

THE HARD CASE OF GHANA

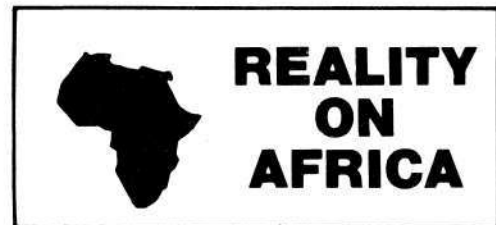
In March 1957 the British colony of the Gold Coast became the independent state of Ghana. It seemed at the time a seminal event in the history of Africa. For Ghana was the first colonial territory in black Africa to achieve independence, and the country's prime minister and later president, Kwame Nkrumah, a charismatic leader of continental stature, became the first black African politician to move as an equal among the statesmen of the world. The late 1950s was an euphoric time for Africa. The process of decolonization was gathering momentum. And the new Ghana seemed to symbolize all the hopes that Africans themselves and their wellwishers overseas held for the future. The new nation had achieved independence peacefully through a series of elections conducted according to the rules of parliamentary democracy. Its leader seemed a man of heroic stature. Ghanaians themselves charmed foreign visitors to their country by their friendliness, their cheerfulness, their ebullience. Great strides had already been made in the development of education and other social services. And the economy, largely dependent on cocoa but offering a number of other products, including gold, looked to be one of the most buoyant in tropical Africa.

Twenty-six years later Ghana presents a very different spectacle. Few countries anywhere in the Third World have experienced so great a degree of political instability, though at least it may be said that Ghana has escaped the ravages of civil war or the bloodier forms of repression. But the economy is now regularly described by foreign correspondents as being in a state of chaos or on the brink of disaster. Hundreds of thousands of Ghanaians voted with their feet to leave the country and move across to oil-rich Nigeria, only to suffer the fate — in the majority of cases — of being thrown out by the Nigerians early in 1983. The contrast with the prosperous face of Ghana a quarter of a century ago could hardly be sharper. So cruel a contrast demands an explanation. Why on earth have things gone so terribly wrong?

HISTORY

In trying to answer this question it is necessary to begin by looking briefly at the country's political history. A century ago the political geography of the territory that now lies within the borders of modern Ghana presented a pattern of some complexity. The coast and its immediate hinterland formed the British colony, a colony acquired not through conquest but by the peaceable extension of British protection over a large number of small chiefdoms mainly inhabited by Fanete people. The centre of the country was dominated by Ashanti (Asante), one of the largest and most powerful indigenous kingdoms to be found anywhere in Africa, but a kingdom whose tributary provinces were beginning to break away and whose rulers would find themselves forced to accept British overrule by the end of the century. To the north of Ashanti lay a mosaic of polities, chiefdoms or independent villages, inhabited by people sharply distinguished in language and tradition from their neighbours to the south.

The people living on the coast had an experience of Europeans reaching back to the late fifteenth century when the Portuguese established the pattern other Europeans—Dutch, English, Danes, Brandenbergers — were to follow, of building forts to serve as depots for their trade. African settlements developed around these forts and there was some intermarriage between local women and white traders. By the mid-nineteenth century there had already come into existence in the towns of the coast a class of professional men, many of whom had received their higher education as lawyers, doctors or clergymen, in Britain. Already by the 1880s this class had shown itself to be open to modern political ideas, but there was little contact between the coast and the interior and so it was not until 1947 that the first political party with truly national aspirations, the United Gold Coast Convention, was founded.



The UGCC was dominated by the coastal elite. Its nationalism was of a sedate, respectable, cautious, conservative nature. But it was to provide an essential point of entry into local politics for the man who was appointed the party's first general secretary, Kwame Nkrumah. Nkrumah was then in his mid-thirties. He had been out of the country for twelve years, leading the life of an 'eternal student', first in the United States, then in Britain, picking up ideas from his reading — Mazzini, Marx, Lenin and Marcus Garvey were particularly influential — and from his first-hand observation of American and British politics, searching all the time, as he wrote later, 'for a formula by which the whole colonial question and the problem of imperialism could be solved.' Back in the Gold Coast, he soon realized that the UGCC certainly could not offer any such formula — it lacked the essential dynamism of mass appeal. But Nkrumah also saw that the Gold Coast, far from being the 'model colony' the British complacently called it, was in fact simmering with discontent. Nkrumah himself was in no way responsible for the riots which broke out in Accra, Kumasi and other towns in February 1948. The riots marked a turning point in British policy towards their West African colonies, after an investigating commission had come up with a wisely frank analysis of the reasons for Africans' 'distrust and suspicion' of Europeans and gone on to recommend the introduction of new political institutions that would give 'every person of ability the opportunity to help govern the country'. By accepting these radical recommendations the British government ensured that the process of decolonization should happen peacefully and so created the conditions that made possible Nkrumah's dazzling career.

CONVENTION PEOPLE'S PARTY

Shortly after the riots Nkrumah left the UGCC to found his own political party, The Convention People's Party. The appeal was radical and populist. With its rallies, its songs and slogans and uniforms, its leader's intoxicating rhetoric, the CPP in its early years was a marvellously exciting organization, especially for the young. It was the first mass party to emerge in black Africa and so it was to provide a model for nationalists in other parts of the continent. But it was never — unlike TANU in Tanganyika — a party that enjoyed overwhelming support in every part of the country. Certainly the CPP won the three pre-independence elections of 1951, 1954 and 1956, with substantial majorities, but elections also showed that there were many pockets of opposition. Members of Ghana's upper bourgeoisie, the professional class of the coastal towns, never really took to Nkrumah. The Ewe living along the eastern border with Togo and the Dagomba and Mamprussi of Northern Territories felt a deep distrust for the radical politicians of Accra. But the main centre of opposition to the CPP was to be found in Ashanti. Ashanti was the country's main cocoa-growing area and Ashanti cocoa farmers were quick to resent government policies that affected the price they were paid for their product. And many Ashanti people were conscious of the unique position their kingdom had achieved in the past and resented the shift of political power that had taken place during the colonial period. Here then, even before 1957, were omens for the future, evidence of a deep radical-conservative divide and of substantial inter-regional tensions.

In the years immediately after independence Ghana became an increasingly authoritarian state. Nkrumah and his closest associates justified the introduction of preventive detention and other stringent measures on the grounds that the state itself was in danger and that there was a need for what Nkrumah himself described as 'totalitarian measures of an extreme kind'. In fact Nkrumah's regime, not unlike Mussolini's in pre-war Italy, was never guilty of the grosser atrocities of modern totalitarianisms. But Ghanaians possess a long indigenous tradition of political discussion and the colonial authorities had always allowed a great measure of political freedom, so they found Nkrumah's repressive measures deeply irksome. To make matters worse, repression was accompanied by increasingly flagrant corruption, while the President, partly out of fear of assassination, retreated into a state of lofty isolation that cut him off completely from the concerns of ordinary people. That Nkrumah gave to Africans throughout the continent a new sense of personal dignity and an awareness of political possibilities cannot be denied: this was a massive achievement. But Nkrumah also needs to be seen as one of the most self-indulgent political leaders of our times, a man whose obsession with his own romantic dreams rendered him incapable of understanding those whose aspirations differed from his own and led him to gloss over the boring, practical details that form an essential part of the proper concern of any political leader.

COUPS

In the end Nkrumah paid for his self-indulgence by his overthrow in the military coup of 1966. The crowds cheered as his statue was toppled from its pedestal in the centre of Accra. The officers who organized the coup were moderate men. In 1969 they were glad to be able to hand over power to a civilian government, after the holding of properly conducted parliamentary elections.

The new government was led by Nkrumah's best known political opponent, Dr. Kofi Busia. But Busia's government failed effectively to tackle the country's mounting economic difficulties and was overthrown in a second coup early in 1972. This time the military, led by Colonel Acheampong, decided to hold on to power. The state of the economy grew still worse and Acheampong was replaced by another officer, Akuffo, in 1978. The military now began to talk of handing power back to civilians but before they could do so the ruling junta was itself overthrown in a coup organized by a group of junior officers and NCOs calling themselves the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council and led by Flight-Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings (son of a Scottish pharmacist and an Ewe mother). Rawlings and his men were concerned to clear up the mess created by the previous regime. They sentenced Acheampong, Akuffo and six other senior officers to public execution, introduced draconian measures against black marketeers but did not interfere with plans for a general election and gladly handed power over to a new civilian government led by Dr. Hilla Limann. But Limann's government proved no more competent than its predecessors in tackling the country's fundamental problems. Again the armed forces provided the spearhead for the discontented. On December 31, 1981 Rawlings staged his second coup, removed Limann, abolished parliament and set up a Provisional National Defence Council under his leadership to govern the country. Rawlings and the PNDC have retained a shaky hold on power from that date to the time of writing.

LEGITIMACY

From this brief survey of Ghana's political history four themes emerge. First, it is clear that there exists among Ghanaians a hankering for some form of democratic government. Witness the bitter resentment of Nkrumah's authoritarianism, the willingness of the military to hand over power to civilians and — under the present PNDC regime — the frequent references in Rawlings's speeches to the need to work out some form of popular participation in government. The second theme is represented by the political divide between 'radical' as represented by Nkrumah and 'conservatives' as in the UGCC. Busia looked back to the UGCC, Limann tried to assume the mantle of Nkrumah. But cutting across this ideological divide must be set — this is the third theme — the pattern of regional differences and ethnic rivalry. Any detailed study of Ghanaian general elections reveals very clearly the importance, the excessive importance according to conventional nationalist wisdom, of local patriotism. Finally it is clear that governments in Ghana, as in many other African countries, have not yet been able to acquire the massive stability of governments in most First and Second (Communist) World countries. Decisive action by small groups of soldiers has been sufficient to bring about changes in regime. Put this another way: no Ghanaian government since independence has succeeded in gaining a proper measure of legitimacy in the eyes of most Ghanaians.

This failure to acquire legitimacy can only be understood if one looks at the changes that have taken place in the country's political economy in the past twenty-five years. Clearly Ghana has suffered from the effects of worsening terms of trade and of the world depression. But so too have most other African countries, yet few of them have experienced quite the same range of political vicissitudes. What has been the cause of Ghana's special malaise? It is

tempting for any anti-imperialist to resort to rhetoric and put all the blame on the 'colonial situation'. Yet in fact Ghana's experience during the colonial period was in many ways a prosperous and progressive one. The cocoa industry on which the country's fortunes were so largely based was developed in large part as a result of the initiative and enterprise of local farmers, the peasants who from the turn of the century carved out cocoa farms for themselves from the virgin forest. To the colonial government was left the task of maintaining political stability and gradually improving the country's infrastructure. 'Colonial stagnation' became one of the clichés of Nkrumahism, but during the decade of the 1940s school enrolment increased threefold from 91,000 to 279,000, an increase that was to contribute greatly to the growth of local nationalism, for the CPP found its most vociferous supporters among the ranks of young school leavers.



Kwame Nkrumah

Nevertheless it can certainly be argued, as Nkrumah so often did, that the Ghanaian economy was a 'dependent economy', dependent primarily on the price paid for cocoa as set by buyers in the world market. Nkrumah wanted to escape from this dependency by developing Ghana's own resources to the full, an excellent principle if applied in a practical manner. Unfortunately he allowed himself to be sold — by self-seeking businessmen as much from the East as from the West — a series of schemes as impractical as they were extravagant. Superficially it might seem good sense to erect massive silos in which cocoa beans could be stored until a suitable price had been reached on the world market: unfortunately the beans cannot be stored for long in a tropical climate. Given the shortage of indigenous capital, rapid industrialization, which Nkrumah saw as an essential process to free the country from the shackles of dependency, could be achieved (at least in theory) either by encouraging massive foreign investment or by using the state's own resources to finance development. The two approaches contradicted one another. Excessive talk of nationalization naturally frightened off foreign businessmen who could find, if they so wished, a much more congenial economic climate in Ghana's neighbour, the Ivory Coast. So the state was to play the leading part in 'development' and it was to do so by the creation of a large number of para-statal. Already in colonial times an important para-statal had been established,

the Cocoa Marketing Board which set the price that cocoa-farmers were paid for their crop and monopolized cocoa buying. After independence the number of parastatals rapidly increased. Such bodies have a double political function: they provide the institutional machinery needed by the government for controlling extensive areas of the economy and they offer an easy means of rewarding political supporters and of buying off political opponents — in other words "jobs for the boys" . . . But parastatals, like all forms of bureaucracy, cost money — money for office buildings and office equipment and official cars and expense accounts — and of course salaries. And the government needed still more money to finance the grandiose public works that Nkrumah craved to satisfy his romantic whims. And money too to pay for an ambitious foreign policy, supporting liberation movements in other parts of Africa and furthering the aims of Pan-Africanism, of which Nkrumah had become the prophet.

MONEY

But where was the money to come from? There were two possible sources. One was to be found by borrowing on the world market, and this Nkrumah began to do ever more impulsively. Between 1963 and 1965 Ghana's total foreign debt rose from 38 to 378 million cedi. But the more money a country borrows, the greater the proportion of its revenue that has to be put aside for the servicing of the debt through interest charges and repayments. And if revenue is not increasing at the same time, then that must mean that less money is available to meet internal needs. Translate this into less abstract terms — less money for roads or schools or hospitals. The other main source for ready money was to be found in the country's cocoa farmers. The export tax on cocoa was an important source of revenue, but this was not the only fiscal burden borne by the farmers. They had to sell their crop to the Cocoa Marketing Board at prices set by the Board. These prices were always substantially lower than those available on the world market. Marketing boards exist in many countries as a mechanism for stabilizing prices and basically for assisting producers. But they can easily be manipulated to screw money out of farmer's pockets, to syphon cash off into the coffers of the state. This is what happened in Ghana. But in reality what was the 'state' but an urban-based and privileged bureaucracy?

The abuses initiated during the Nkrumah period continued under Nkrumah's successors. As the country's international trading position worsened, less and less foreign exchange became available for the purchase of essential imports. If imports were to be restricted, there were two ways in which this could be done. One was by devaluing the cedi (so that Ghanaians would have to pay more for their imported goods) and at the same time imposing higher import duties. The alternative was not to touch the exchange rate, which stood at 3 cedis to the US dollar, not to increase import duties, but instead to introduce a system of import licences. The first approach had the disadvantage that it would lead to an immediate rise in the cost of living, at least for all those town-dwellers who were dependent on imports. A system of import licences, on the other hand, looked attractive: it provided a means of distinguishing between imports, of determining, for example, that more foreign exchange should be used for buying essential spares for lorries and less for private cars. So Ghanaian governments decided in favour of a system of import licences.

BLACK MARKET

Inevitably, as imported goods came into shorter and shorter supply, a flourishing black market developed. Those who controlled the issue of licences — members of the government and senior civil servants — now found themselves in a highly advantageous position. Suppose a local firm applied for a licence to import tyres for motor cars and that the cost of these tyres was \$20 each on the international market. With the cedi fixed at 3 to the \$, each tyre would cost the Ghanaian importer 60 cedis. But on the black market these tyres might be selling for 600 cedis. The politician or the bureaucrat who issued the licence would be well aware of this fact. He would therefore expect the local trader, applying for a licence to import tyres, to pay very heavily for his privilege. And the local trader would of course pass on the cost of this transaction to his customers.

Already in the last years of the Nkrumah regime the price of local foodstuffs in the markets of Accra and other coastal towns had risen so sharply that it was causing, in the words of one official report, 'a very real threat to the morale of our people'. The threat became still more acute after the oil price-rises of the 1970s. But why should the price of locally produced yams or tomatoes have risen so sharply? One major cause was the steady worsening of the transport system. Lorry owners used to sending their vehicles up country to purchase food crops for the markets of the coast became increasingly reluctant to do so. Spare parts were more and more difficult to obtain, so breakdown might mean the loss of a lorry, its owner's main form of capital. Add to this the fact that roads were no longer properly maintained, thus increasing the risk of breakdown. So fewer lorries went up country, less food reached the towns — and prices rose steadily.

'What was once an impressive road network', a correspondent of the *Financial Times* (London) reported in January 1982, 'is now often impassable for the articulated lorries that are supposed to collect the cocoa crop'. So why grow cocoa if your crop is never collected — or, if collected, then the price the farmer is offered represents a rip-off by the government. Ghanaian cocoa farmers are practically-minded people. Many of them have begun to turn from cocoa, abandoning or cutting down their trees, to food crops which will at least feed their families and bring in some money from local markets. Alternatively, if they live near the border with Togo or the Ivory Coast, they have taken to smuggling, having discovered that the price offered for cocoa in those neighbouring countries is anything between five and ten times the price offered by their own Marketing Board. So Ghana in the late 1970s was only able to export about two-thirds as much cocoa as it had done a decade earlier. That meant a serious decline in government revenue: still less money for roads, schools or hospitals.

PEOPLE'S PROBLEMS

There is a dearth of material on conditions of life in rural areas of Ghana. On the problems people face in the towns a good deal of exact information is available. Thus a recent report in the *Times* (March 8 1983) pointed out that the minimum daily wage in Accra is set at 12 cedis (about R4 at the official exchange rate.) Compare this with the cost of a single egg — 5 cedis (nearly R2) or 'a decent sized yam' — a staple item of diet — 50 cedis (about

R17). How on earth do people survive at all under these conditions? There is rueful talk of the 'Ghanaian miracle', of finding ways of keeping body and soul together. The miracle can no doubt be explained by a combination of mutual assistance through the extended family and — as in immediately post-war Germany — widespread involvement in the black market. But there can be no doubt at all that for many people life has over the last ten years and more been very tough indeed. 'Poverty can be seen everywhere in Accra', a correspondent of the *International Herald Tribune*, noted in January 1982. 'Most buildings are run down and beggars occupy the pot-holed streets. Many Ghanaians wear shabby clothes. Street lamps do not work. Matches are a rarity and cigarettes are hard to find . . . Western diplomats whose embassies ensure that their pantries are well stocked, report increasing thefts from their kitchens'.

But a small minority of Ghanaians have managed, at least until recently, to live very well. They are the successful practitioners of *kalabule*, the slang term for corruption. Members of this kleptocracy — a useful term to denote any ruling class that lives by stealing — range from street traders and market women to high army officers and senior civil servants. But a ruling class that turns too obviously into a kleptocracy pays a heavy price: it loses all trace of legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary people. Conversely the great strength and source of popularity of Ghana's present ruler, Jerry Rawlings, lies in his constant sense of moral outrage at the villainy of his predecessors, his determination to lead a 'holy war' against corruption, his convictions that this can only be done by giving 'power to the people' . . .

RAWLINGS'S TASK

Rawlings faces a Herculean task. And there is no unanimity among his closest supporters about the best way to tackle the country's economic morass. The Marxists are in favour of more state intervention, including the takeover of foreign banks, the pragmatists want to find ways of attracting foreign investment. But Rawlings' most pressing difficulties arise from the narrowness of his own power base. He has drawn enthusiastic support from the more radical elements in Ghanaian society — students, junior army officers, the proletariat and lumpen-proletariat of the coastal towns. But the country's conservatives are strongly against him: that means all those members of the Ghanaian bourgeoisie whose Western life style was made possible only, so their critics affirm, by a system of institutionalized corruption, and who now see their privileges under threat from the actions of the Peoples Defence Committees that the new regime has set up in factories and offices. How much support or popularity Rawlings enjoys up country is one of those points on which no information is available. What is clear is that in his first eighteen months in office Rawlings has had to survive a number of coup attempts, in at least one of which the hand of the CIA was detected.

Can Rawlings really 'solve' Ghana's problems? It would be comforting to fall back on an easy optimism, to see the new regime as succeeding in gradually pulling the country together again. But what if Ghana's problems are in fact insoluble? How do you pull your country together if you can never afford enough petrol, if the telephones do not work any more, if a large number of your most skilled people have left to seek jobs elsewhere?

The conventional wisdom both of the capitalist and of the communist worlds assumes that the form of 'development' that has taken place in Western Europe and the United States or in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union has some sort of universal validity. Accept these premises and the recent history of Ghana looks like a case of tragic decline. But suppose that African societies, at least those societies which have not been messed up, as is the case in South Africa, by excessive alien interference, are simply not adapted — for historical, politico-social and ecological reasons — to carry the burden (or should one not say the incubus?) of the urban-based bureaucratic state. Things may seem to be 'falling apart' in Ghana, local economies returning to a greater measure of self-sufficiency, communities, less closely in touch with the outside world as a result

of the breakdown in communication, finding themselves with no alternative but to run their own affairs without assistance, advice or interference from the agents of the centralizing state. These points must be made in a spirit of speculation. In Ghana, as in many other African countries, it is impossible for an outsider to find out what is really happening away from the capital and one or two other major towns. Ghanaians are a people of wit and intelligence. It may well be that they are now in the process of working out a system and a philosophy of life that is going to prove much more relevant to the strains of the 21st century than the easy nostrums of the development economists and the political scientists. So Ghana may well have some important lessons — and probably some pretty hard lessons — to teach the rest of us. □

by KEYAN G. TOMASELLI

'ADAPT OR DIE': MILITARIZATION AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA 1976–1982

"Join the army, see the world, meet interesting people and kill them. Over and out ... "

Souvenir T-shirts, Omega Rest Camp, 'the Border', 1982.

"Study . . . animal, insect, and plantlife, handwork, mountain-climbing, court-cases, concerts, film-shows, tenniquoits, volleyball, *hunting terrorists*, swimming . . . (The camp will be conducted on a Christian basis).

Programme brochure, 34th Afrikaans Holiday Camp, 1983 (emphasis added).

The media are a prime site of ideological struggle in South Africa. Press, film and broadcasting have, since the turn of the century, provided the motor for the growth and acceptance of the Afrikaans language and its associated Nationalist spirit.

More recently, with the fall of white rule in Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe, increasing pressures on 'South West Africa', and a growing internal resistance, the media have been progressively co-opted by the South African Defence Force (SADF) both in terms of what they report and *how* they report. This co-option is not wholly coercive, for the commercial media, with their vested interest in economic and commercial stability, articulate the ideology of organised capitalist interests. These interests — whether national or international — and those of the SADF (and the state) began to converge after the Soweto uprising in June 1976.

'THE TOTAL STRATEGY'

THE SOCIALIZATION OF DANGER

To understand the relationship between the military and the media in South Africa, it is first necessary to discuss the ideological rhetoric of what the state terms the 'total strategy' and its related catch-phrases, 'total war', 'total onslaught' and 'total survival'. The aim of the 'total strategy' is to prepare South Africa militarily, economically, politically and psychologically to fight what is seen as a 'total war' against the 'total onslaught' waged on South Africa not only by communists, leftists and liberals, but America and the West as well. This strategy encompasses the state, the private sector, diplomacy and state-funded scientific research and armaments organizations. Paramilitary in posture, it has infiltrated all areas of life, including holiday camps and T-shirts.

The 'total strategy' is not a planned conspiracy but is the result of a new balance of forces deriving from changes in the political economy, South Africa's relationship to international monopoly capital, politico-military initiatives and the restructuring of the class alliance. These elements coalesced at more or less the same time (the mid-1970s) and led to the convergence and cooperation of previously conflicting interests. The emerging hegemony consists of the white bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie (as well as remnants of the white working class), the rural black bourgeoisie (the black homeland leaders and businessmen)