisation and plentiful resources on both sides.

The candidates travel at (reckless) speed along Ghana's dusty highways in convoys of expensive vehicles, decorated with party insignia. They are accompanied by T-shirted motor cycle outriders. They overtake specially hired buses of flag-waving supporters. They deliver their addresses from well-constructed podiums equipped with sophisticated sound systems. T-shirted marshals act as cheerleaders: at one rally these auxiliaries are even mounted on horses. At a night-time meeting spotlights pick out a dirigible floating above the assembly. Campaigning is quite evidently national: both parties hold exuberant meetings in the same vicinities, in big cities and in more remote villages, in the north and in the south.

As a BBC voiceover commentary attested, this was 'essentially a two-party contest' (1:26).¹ The British reporter could not discern 'a huge amount of difference between the two parties' and indeed they both appeared to be offering voters very comparable undertakings. Later in the film there's a deftly edited passage of cross-cutting excerpts from speeches by the two candidates at different rallies. His government would soon 'modernise agriculture', the National People's Party's (NPP) Nana Akufo Addo pledged. A renewed mandate for his party would 'bring science and technology here'. The National Democratic Congress (NDC) had the same plan, though, according to John Atta Mills: 'I'm telling you, *we* are going to modernise agriculture, we will give you the fertiliser, we will give you the seedlings, we will give you the input' (11:58).

Notwithstanding these similar enticements, in the film the two parties in fact projected rather distinct identities. Professor Atta Mills's NDC represented itself as the party of 'change' and as the vehicle for the aspirations of common people, 'the generality of the people working in poverty'. Its opponents, Mills, charged, stood for 'their own tradition, property owning democracy, they call themselves' (10.46). Such hostile characterisations might, of course, be unwarranted, but in fact the patrician-accented Akufo Addo did choose to project his group as the party of meritocracy: 'we are not going to put the destiny of our nation into the hands of

1 Numbers in brackets refer to minutes into the film.

these incompetent, unproductive, inefficient persons' (58:07). It's a contrast that is echoed in the film's *vox populi* commentary.

In a blacksmith's shop an NDC supporter proposed that change is needed: 'because the youth are suffering: now you cannot go to school any more'. 'There's no food for a lazy man' (5:38) was the bantering response from the older NPP adherent. Atta Mills directed his appeals precisely at those people who felt they were 'suffering'.

The NDC would bring jobs for such people and it would invest in new infrastructure for neglected regions: 'Tamale airport: we'll turn it into an international airport. So when you are travelling to Mecca you don't need to go to Accra' (57:44). Akufo Addo's pledges tended on the whole to be more circumspect, for he was, after all, campaigning on behalf of the incumbent group: 'we won't promise you the moon' and, really, 'the best way forward is to have a stable government guided by the principles of good governance' (4:30).

As Sekou Nkrumah explained in an interview, 'If you want to be more progressive, more to the left, I think the NDC will do it.' The NPP was for people who were 'more conservative', he thought (8:48). Sekou Nkrumah isn't the only famous son to appear in the cast of characters who animate this documentary; indeed, both presidential contenders belong to political dynasties whose members can trace their genealogies to the politicians who helped Kwame Nkrumah construct Ghana's First Republic. And both parties are sharply conscious of their own and their opponents' historic lineages.

Akufo Addo projects the NPP as the bearer of a liberal tradition 'in the frontline in the struggle for democracy and a regime of human rights' (7:39). Meanwhile, NDC spokesmen claimed to embody '*Osagyefo*, Dr Nkrumah's vision for Ghana, a vision for black people' (12:02), 'a promised land' (19:11). In the film footage the most conspicuous campaigner is, in fact, neither of the two presidential candidates but rather the ebullient personality of Jerry Rawlings, first elected president of the Third Republic and before that a two-times military dictator.

In *An African Election*, Rawlings delivers the best lines. He appears in the third minute of the film, arms akimbo, his voice booming across an adoring multitude at an NDC rally: 'Presidents will come and go. Governments will come and go. But this time once again. When the people's power returns to your hands. Never let it out of your grip again. Don't ever make that mistake again' (3:58).

The mistake to which Rawlings is referring is not the complicity of Ghanaian citizens in military takeovers – Nkrumah's overthrow in 1966, for example, was greeted with public rejoicing and Rawlings's own coup in 1979 and the subsequent brutalities were widely acclaimed. His reference is, rather, to the 2004 election, an election the NDC lost, for the second time in succession, in a poll that he informs the visiting ECOWAS observer team, 'did not have the integrity it needed' (30:41).

They should not make the same mistakes of observers in that election who validated its outcome; even one little mistake, he insisted, 'could undermine the aspirations and hopes of a population of 20-million Ghanaians' (30:41).

If we are to believe the evidence in the film, Rawlings remains a charismatic figure in Ghanaian politics, talismanic both for his supporters and his opponents: alternately, 'the foundation on which the rest of us are today building' (27:00) or the preacher of 'the old revolutionary slogans ... that will take us back to our dark days' (12:02). And as we shall see, Rawlings's role in the film is pivotal, for, in its dramatic construction, he is both actor and *auteur*.

If a basic requirement for a working democracy is to have at least two strong parties that offer voters clear choices there is plenty of testimony in Merz's documentary to demonstrate that in this respect Ghanaian democracy is flourishing. It's not just that each party appears organisationally robust, with its own separate brand or identity, it's also obvious that voters are offered real choices.

Though at a very localised level political affiliations appear to be territorial, to judge by the flags of one party or another flying above shanty rooftops, the regional settings in which the parties bid for support are not politically monolithic. In the streets of the larger cities the T-shirted partisans of *both* groups exchange insults and derision and, at times, come to blows.

There's the odd evidence of regional or ethnic loyalties affecting political choices – for example, at one NPP rally there's a T-shirted cluster of 'Ashanti boys' – but such primordial identities do not appear to preoccupy the main protagonists, even in their denigration of each other's groups; not in front of the cameras, anyway. These *are* national parties, it would appear, with contrasting ideological appeal. But if elections do, indeed, offer real choices, how eager are the voters to choose between them? What does the film tell us about the quality of Ghanaian citizenship and the extent and depth of public political participation?

Here the evidence is much more mixed. Certainly, there are many indications of civic enthusiasm. On polling day voters started lining up hours before the stations opened. Even so, they were lucky if they obtained a head start over their neighbours, for, as one police officer observed, most of the people in his location 'were at the polling station around 3am' (30:58).

Many of them would wait all day: at Gbebu polling station there were long lines of voters still awaiting verification at the formal closing time, 5pm. The police had to summon the army so that their vehicles' powerful headlights could illuminate proceedings, for this station had no electricity: officials enjoined the soldiers: 'give them light' (37:59).

In Ghanaian elections counting takes place at every polling station the day after the ballot. It is a very public procedure, conducted in the open air on tables separated from onlookers by a plastic police strip. Small children stand at the

front of the crowd. As one of the witnesses explains: 'We want to see everything with our own eyes: we don't want anyone to steal' (39:20).

The cameras record the scene as it is witnessed by these spectators. The ballot papers are sorted by party choice, each one held aloft so that everyone can verify its assignment to the correct presidential contender. Then each pile is counted, aloud, with the crowd supplying a chorus as each ballot is enumerated. The results are declared and validated by party agents. A similar public reception greets the arrival of the ballot boxes and the results tabulations at the various collation centres: at the Jonestown centre the atmosphere is carnival-like and dancers entertain the awaiting multitude.

Visibly excited crowds assembled around counting stations might represent a healthy indication of a politically assertive citizenry but their presence may, alternatively, signal a contest in which public perceptions are of stakes at issue that represent vital interests, in which the electoral contest is, in effect, a zero-sum game. Indeed, the film's street-side commentaries suggest that many people believed or at least professed to believe that victorious candidates would reward their supporters: 'We know there are jobs but these are for your party people. It's not for any other person apart from your party people. They look at the party card. You have to hold a party card before you will be employed as a worker' (5:49). As one T-shirted supporter of the 'Kakpugu Fan Club' informed the cameraman: 'We are praying to see who can come out to get us some skills to do something' (15:30).

On a radio chat show a listener insisted that 'Professor Mills, he will take us to the promised land' (19:11), echoing one of the NDC's favourite catchphrases. Of course, it is possible that there may have been a substantial segment of the population who shared the predispositions of farmer Moses Imoro, who had not attended any rallies or meetings and did not intend to. All he wanted from politicians, Moses Imoro said, was that 'if only they stopped to tell lies' (20:42).

But such disengagement was exceptional among the testimonies brought together in the film, and the visual evidence depicts many settings in which political animation appeared to be universal. As noted above, the prevalence of party flags – uniformly of one party or the other – flying above shanty neighbourhoods – suggests this, though it also reflects the territorial dynamics of party patronage, of 'chop' politics, so to speak.

Zero-sum politics can be lethal. And indeed, at moments in the film, activists behave violently – or at least assume forceful postures. After the second run-off poll, at the end of a protracted collation of the national results, the final addition of long-awaited tabulations from the Volta region changes the overall outcome by a fraction, but sufficiently to put the NPP candidate, Akufo Addo, in front of his rival. The NDC officials are furious and are quick to accuse the Electoral Commission of foul play: 'We are not accepting the Volta results. Stop the process.

This is not Nigeria.' That night a large and hostile crowd appeared outside Akufo Addo's residence: 'Addo, Addo', its members chanted, 'do something before you die' (70:00).

In the campaigning for the run-off election, noticeably more ill-natured than the first contest, at an NDC rally, youngsters are lined up in T-shirts bearing the legend 'winning team'. They perform a military drill, deploying painted wooden guns. During the run-off, Jerry Rawlings is filmed on the campaign trail, warning that the NDC's opponents – 'a pack of thieves and liars' – were scheming 'to do everything possible to wanna steal your 2008 election *again*' (55:42). NDC activists should 'protect the ballot boxes the way you will protect and defend your mothers and your daughters' (54:24). An NDC television advertisement begins with a cobra opening its fangs. Then a voiceover message: 'If we give these people another chance they are going to be very dangerous' (52:45).

How widely such polarised perceptions are shared among ordinary Ghanaians is a question the film does not attempt to answer. Such perceptions are at odds with the calm insights on offer from commentaries in the film, though. As journalist Kwesi Praa notes, 'none of the parties are offering a paradigm shift; they are all planning to do the same thing'. According to 'expert' Baffour Agyemeh-Duah, 'the psychology of Ghanaians when it comes to politics is very much influenced by our political history': Ghanaians valued 'stability' above anything else, he thought (4:25). And the violent posturing of the activists might be just that, posturing – theatrical heroics.

Merz's cameras record a street skirmish – as one group of partisans attempts to demolish a barricade of burning rubbish erected by their rivals. In the stick fighting that ensues one man is struck down and falls to the ground. The other adversaries are then dispersed by police. But the cameras continue filming as the fallen man eventually gets to his feet, clutching a doubtless sore head, and stumbles off the scene. Perhaps such animosities are games, dangerous games to be sure, but games all the same, in which participants act out roles assumed only temporarily.

As one NDC party agent notes about his relationship with his opposite number in the NPP while they await the results tabulation at the Electoral Commission headquarters: 'Kwabena and I, we are friends. It is the politics that make it look as if we are at each other's throats, but hey, we are friends, we're buddies' (43:56).

Even in the troubled northern region, in which, during the 2008 campaign, both parties fielded virtual militias of youthful adherents, in the regional capital, Tamale, during the NDC's victory 'jubilations', reporters noted 'an atmosphere of peace and camaraderie' in which partisans of the two rival parties 'were seen teasing and hugging each other and dancing together to campaign songs of the two parties' (Nurudeen 2009).

The main drama of Merz's film is constituted by its second act, when accusations of ballot-box theft and false tabulations apparently bring the country to the brink of political breakdown. Merz's direction is generally careful not to endorse these accusations of electoral malpractice completely, but many viewers may well join certain film critics in sharing the NDC's view that this was an election which was nearly stolen by the incumbent party and its candidate.

This is the representation of the campaign favoured by Jerry Rawlings, who enjoys a privileged status amongst the political principals who appear in the film. He is the only one who is interviewed at length and is allowed to speak directly to the camera. Rawlings lays the groundwork for this narrative about a stolen election right at the film's opening, when he tells his supporters not to 'make this mistake again' of letting power slip out of their hands. He warns the visiting ECOWAS mission about his worries about repetition of the fraud that he suggested affected the outcome of the 2004 election.

Rawlings's professed anxieties appeared to be shared by senior NDC officials. In the national collation centre, the Strong Room, the film records NDC agents making the first complaints about 'attempts to manipulate results' (45:05). Encouraged by the lap-top-assisted projections of their likely support, premature celebrations begin at both party headquarters about their respective candidates' victories.

Once again, this time during the run-off campaign, Rawlings warned a visiting African delegation that his party's rivals were 'bent on taking [the election] by force and violence'. There was a real possibility of an 'explosion', he insisted (53:04). In the one editorial judgement in which Merz's direction seems to be supporting Rawlings's conspiratorial narrative, the sequence that depicts the events on the second polling day, the run-off ballot, is entitled 'Macho Men'. We are told about reports of 'macho men', or 'muscle men', who have been intimidating voters at certain polling stations. Then, at a station in Accra, NDC officials object to a body of NPP agents who have positioned themselves outside the station. 'They have stationed themselves here with their motor bikes and we know that when they are stealing ballot boxes they will use motor bikes' (60:21).

We then learn that in a whole constituency, in Tain, the voting had to be called off, after a search for supposedly stolen boxes produced no results. After the police's failure to disperse angry crowds, the Electoral Commission closed the local stations. Tain is, customarily, a NDC stronghold, an obvious target for any supposed conspiracy by the NPP. In the film Rawlings then appears on television: 'Freedom can come at a cost; justice can come at a cost; we have to be ready to defend freedom and justice, just as others did' (60:25).

In the disputes that accompany the subsequent collation of the run-off results as they arrive from the different constituencies NDC agents appeared to

be taking their cues from Rawlings. The Volta outcome was unacceptable, they said (for this was a region of historic strength for the NDC): 'You are doing what Robert Mugabe did.' But Ghana was not Nigeria and it was not Zimbabwe: if the outcome was unacceptable 'we'll meet you in streets', the NDC 'would organised the people in the streets', the NDC's officials promised (65:34).

In the end, the conflict is resolved, not in the streets but behind closed doors – away from the cameras – in the Electoral Commission's Strong Room. Dr Afari Akan, the electoral commissioner, was able to negotiate a compromise. The results of the second poll were too close to be decisive, though Mills was in the lead, having overtaken his rival, who enjoyed a plurality by a narrow margin after the first round. The margin between the two candidates was smaller than the number of votes that might have been cast in Tain constituency if polling had been held there. Hence, the Tain election would be re-run.

The film's closing episodes are anticlimactic: a tranquil – in fact uncontested – ballot in Tain and the inevitable NDC victory, followed by Professor Atta Mills's investiture. Ghana obtained its second electoral turnover, a benchmark democratic achievement.

Who deserves the credit, though? Was this an election saved by a forceful opposition with supporters willing to defend democracy in the streets, as the NDC's spokesmen who appear in the film would have us believe? Or were the accusations and threats of the NDC's officials part of the normal bluster and bargaining that accompanies Ghanaian electioneering? Was the atmosphere of 'a country balanced on the brink of chaos' a manufactured contrivance, in which Merz reinforces Rawlings's narrative about conspiring opponents with footage of tumultuous activism for dramatic effect? In other words, does Merz borrow unduly from Rawlings's interpretive frame to construct his 'political thriller'?

For a candidate who won the first round by a one per cent margin and then lost the second round, Akufo Addo's response was remarkably low key, phlegmatic even: 'I'm not downhearted, just disappointed. It didn't turn out my way' (79:01).

In the context, it's a graceful enough concession, even if it came 24 hours after the declaration (Gyimah-Boadi 2009, p 144). Its tone may have been prompted at least partly by Addo's awareness that the NPP lost despite its own vigorous efforts to subvert electoral procedure. NPP officials were not alone in making such attempts. Subsequent academic analysis does suggest that both parties were probably responsible for serious abuses (Jockers, Kohnert & Nugent 2010, pp 104-111). In core support regions of both parties: Ashanti, in the case of the NPP, and Volta, with respect to the NDC, there seems to have been considerable over-registration and then, in these constituencies with bloated registration figures, there were incredibly high turnouts, particularly in the second, run-off round. Both parties recognised turn-out as the decisive consideration.

In one conversation recorded in the film the NPP's director of operations warns his colleagues about the risks of promoting a too festive mood at his party's final rally: 'We have to be careful so people don't assume we are celebrating and therefore don't go out and vote. It should give a bit of good feeling but at the same time there should be a bit of anxiety' (23:21). The scenes filmed in the Electoral Commission's Strong Room include an episode in which NDC agents objected to tabulations arriving from the Volta constituencies, the party's regional stronghold. Here, in certain districts inhabited by ethnic minority groups, the NPP had succeeded in achieving unexpectedly high registration figures and subsequently implausibly high voter turnouts.

Which party was more guilty of such fraud is difficult to assess, particularly in the absence of the detailed computations of the local results: the Electoral Commission refrained from publishing these. In a poll in which the outcome was so finely poised it is possible that the extent of fraud committed by one side or the other might have been decisive.

Merz's film suggests that during the count it was the NDC that was most predisposed to complain. In fact, however, the NPP also objected to what it perceived to be irregularities in NDC-dominated districts in the Volta region and boycotted the final Tain poll as a consequence (Gyimah-Boadi 2009, p 144). It stood little chance of winning Tain anyway: this was a locality in which the NDC had an established strength. A key consideration in influencing Akufo Addo's decision to concede was the fact that most of his agents in most of the constituencies in the region had, in fact, signed off on the results.

The NPP had despatched the so-called 'macho men' from Accra in an attempt to substitute them for their own locally appointed agents in the Volta region – party officials hoped they would more predisposed to contest any irregularities. In most cases they were refused accreditation; hence their presence outside polling stations that the NDC perceived to be so threatening.

Democracy on a knife edge? Perhaps. Though, as noted, the NDC's threats to take its followers into the streets to contest the results had an element of theatricality. Its assertions about the risks of a stolen election were part of its campaigning from the beginning, helping to instil that 'bit of anxiety' so essential to promoting a high turnout among core supporters. For students of African politics the final lesson emerging from Merz's luminous film is that, despite Ghana's success in 2008 in meeting the challenge of the 'two times turnover test', institutional consolidation remains an untidy and messy process, and democracy is not quite the only game in town.

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