

Dr. Kwesi Aggrey
"Only the best is good enough
for Africa."



Amanda



Kwame Nkrumah
"The independence of Ghana
is meaningless unless it is
linked up with the total
liberation of Africa."

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NPP Reforms-Reflecting, Rebuilding and Recapturing Power in 2016.

By Dr. Kwasi Sarpong Afrifa

Introduction

On October 18, 2014, NPP leadership will assemble in different parts of the country to address the invidious distinction between modernity and tradition in an attempt to nominate the Presidential Candidate for the 2016 general elections. At this time, the fault lines have already been drawn and while most party adherents are worried others are far more attentive to the significance of demonstration effects, aware of the path-dependent historical trajectories of pre- and post-1979 course of events, variations in institutional design, the role of informal norms and social networks, and strategic calculations of individual actors. Others, on their part, are concerned about the opportunity of foreign borrowing as one of the situational advantages of backwardness. The concern of yours truly has to do with the unanticipated consequences wherever institutions have been crafted by following the simplifying logic of emulation without commensurate attention to the particular social and political environment in which an imported or imposed institution is being constructed.

My views are not the result of a detached academic review of our Party's institutional evolution and development. In fact, a rich literature on institutional evolution has already drawn attention to such processes as "hybridization", "institutional layering", "institutional conversion," and the "reworking" or "blending" of old and new institutions. While we had anticipated the fundamental dilemma of institutional adaptation across time and space, and while we have to anticipate the malleability of institutional structures and processes over time in response to changing social environments, we tend to sometimes reify the constituent elements of institutions and treat its norms and social relations as either rigidly fixed or infinitely malleable.

Reflection

Theories abound on why we lost the last election and they will not be restated here. Undoubtedly, it's hard to overstate the transformation we have witnessed in our national politics. It's seemingly an instructive and teachable moment calling us to put aside at least some of our cherished illusions, come to terms in some meaningful way with regards to next steps. Collectively, we had championed certain notions, but when the reality of our loss came rolling through our doors, we have gained additional and altered insight on what needs done.

We may soberly concur that the last election underscored something about Ghanaian political attitudes toward political accountability, attitudes toward national priority issues and overall political maturity. The electorate viewed these issues and actions pragmatically, not ideologically. The election was neither, above all, a rejection of NPP era nor an endorsement of any NDC alternative. In some instances, we had the opportunity to counter unfounded allegations but for some unexplained reason(s), we offered no countervailing response against or even address them. Nevertheless, the defeat is an opportunity for a dramatic break with certain old order principles.

It's clear that we cannot go into the 2016 and future elections with the same playbook as in 2008 and 2012; run hard on former President John Agyekum Kufuor's policies and accomplishments; invoke and equate the name of Jerry Rawlings with the NDC; capitalize on President John Mahama's weaknesses and use wedge issues to a renewed national political discourse. We ran the play perfectly in 2008 and 2012, but we achieved a different outcome. It's therefore important to understand why the NDC won not despite our fixation on Rawlings, but partly because of it and what we must do to strengthen and reposition our party and its profile on national development issues in the coming months and years.

Rebuilding

In the aftermath of the election, our leaders have probably been inundated with recipes, formulas and strategies for what NPP must do next. Some of these proposals have taken the form of strident recommendations for change in what many hope will be a new era for NPP and Ghanaian political history. Some supporters are so concerned about the glaring omission of innovations and progressive ideas that would not only modernize our party but also would increase its electoral chances of winning future elections.

The most important obstacle for seizing the moment to achieve enduring change is the much nuanced but glaring lack of consensus or cohesion in our Party for electoral success. Voters interpret such internal squabbles as opportunistic factionalism, as weak political capacity, or as an indication that something is seriously amiss with the Party. Elsewhere, parties have been punished by the electorates for such behavior.

However, there are two ways of achieving consensus. One is to split the difference with the opposing end and the forces obstructing reforms. The other is for the leadership to use the Party's accumulated goodwill to transform the political center and thereby alter the political dynamics. While we can do a little bit of both, the default position must be the "politics of accommodation." However, any default position of reform without a symbolic, instrumental, forward-thinking, transformative and strategic action would be counterproductive.

We know that the process of re-building – comprehensive, instrumental or incremental- will not just happen spontaneously. It will take exceptional party resolve and leadership. We've already witnessed obstacles to seizing the moment to produce fundamental change, some of them systemic and others self-inflicted. The systemic obstacles include the lingering political power of the old order to blocking reforms or strategically and adroitly tinkering with existing policies. This has led to a defensive redoubling of political resolve. A second systemic obstacle is the absence of a popular movement to put wind at the current progressive leadership's back to modernize our Party. Some of these self-inflicted actions are so bothersome a force not to be bottled up anymore.

Institutional Change, Stability and Adaptation

It has become a trend, almost a norm, that political parties are reinventing their organizational structures to improve electoral outcomes. In the process, practitioners have asked vital questions as they sought to understand the meaningful long-term solutions some semblance of stability and improved electoral outcomes. In some instances, political leaders have been tempted to take the easy way: adjust the organizational structure without much insightful planning, or indiscriminately adopt quick fixes that actually end up compromising electoral chances or addressing symptoms of organizational problems rather than taking the time to respond to the root causes of problems with new political and management strategies. Cultural and sociological approaches hold that institutions dictate "logic of appropriateness", that is, they tell the actors what they ought to prefer in specific situations.

Historical institutionalism posits that power is what causes institutional stability. Political agents will try to "change the rules of the game" for themselves in retaining and extending that power. The power an agent derives from more basic asset is increased by the power coming from the institutions in which he has helped to design. This "doubling" of power will of course make it extra costly, or extra risky, for less powerful agents to challenge the established institutional order. We know that political parties do not operate in a vacuum. As formal institutions, they tend to remain "sticky" even when the political and economic conditions within which they have existed have changed dramatically.

While tracing the interaction of institutions, ideas and interests, we may confront a situation where institutions are biased toward continuity or even posing obstacles to change and they may facilitate rather than impede change. In such instances, Ellen Immergut suggests that we should aim not to identify " veto groups" so much as " veto points" in the process. "Veto points" are areas of institutional vulnerability, that is, points in the process or structure through which the mobilization of opposition can thwart policy innovation. The analysis of how these processes occur- "process tracing" is thus central to any institutional design and redesign.

By shaping not just actors' strategies, but their goals as well and by mediating their relations of cooperation and conflict, institutions structure political situations and leave their own imprint on political outcomes. The intermediate feature of political life provides the theoretical bridge between men who make history and the circumstances under which they are able to do so. Karl Polanyi's analysis of the "Great Transformation" deals explicitly with the consequences of macro level changes in broad social and economic structures.

But his examination of the causes and consequences of the shift to a "market society" is anchored in an analysis of specific social and economic institutions in which battles over and within these broader forces are crystallized. Thus, institutions constrain and refract politics, but they are never the only causes of outcomes. Rather, they structure political interactions and in this way affect political outcomes. Stephen Krasner's model of "punctuated equilibrium" of institutional change deserves our attention. Krasner states that institutions are characterized by long periods of stability, periodically "punctuated" by crisis (e.g. loss of successive Presidential elections in NPP's case)

continued from page 16

which bring about relative abrupt institutional change, after which stasis again sets in. In Krasner's version, institutional crisis usually emanate from changes in the external environment. Such crises cause a breakdown of the existing institutional order and breakdown precipitates political conflict over the shape of the new institutional arrangements. "Punctuated equilibrium" can also occur when piecemeal changes result from specific political battles or ongoing strategic maneuvering within institutional constraints.

An Appeal

Fellow Kukurudites, as we select our flagbearer for the 2016 national general elections, our objective should not only be on recapturing power in 2016, but over the next two years, we must make several principles clear at every turn by re-branding our party by wearing on our sleeves our cherished traditions and principles with a "social democratic" bent and i) redefine our campaign message and offer programs to reconnect with ordinary Ghanaians.

If we act now, Ghanaians will forgive us for trying, and the party will continue to stand on stronger ground as we face what is likely to become Ghana's third national economic development election in 2016. We need to convince voters that there are strong policy reasons to vote NPP on development issues. This is a fluid moment in the thinking of the electorates on national development issues. Many Ghanaians are now assessing which party really offers a solid path for developing the country, and has the competence and capacity for its implementation. In the last election, they voted for NDC; the next two years will determine whether they see a better alternative in President Mahama and the NDC.

We need to invigorate the body politic of our party across the country by running to the strength of the party in its vibrant grassroots. Let's mastermind the resurgence of the party that has become afflicted with a cluster of geriatric symptoms, lassitude, memory loss, energy drop, lack of concentration, inability to focus, myopia, etc, and sometime blinding and habitual disorientation punctuated by conflicting pronouncements. Currently, NPP enjoy a huge reservoir of popular goodwill. Let's manage to charm our detractors while we court supporters to cut us a lot of slack. In times such as these, that initial support is a large asset but it will not last forever. Public support of a party is not like a stock of savings. It needs to be invested in great deeds and earned. We tirelessly inveigh against President John Mahama and NDC's treacherous ambitions and the cascade of instability it purportedly brings. But allowing our own obsessions to frame this singular reform opening would possibly be a colossal blunder. Our strategy has been to give opponents a chance to come in from the cold with offers of engagement and other incentives. The political environment surely is pernicious because of the frayed social and political fabric and the extremism in our politics, the willingness to savage the opposition and the party in power.

Some Parting Thoughts

The utility and relevance of NPP as a political party in Ghana is not in dispute. What is more disputed is the question of whether and to what extent it matters how we arrive at the choices we present to voters, and specifically, whether and to what extent we need to be internally democratic in order to promote democracy within the wider society. Answers to these issues differ, depending in part on whether our focus is on process or outcomes, that is, party electoral success versus party maintenance, or both. What we usually overlook is the impact of public opinion. As the largest opposition in our democracy, NPP's action must make political parties a respectable institutional component of Ghanaian politics. We should be aware that organizations "implode and not explode." Much of the destruction of political parties has come at the hands of people who claim allegiance to it. While Thomas Jefferson was attacking political parties, he was at the same time actively building one; today we find many who praise NPP and claim to support our tradition at the very time that they are dismantling it. If we are to realize the potential that the last election has revealed and begin to build a more stronger party, if we are to finally transcend our downsized politics of excluded alternatives, the progressives will have to drive a bold agenda to invigorate our members and capture greater power for Ghanaians. In American political tradition, the Progressives' reverence for Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson as America's most inspirational statesmen was well placed. Their greatness however, was not due exclusively to their philosophical genius or their rhetorical gifts. Their philosophical understanding of the "central idea" of American society- the notion that "all men are created equal"- was in need of an institutional anchor and they saw the anchor in political parties.

For NPP, maintaining our "central idea" of "development in freedom" require a system that accommodates the ambition of "the family of lions," or "the tribe of the eagle," to borrow Lincoln's terminology, but at the same time forces those ambitious to perpetuate the party's "central idea."

The Progressive movement in the American sense failed because it never came to terms with the relationship between its means and its ends. It was rather obsessed with its social and political ends, and careful thought was not given to the means of achieving those ends. They spoke eloquently about democracy and justice, however, their extreme desire for democratic results made them too impatient to calculate carefully the appropriate means to achieve the desired results. Most party reformers elsewhere have made a similar error.

They were obsessed with ends, whereas the commission of reformers erred in the opposite direction. Reforms may be necessary from time to time, but the most successful reforms have always been those that would move us closer to the ideals set forth by our tradition, not those that claim to transcend them. NPP lost the last election, but it has done an excellent job of preserving the principles and institutions that were.

In general, we would not begin a road trip without a map or, in the contemporary period, a global positioning system (GPS), although there is no single formula that we should turn to and expect results, time-tested models and methods have proven effective as the foundation of electoral quality with consideration for Donabedian's 1960 formula for quality based on his triangle: structure, process, and outcome. In doing so, the question to ask is how often do we focus on structure and process without measuring our outcomes, creating our scorecard, tracking, trending, and benchmarking our results? Arthur W. Jones stated that "all organizations are perfectly aligned to get the results they get." As we nominate our flagbearer for the 2016 presidential elections, we hear that the promising winds of transformation and struggle are forming, lightening up, dying down, and turning back on themselves. Already there are signs and sounds of anxiety, confusion, hatred, retrenchment, retreat, and plain fear that rightful change may elude us. However, as we reflect to rebuild and recapture power in 2016, let's be guided by the notion that there are no secured privileged places in oppression and opposition, no dignity in self-denial of one's weakened position and as the legendary Paul Robeson reminds us "the battlefield is everywhere; there is no sheltered rear." Abraham Lincoln once said "The people- the people- are the rightful masters of congresses, and the courts- not to overthrow the constitution, but to overthrow the men who pervert it." As we reflect on rebuilding NPP for 2016 and beyond, structural change is required at the organization level to realign and achieve different results. And the kind of change that is needed transcends individuals.

Long Live NPP !, Long live Ghana !
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