



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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McCANTS: This is an interview with Johnson Nketia, the General Secretary of the National Democratic Congress in Accra, Ghana. It is 19 August 2008.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I always like to begin these conversations by learning more about a person's personal background. Can you describe the position that you hold, explain your job and what your goals are in the position?

NKETIA: *Thank you very much. My name is Nketia, Johnson. I am the General Secretary of the National Democratic Congress (NDC). According to our constitution, the General Secretary of NDC is supposed to be the chief executive of the party, the key spokesperson for the party and the administrator of the party and its structures through the country.*

Before becoming the General Secretary, I was a member of parliament for twelve years on the ticket of the National Democratic Congress after winning elections three consecutive times. I was a Minister of state, Deputy Minister in charge of agriculture for four years, and that's about it. I decided to retire from Parliament and then take active interest in the running of the party.

McCANTS: What has been your participation with the Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC)?

NKETIA: *I actually lead the NDC team on the Inter-Party Advisory Committee. Just a little background—The idea of the Inter-Party Advisory Committee was raised by then Director of Elections, one Mr. Adeenze-Kangah in 1994. Remember that the country went through some elections in 1992 that were disputed by the main opposition party of that time, the New Patriotic Party (NPP). We had gone through the presidential elections and the winner had been declared. Then we were preparing for parliamentary elections. Then they decided not to participate, and it nearly ran the country into some form of crisis.*

So the Electoral Commission sat down and thought of something that could bring the parties together to discuss and agree on how to move our electoral process forward in the coming years. So they came up with the idea of bringing representatives of all political parties around the table to discuss and find consensus on establishing electoral rules. It has been a very successful experiment. It has served the country and democracy in Ghana very well.

McCANTS: How would you describe the relationship of IPAC to the Electoral Commission?

NKETIA: *Well, I think that the relationship changes from time to time. From the beginning of the establishment of the IPAC in 1994 there were very, very regular meetings; it was almost monthly meetings. So I can count about eleven or so IPAC meetings in that very year of its establishment. In those days the decisions of IPAC eventually found themselves incorporated in the electoral process.*

I remember we were in power at that time and the opposition parties were sort of ganging against our delegation because at IPAC each party is represented by an equal number of delegates, irrespective of its strength. So when you have the opposition parties ganging up against you, the ruling party was losing the debate in those meetings. It was very useful because it was another way of checking abuse of the incumbency. So those days, up to 2000, IPAC decisions were virtually mandated for the Electoral Commission. During this period, between 1994 and 2000, through the mechanism of IPAC, we were able to introduce more than forty changes into our electoral system. Some of them—the introduction of

transparent ballot boxes was a decision of IPAC before it was adopted by the Electoral Commission. The introduction of voter ID cards was a decision of IPAC. The original, the first ID cards were thumb-printed ID cards. Then subsequently IPAC decided that we should move from that to photo-based ID cards. Then we also moved from photo-based ID cards to photo-based ID cards with photos in the electoral register itself so you could compare the picture on the ID card with the picture on the electoral roll. All these were decisions of IPAC.

Then the decision to hold both the presidency and parliamentary elections on the same day was also a decision of IPAC. All these were adopted. We think that they helped improve transparency in our elections and boost the confidence of the electorate in the electoral process. Things however have changed dramatically since 2000 to date. I think it had to do with the aftermath of the 2000 elections in which the opposition captured power and the Electoral Commission had no fears or whatever in declaring the opposition party the winner and then the sitting government also had no hesitation in handing over peacefully to the opposition.

We have suffered a lot of reverses in our electoral system, particularly in the way IPAC has carried out its functions up to now. So we cannot say that IPAC as we have it now is as effective as it used to be under the previous administration.

McCANTS: In what ways has it been less effective?

NKETIA: *First, in, you know, IPAC has also been attended—apart from political party representatives, development partners used to be in attendance and provided partial funding. Now the majority of the funding is coming from government. So somehow the government has sort of denied the Electoral Commission the needed funds to undertake its activities. Therefore, the funding of IPAC meetings has been so severely affected. If you take the statistics of IPAC meetings since 1994 to this day, and I will be pleased to give you a copy, you realize that from 2000—before 2000 meetings were very frequent, annually you would have about ten meetings, eleven meetings. When you get closer to election years the meetings become more frequent.*

The story is totally different from 2000 to date. IPAC meetings have been very, very infrequent and for a given year you can have about three meetings, in some years you have only one meeting. In fact, since I became the General Secretary of this party, two years ago, I've attended only five IPAC meetings.

McCANTS: We're continuing with Mr. Johnson Nketia at the NDC headquarters in Accra.

NKETIA: *I was saying that since 2000, 2001, IPAC appears to have changed its color, changed its mode of operations and so on. First meetings are very rarely held and we've been ignored even after our political party prompted that there ought to be an IPAC meeting. Then when IPAC decides on something, our decisions are not implemented as agreed upon. For instance, during the last registration exercise IPAC objected to the use of 2500 workstations for the data capture and picture capture. We insisted that we ought to have 5000 workstations, that was the only way we can ensure that everybody gets the opportunity to register with minimum delay.*

The Electoral Commission accepted it. We walked out of the place with the satisfaction that we were going to have 5000 workstations. In the end, the workstations that were established were less than half the 5000 that IPAC agreed upon. Then, again, in the past IPAC was given full disclosure of the

financial position of—the resources of the Electoral Commission. Therefore IPAC was able to put up pressure on the sitting government to release resources if they were coming from the government coffers, or find resources if we had to contact our development partners. What we see in this time is that IPAC will feel that the resources are not there because things that ought to be done are not getting done. Then when you complain that resources are not there so the Electoral Commission ought to be funded, the commission officials go out and contradict what you are saying in public, knowing very well that what they are saying is not the true state of affairs. Then the whole nation walks into the problem, like we did during the immediate past registration exercise. We never made a secret of our intention to ensure that the Electoral Commission, that the voters' register was compiled in a credible manner.

So last year, 2007, even though the law requires voter registration to be undertaken, the Electoral Commission did not call an IPAC meeting to discuss it at all. Then, even when they called the meeting last week, it was only when everything had gone wrong. They just called a meeting to inform us that they were not going to be in a position to open the voters' register for 2007 because of lack of resources. Now how do we proceed from there to make this position public? They then turn around to contradict us and said that no, they don't have any resource constraint at all. Then we all agreed that for the next registration, since it would be using a new technology, the equipment for the registration would be procured before, in the last quarter of 2007 so that the training of staff and everything would be done. Then in 2008 we were not going to have any difficulties and the register could be opened in the first quarter of 2008.

We got to the last quarter of 2007 and no procurement was being done. We issued a statement; we came out publicly to say "look, the Electoral Commission is compromising our electoral calendar because they should be procuring the workstations now, and we are calling on government to release the necessary funding to enable them to procure those quickly." The Electoral Commission—we want to believe that they are always forced by government to come out to say something that will defend government. So quickly they came out and said "oh, the government has released all the resources we need." Meanwhile the procurement was not being done.

In the first quarter the procurement was not being done. Even when at the time of 2008 budget preparation Parliament realized that the Electoral Commission's allocation was not sufficient and resolved, a whole parliamentary resolution was passed that the Minister of Finance would come back to Parliament at the end of February 2008 to submit a supplementary budget to cover the 30% deficit in the Electoral Commission's funding.

February came. There was no supplementary budget. March came, there was no supplementary budget. When we raised it the President said that they had given the Electoral Commission all the resources they needed. We thought the Electoral Commission was going to say "no, we don't have the resources" because supplementary budgets are not presented in secret. They are debated in Parliament and Parliament itself was on recess. So there was absolutely no way the government would have made the resources available.

The Electoral Commission came out and said that they had all the resources they needed. So you see that apart from the attitude of the Electoral Commission, before 2000, when they were agreeing with IPAC to implement reforms, the Electoral Commission is now always on the defensive, trying to defend government positions. When IPAC decisions are against government positions

then the Electoral Commission comes out and says that IPAC has an advisory capacity, so they are not bound by their advice. So that is how we are proceeding now, and that is how come we are scared that the election ahead could be severely compromised because the registration process has been badly compromised.

McCANTS: I'd like to transition to discussing the role of the Electoral Commission in regulating political parties. What responsibilities does the Electoral Commission have for regulating the role of political parties?

NKETIA: *Their role in the whole electoral process or with respect to IPAC?*

McCANTS: In the whole electoral process.

NKETIA: *First, our Constitution requires that political parties must be registered by the Electoral Commission. So it is actually the Electoral Commission that gives political parties authority to operate. The requirements for the formation of a political party are also found in our Constitution. For instance, before you can form a political party to be registered by the Electoral Commission, the party must be organized in all regions and also in two-thirds of all the districts within each region and so on; it's a very stringent requirement. So the Electoral Commission has the power to withdraw a party's license if it is not operating according to the rules.*

Secondly, there is the requirement of disclosure of financial dealings of each party. So under the law, we are to report to the Electoral Commission about our annual financial statements. They must receive them within the first six months or so of the succeeding year. Then there is also a requirement that the internal organization of the party must be done according to democratic principles. Therefore we interpret that provision to mean that elections within the party at every stage must be supervised and conducted by the Electoral Commission. So, for instance, this is what they do. When it comes to the conduct of elections and conduct of registration and so on, there are rules that allow parties to observe the elections. So parties are allowed to place party representatives at the various registration centers or polling centers as the case may be. Then they require the signature of the parties or the endorsement by the various parties of the results of the election, at whatever stage, from branch to national level.

McCANTS: Does the Electoral Commission play a role in vetting candidates?

NKETIA: *No, in the vetting they don't play any role, but in the elections, after the vetting, there are primaries. The primaries are supervised by the Electoral Commission. So the commission makes sure that the conduct of the elections is done according to democratic principles.*

McCANTS: Are there any rules in place that require political parties to register the dates, the times, the places of campaign rallies?

NKETIA: *No, not with the Electoral Commission, but with the police and security agencies. We need to inform the police five days before any major outdoor activity so that the police will then prepare to give you the necessary security cover.*

McCANTS: Contacting voters is expensive and often difficult if infrastructure is limited, if fuel costs are high. What are the main methods that political parties use to try to reach potential voters, and do you think that these methods have any particular advantages or disadvantages for the quality of the election?

NKETIA: At this stage—at some point I can only speak for my party because there are things that happen in other political parties that are not condoned by us. In fact, we have cause to complain about some of them. We are a mass party so we are organized through country-wide branches or offices. Our party, the basics of our party at the branches and the branches are organized around polling their core terminals with the Electoral Commission polling stations. We have about 24,000 branch offices serving approximately 500 eligible voters per locale. We have about 24,000 branches of our party country-wide. So at every locale, where you have about 500 eligible voters, of course the criteria being dependent on your geography and other features. You have a branch of NDC there. So the executives, we have nine executive members, and these nine are in charge of contacting the 500 or so eligible voters there. They discuss the party's program and try to market our candidates and so on. So that is the major means of contacting the voters and then selling our products, which are our candidates and programs.

Then, apart from that we do organize rallies. We organize public events and these public events can take the form of mini rallies at the various branches or larger ones at ward, constituency, regional and national rallies. So we also have that set of activities, public activities. These are the major means of selling our products. Then we use the mass media. What is meant by the mass media? Press conferences here which are then sent to the news.

McCANTS: It seems that one of the ways that the Electoral Commission maintains transparency of the election process is by having party representatives or party agents be observers of the entire process at every level, from counting, to the transport of ballots, the printing of ballots, to the reporting of results. It seems also that that would require each of those party agents to be trained enough—.

NKETIA: Yes.

McCANTS: Can you describe how the party goes about the recruitment and the training of these people that play such a vital role in the transparency of the process?

NKETIA: Since our branches are co-terminal with the various polling stations so it works out that the branch executive there will be responsible for any party activity that takes place there. So the recruitment of the agents is handled by branch executives. So the branch executives would select the two agents that are required there. Then we—so that is how the recruitment takes place throughout the country. Then we also undertake training from here. What we do is to train trainers so at the moment we have completed the training of our trainers, about 300 throughout the country. So there are ten regions; we have about thirty trainers in each region, roughly. These trainers are responsible for the various constituencies in those regions. These trainers are the people who then organize further training of agents that are selected in the individual constituencies.

McCANTS: How do you evaluate the performance of these agents?

NKETIA: Well unfortunately if you want to evaluate their performance it is always after the election. That is how you can actually evaluate their performance in the field. But we have simulation exercises. For instance, because the current registration exercise is a limited exercise, we just trained some people a little more than the trainers. Then we put the trainers and the people they have trained to man the registration centers. The registration that takes place before the major election always serves as a testing ground for our agents. Apart from that unfortunately

before you even know someone is not performing, he has compromised voting in that place. You will then start planning for future elections and how to replace underperforming agents and so on.

McCANTS: Thank you very much.

NKETIA: *You're welcome.*