

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Ah, Ghana

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Dear Peter,

Ah, Ghana. One hears it like a refrain traveling in that beautiful, despoiled country. From taxi drivers and businessmen, students and market women, expatriates and self-exiled indigenes, it sums up the lost hopes and broken promises that seem to be all that's left after 24 years of independence.

Ah, Ghana. Said with a sigh and a heave of the breast, as if for a loved one who died tragically, or perhaps not dead but suffering from a disease that may be incurable. For despite continual reassessments of the past and resolves for the future, nothing seems to change. Corruption and mismanagement are words that stick easily to many West African governments, but few leaders have shown such determination to repeat the wrongs of their predecessors as have the Ghanaians. Their actions arouse in the observer the same morbid fascination with which one might watch a greedy mouse nibbling at a chunk of cheese in a trap.

An elected, civilian government took office in Ghana in September 1979, after seven years of military rule. One of the more controversial actions taken by the new lawmakers last year was to give themselves a substantial pay raise. At the time, the government was calling on Ghanaians to make sacrifices to help the country regain its feet. Strikes were and are common as workers protest the drastic reduction in their standards of living brought about by annual inflation rates that have run at 50 to 125 percent over the past few years.

"Ghana is a 'used-to' country," a friend told me as we walked through his old home town. "Everything used to be better." We were walking down a rutted path that used to be a road for trucks coming to the town's market. Trucks don't come to the town much anymore, and the market has dwindled. On the hill behind it is a large, vacant building that used to be an automobile showroom. Almost no one in town can afford to buy a car these days. My friend used to make the trip to Accra, the capital, in about 15 minutes from a nearby town on the main road. The road is in such poor condition now, the trip takes three times as long. A web of wires runs beside the road, but hardly anybody outside Accra uses telephones. Too many lines have been cut. The copper wire is sold across the borders.

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Ghana's first military coup occurred in 1966, removing President Kwame Nkrumah. His leadership had brought Ghana to independence in 1957, the first European colony in West Africa to attain that goal. For years he was admired not only in Ghana but throughout the continent as a spokesman for African freedom and unity. As conditions worsened at home, however, his countrymen began to resent his global pretensions. He was in Asia trying to bring peace to Vietnam when he lost control of his government. Today, some Ghanaians still blame him for squandering the large foreign currency reserves Ghana had at independence on African liberation movements and pan-African conferences. Yet by and large, his reputation is restored in his native land. One of Accra's main streets has been renamed in his honor. The ruling People's National Party (PNP) is the successor to his Convention People's Party (CPP). Ghanaians handled a copy of one of his books that I had brought with me as if it were a Gutenberg Bible. (Books, even Nkrumah's, are hard to buy in Ghana—scarce and prohibitively expensive for the average person.)

Nkrumah's fall was followed by three years of military rule. Conditions in Ghana worsened. "Ghana's financial crisis continued and expenditure on agriculture, communications and industry were cut. Yet various elite groups received salary rises and defense expenditure increased by forty-one percent in three years, consuming more foreign exchange than any other state department."*

The military handed over power in 1969 to Dr. Kofi Busia, a respected academician. Busia had been a harsh critic of Nkrumah, and his Progress Party won the election on a clean-government campaign. In power, however, the civilians only cleaned up for themselves. Ghana's slide continued. "The Progress Party was...like its CPP predecessor profoundly intolerant of opposition. It was ruthless in suppressing rural discontent, most markedly to be found once again amongst the highly taxed and poorly rewarded cocoa farmers. It hit labor dissent sternly. Like its predecessors it did no better with the economy."**

The military grabbed the sceptre back from Busia in 1972. The only substantive change it made in Ghanaian society was the refurbishing of Nkrumah's image. Almost everything else—the corruption, mismanagement and economic decline—remained the same. An unexpected alteration in the scenario occurred as the generals were preparing to retire from public life a second time. The lower ranks, determined that their commanders should not be allowed to enjoy the wealth they had amassed while in power, rose up and took control of the government. They allowed elections to be held as scheduled, but before moving out, the soldiers conducted what they described as a "house-cleaning". Eight military leaders, including three former heads of state, were executed. The interim Armed Forces Revolutionary Council added "transition clauses" to the constitution, designed to

*Elizabeth Isichei, History of West Africa since 1800, (London: MacMillan, 1977), p. 335.

**Richard Rathbone, "Ghana", in West African States: Failure and Promise, John Dunn, ed.; (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); p. 29.

ensure that the civilian government would not undo the council's efforts to root out corruption and to punish those considered guilty of it.

One would have expected that the new government of President Hilla Limann, with the soldiers looking over its shoulder, would consider honest and efficient rule to be in its own best interest as well as the country's, but greed and stupidity seem to be ineradicable parts of Ghana's political make-up. Limann began his term stressing agricultural development, but nothing his administration has done has raised confidence in its ability to accomplish this. Reportedly, to launch the program the government spent a million cedis (about \$350,000 at current, official exchange rates) on a farm that folded a few months later. Specially ordered machetes from China were found to be of a design unacceptable to the farmers. Attempts to replace Ghana's aging and diseased cocoa trees have made little progress. The cocoa farmer continues to receive a poor price for his crop, and on the local level he finds the government's assistance program is just another means of extorting money from him. In the region I visited, farmers were uprooting their trees to plant cassava and corn, which, sold on the local market, give them a better return. A large amount of the cocoa that is harvested is smuggled into the Ivory Coast, partly because the farmer gets a better price there, but in some areas it is easier to get the cocoa to Abidjan than to Accra because of the state of Ghana's roads.

The Limann administration hasn't talked much about agriculture recently. These days it is stressing industrial growth and foreign investment. It particularly wants to develop the country's gold fields. Although Ghana has one of the richest gold mines in the world, it benefited little from the metal's rise in value the last two years. Because of import controls, mining companies were unable to replace equipment and production fell drastically. Such is also the case in other industries. Production levels in many factories are running at less than 50 percent of capacity. The Limann administration has promised to produce a new investment code that will help manufacturers and provide profit-making opportunities attractive to overseas capital, but new laws alone won't bring business back to Ghana.

I met an Accra businessman, an electronics engineer, just back from London. He was tired of traveling--tired of airports, tired of customs procedures, tired of subtle racism. He wanted to stay in Accra and conduct his business, but under present conditions, he can't. The morning I spoke with him, overseas communications were cut off. Someone had stolen part of the land link with the undersea cable, that precious copper wire again. Until a new line was installed, Ghana had no telegraph or telephone connection to the rest of the world.

"It's not the first time it's happened," the businessman told me. "They keep replacing the line just to have it stolen again. I don't know why they don't put a guard on it. One time it was fixed at 3 o'clock and someone had cut it again by five. Ah, Ghana."

Three weeks before my visit, the minister of trade made a national broadcast on radio and television to explain why the Limann administration had been unable to fulfil its campaign pledge to flood the market with basic goods and so bring down

prices. He said the country doesn't earn enough from its exports to pay for everything it needs to import. The government tried to remedy the situation by allowing merchants to import certain goods directly, but it is unable to provide the necessary foreign currency. The merchants have to purchase the currency on the black market, where it costs ten times the official exchange rate. The result, in the words of a reporter for West Africa magazine, "is that while the supermarkets and big shops remain empty, the market and roadside stalls and shops are filled with all kinds of consumer items, all of which had been imported under this special open licence and the prices have no resemblance to the official rates of exchange at all. They are straightforward, black market prices."

In Ghana House, a large store in the center of downtown Accra that is the main outlet of the government-run Ghana National Trading Company, some departments offer only two or three items. Entire stocks are spread across the shelves in a vain attempt to make the store look less empty. If the minister's speech succeeded in tempering the public's impatience with such shortages, their sympathy was dissipated by the revelation soon afterwards that GNTC had spent \$77,000 of the government's scarce foreign reserves to purchase a shipment of watchbands.

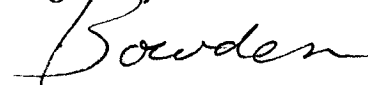
Ghana is so mired in the consequences of past mistakes that no government may be strong enough to pull it out. Attempts to put anything right are stymied by other problems. All of the country's troubles cannot be blamed on its political leaders, though many of the Ghanaians I spoke with wanted to. The Ghanaians I met were warm and generous, but they also seemed irresponsible and hypocritical. They said they do what they must to survive. That attitude was attacked in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, written in the Sixties by Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah. The book depicts the disillusionment with the Nkrumah era at the time of the first coup. Today, the period the novel presents so unflatteringly is remembered as a golden age.

Will the second act be performed yet another time? Politicians in both the PNP and the opposition parties say the populace won't accept another coup. Intellectuals and reporters support this view, but I got a different impression. Drinking in a restaurant with a friend named Willie, I met a young and well-spoken military man, a relative of Willie's. Learning that I was studying his country, he asked for my observations and gave me his analysis of what was wrong, with suggested remedies. I was impressed and told Willie so after the officer had driven off.

"Tomorrow he may be head of government," Willie said bitterly. "He's building a new house. Where's he getting the materials?" Willie, who makes good money as a surveyor, has had to halt construction of his house for lack of building supplies. His car is off the road for want of spare parts.

"Tomorrow he may be head of government," Willie repeated.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn