



# COVID-19 Pandemic and the 2020 Elections in Ghana

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## Authors' contributions

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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## ABSTRACT

The paper explores the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on Ghana's election 2020 which will be conducted on the 7<sup>th</sup> December 2020. The paper argues that despite the fact that the pandemic has negatively affected the 2020 elections process, it also presents political parties and the Electoral Commission the opportunity to be innovative in their activities. The study adopts a content analysis approach and depends mainly on the desk review of related literature on the topic under investigation. The study found that the possible negative impacts of the virus on the 2020 elections include: low voter turnout because of the fear of contracting the virus due to human contacts at the voting centers and postponement of the 2020 elections if the spread goes out of hand. The impacts felt already include postponement of voter registration exercise from April 2020 to June 2020 and the ban on political activities such as mass campaigns.

Again, one positive impact of the virus is that it has made political parties innovative in the mobilization of voters through the use of various social media platforms. Now campaigns and other political activities are held via the internet. With such innovation, the paper proposes that the E.C. should consider online voting, postal voting, and early voting in the 2020 election as a way of reducing human conduct and overcrowding on the day of voting in order to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

*Keywords: COVID-19; elections; political parties; electoral commission; Ghana.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe negatively affected the delivery of services and other activities that are core to enhancing inclusiveness. Among these core activities that enhance inclusivity is elections. Elections offer citizens the opportunity to retain or remove elected officials from office. It also confers legitimacy on the elected officials. In most democratic states, leaders are elected for a fixed term of office and in some cases have the opportunity to be reelected as in the case of Ghana.

The conduct of regular and periodic elections remains one of the critical features of democracy. This condition was superbly preserved in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Article 21(3). Asplund and James [1] posit that the certainty of conducting regular free and fair elections means that citizens are offered the chance to extend or remove the governing rights of their political leaders. In the same vein, there are times when the outbreak of natural disasters, famines, epidemics and pandemics leads to the situation where conducting elections will possibly pose a major threat to the lives of the voters. A typical example is the COVID-19 pandemic in our world today.

What is the impact of the COVID-19 on the conduct of elections? The outbreak of the pandemic does not only affect sports, cultural and social life, the economy and politics. Like sporting activities that can easily be canceled or postponed, elections cannot easily be canceled or postponed [2].

The year 2020 would have been a significant year in Africa's electoral cycle, as twenty countries were penciled to conduct presidential or parliamentary elections and in some cases both. It would have also been noted as a year of landmark elections with elections in Somalia [3], a country that is still in her critical juncture in their transition to democracy. A re-run of the annulled elections in Malawi would have also contributed to Africa's democratic feats. But the outbreak and increasingly spread of the virus in the continent are destructively affecting the electoral timetable of these countries. The beginning of the year has witnessed the conduct of elections in Comoros, Cameroun, Guinea, Mali and Togo [4]. However, other countries scheduled to have elections in

the latter part of the year contemplates postponing the elections due to the virus. It is important to state that only Ethiopia has officially postponed their elections and renewed the mandate of the current government. Burundi went ahead to conduct both the presidential and parliamentary elections as scheduled despite the fears of a spike in COVID-19 cases in the country.

Ghana which is also constitutionally bound to conduct her 8<sup>th</sup> presidential and parliamentary elections on the 7<sup>th</sup> December 2020 is also caught in the web of the virus. There are several concerns in the country regarding striking a balance between public health and the concomitant responsibility of upholding rule of law and democratic processes in the country. In the words of Spinelli [5], it is a daunting task to strike a balance between the two because governments are torn between fulfilling the social contract between them and the citizens at the expense of imperiling their health or the fears of aggravating the pandemic due to mass gatherings that characterize voting triumph over other considerations.

Ghana's democracy has been hyped as one of the best in Africa and even the world at large. At least for the first time in the country's political history, her democracy has traversed more than two decades without any political instability. In this republic, Ghana has witnessed three transitions from one political party to another. The first power alternation took place in 2001 when the NDC handed the reins of power to the New Patriotic Party (NPP), which won the 2000 presidential elections. Similarly, the NPP in 2009 also handed over power to the NDC after the latter won the 2008 presidential elections [6]. The final presidential turnover took place when the NDC handed over power to the NPP again after losing the 2016 crucial elections. With these three presidential turnovers, it will not be implausible for one to suggest that Ghana's democracy is consolidated at least in the sense of Huntington's magical two turnover tests. In this minimalist sense espoused by Samuel Huntington, one can conclude that Ghana has consolidated her democracy although, this may be debatable.

It is imperative to state that from all indications, the 2020 elections are going to be conducted as planned despite the fact the community infection

of the virus is on the rise. The Electoral Commission (EC) of Ghana has set June 30th 2020 for the day to begin mass voter registration.

Since Ghana recorded her first two cases of COVID-19 on the 12<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the Ghana COVID-19 count according to the Ghana Health Service (GHS, 2020) [6] now stands at 11,422 confirmed cases and fifty-one deaths as of Sunday, June 14, 2020, with the Greater Accra Region recording the highest number of cases (6,997). There is considerable uncertainty now as to how or when the COVID-19 crisis and associated public health restrictions will come to an end. Some experts, however, hold the view that it might take about a year for life to return to normalcy in most countries across the globe. One immediate apprehension is how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect the smooth conduct of the 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections in the country.

The main aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Ghana's election 2020 amidst the rising numbers of community infection of the virus. The paper also seeks to contribute to the existing literature on pandemics and elections by providing alternative means of voter mobilization for political parties and alternative voting methods for Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) to adopt in times of pandemics and emergencies.

## **2. ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRACY**

Theoretically, elections are a backbone principle of representative democracy [7] that offers the fundamental mechanism through which political leaders are selected and held accountable for their actions and inactions [8]. Elections are the most defining features of a democracy is the conduct of regular, periodic, free and fair elections [9]. They are also the bedrock of the democratic process. James and Alihodzic [10] contend that they are essential in promoting rule by the citizens as opposed to rule by a sectional elite in the country.

It is also the single most important mechanism that provides citizens the opportunity to partake in the governance process of their country. It is imperative to state that the capacity of states to conduct free and fair elections is reinforced by a hearty regime of human rights protections. These rights are the core characteristics of liberal democracy includes freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of movement [11].

One cannot lose sight of the fact that the number of democracies in the world is on the ascendency despite a democratic backslide in recent times [12]. The rise in the number of democracies means that every given year witnesses a number of elections across the globe [13]. As the COVID-19 pandemic is on the rise in most African countries including Ghana which is the focus of this paper, most of the leaders must come out with measures and strategies that can be used to mitigate the impact of the virus on their democracies.

Based on the figures for 2020, twenty African countries were scheduled to conduct either local elections, presidential or parliamentary elections. It is significant to note that some countries in Africa have already conducted their scheduled elections amidst the fears of the spread of the virus.

## **3. COVID-19 AND ELECTIONS IN AFRICA**

The coronavirus pandemic has had an unprecedented disruption in elections across the globe. Irrespective of whether elections are conducted or delayed, such decisions possess a major threat on the political fortunes of incumbents and the opposition, as well as on citizens' participation in elections. In order to ensure that the electoral process remain credible while maintaining public health, some governments and states have been experimenting or expanding new systems such as mail balloting and proxy voting [14]. In that same vein, political parties across the globe have also been adopting new innovative means of engaging voters. Despite all these efforts, the credibility of elections across the globe is been threatened by unequal campaign conditions, low voter turnout, limited domestic and international election observers.

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, more than one hundred and thirty election activities across the globe have been delayed or postponed indefinitely [15]. Some of these activities include party primaries, by-elections, national elections, referenda and municipal elections [15]. While some of the delays are legal and justified for public health reasons, some delays have raised thorny legal questions and activated political disputes between ruling parties and the opposition [14]. Some other elections were also postponed humanitarian grounds [10]. For instance, when Emmanuel Macron of

France, decided that there were to delay the municipal elections scheduled for March 2020, some opposition leaders called that decision a coup. In other jurisdictions, opposition parties resisted attempts by the ruling government to delay elections indicating that the incumbents will use that to delay and consolidate their power. A classic example of these concerns happened in Ethiopia after the general elections were postponed which led to the extension of the Prime Minister's tenure in office.

It is important to state that out of the twenty-three elections activities that were scheduled to take place in Africa in 2020, sixteen of them were affected by the outbreak of the pandemic. The Table 1 shows a table of elections affected by the virus in Africa. Africa have had its share of the pandemic on its elections. Whiles some elections were postponed and conducted on a new date,

as many as five elections have been postponed indefinitely.

#### 4. COVID-19, GOVERNMENT RESPONSE AND THE 2020 ELECTIONS

Ghana recorded her first COVID-19 case on the 12<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and the infection curve is yet to flatten. The virus has claimed a lot of lives across the globe and many governments have had to think on their feet to respond to the virus. The outbreak of the virus was triggered in December 2019 in Wuhan city in the Hubei Province of China [16]. The virus spread quickly across the globe due to human activities in the form of globalization. Many have argued that Ghana has still not reached her peak and that the government should come out with more stringent measures to contain the community spread of the virus.

**Table 1. Showing elections delayed or postponed due to COVID-19 in Africa in 2020**

Country	Electoral event	Decision	Scheduled date of election	New date
Cameroun	Local by-election	Postpone	04/04/2020 18/04/2020	Indefinitely
Chad	Legislative election	Postpone	13/12/2020	Indefinitely
Ethiopia	Parliamentary elections	Postpone	29/08/2020	08/2021
Gabon	Partial legislative elections	Postpone	04/04 & 18/04/2020	Indefinitely
The Gambia	By-election	Postpone	16/04/2020	07/11/2020
Ghana	New Patriotic Party primary elections	Postpone	25/04/2020	20/06/2020
Kenya	Local by-election	Postpone	April, June & July, 2020	15/12/2020
Liberia	Midterm Senate elections and referendum	Postpone	13/11/2020	08/12/2020
Libya	Municipal elections	Postpone	18/04/2020	06/2020
Nigeria	Local elections (Cross River and Benue States)	Postpone	12/04/2020	31/10/2020
Somalia	Parliamentary elections	Postpone	27/11/2020	1-27/12/2020
	Presidential elections	Postpone		08/02/2021
South Africa	By-election	Postpone	March-May, 2020	Unknown
Tunisia	Municipal elections	Postpone	29/03/2020	05/07/2020
Uganda	Elections of Special Interest Groups	Postpone	April-May, 2020	11, 13 & 17/08/2020
Zambia	Local by-elections	Postpone	01/05/2020	Indefinitely
Zimbabwe	Local by-election	Postpone	04/04 & 25/04/ 2020	Indefinitely

Source: International Foundation for Electoral Systems

The government of Ghana responded swiftly to the outbreak of the virus by introducing some measures to curb the spread of the virus. The president in an attempt to fight the virus first introduced the Imposition Restriction Bill, 2020 to help fight the virus. The Bill was then passed into the Imposition Restriction Act (Act 1012) as the primary legal instrument in the government of Ghana's fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

The government also introduced a two-week partial lockdown of the most affected areas including Accra, Kumasi, Tema and Kasoa. This partial lockdown aimed to control the spread of the virus. The partial lockdown was further extended by a week. Significantly, there was a lot of opposition to the lockdown as many Ghanaians live on what is commonly termed "hand-to-mouth." The general secretary of the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) was quoted to have said that this whole announcement of the emergency ban, emergency here, stopping this gathering, stopping that gathering, in my view, on the surface, it will appear to the world that the president is acting to deal with the COVID-19 and so on. But the real intention is not to deal with COVID-19 at all. The real intention is to find space and put the pieces of the rigging equipment together so that by the time anybody could say jack, the election has been compromised (Daily Guide Network, 2020).

It was unfortunate that after the lockdown was lifted, the opposition party faulted the government again for lifting the partial lockdown when Ghana's case count was still rising. The president also offered Ghanaians in the lockdown areas with free water and electricity for three months. In addition to all these responses, the minister of finance also brought before parliament the Coronavirus Alleviation Programme (CAP) for approval. This program aimed at addressing the disruptions in economic activities, the hardship on the people and to rescue and revitalize the industries. The government received a lot of praise from some section of Ghanaians and the World Health Organization on how it responded to the spread of the virus. The government also closed Ghana's borders, be it air, land or sea. These measures are put in place to make sure people do not contract the virus.

In as much as the government, responded swiftly and introduced some measures to protect Ghanaians and the spread of the virus, its impact

on election 2020 much be given a cursory look. This year's elections would be Ghana's 8<sup>th</sup> successive election since the inception of the fourth republic. The fourth republic was ushered in on the 7<sup>th</sup> January 1993, after more than a decade under military rule. Though there are no indications that the election will not go as planned, this paper is of the view that the electoral cycle has already been affected by the outbreak of the virus.

The spread of the virus and the government's response may have a significant impact on the 2020 electoral cycle. Landman and Splendore [13] argue that there are three electoral cycles that every election contains that will be significantly affected by the virus and the response of the government. These according to them include; first, the pre-election period which encompasses, training, information and voter registration. Second, the election period which includes; nominations, campaigns, voting and results. The final cycle is the post-election period which encompasses review, reform and strategies. They further argue that under every normal environment, these elements must be present to give the citizens the opportunity to inform themselves. However, this is not the case in the present situation.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the 2020 elections in Ghana is manifold. The effects on the elections include; firstly, the rate at which the virus is spreading may lead to low voter turnout in the elections. The virus can discourage most electorates from exercising their democratic right and this in essence will affect the voter turnout in the elections. Many view voter turnouts as a vital fact that supports the legitimacy of elections [13]. It also gives electoral mandates to political leaders and a test for the health of every democracy. Ghana witnessed a decline in voter turnout during the 2016 elections. The 2016 elections recorded a voter turnout of 69.28 per cent [17,18]. The risk or fear of contracting COVID-19 is likely to further depress voter interest in the exercise which will contribute to low voter turnout in the elections. In the view of Landman and Splendore, most advanced democracies are also experiencing a decline in voter turn in recent times. It is important to state that if effective measures are not put in place, this year's turnout will worsen as a result of the pandemic in the country.

Secondly, the consequence of the pandemic on political campaigns is huge. In every normal

election year in Ghana, one would have seen the major political parties busily organizing rallies and political campaigns across the country. However, due to the pandemic and the restrictions instituted by the government which includes a ban on political activities such as organizing rallies, the political environment looks very calm. The pandemic has also made it difficult for parties in Ghana to organize any form of activities that culminated in the postponement of the ruling New Patriotic Party's (NPP) parliamentary primaries which were scheduled to be held on the 25<sup>th</sup> April 2020. Apart from the NDC, no political party has been able to conclude its party primaries. Some parties such as the PNC, CPP and PPP are yet to conduct elections to elect their constituency and national leaders. Since political parties are a significant player in every electoral process, the impact of the pandemic on the political parties will be felt in the national elections. How will they sell their manifestoes to the electorates when the Ghana case count continues to increase and when the ban on political campaigns still holds?

Third, the pandemic has also affected the electoral timetable and the preparations of the Electoral Commission. As per the time table of the Commission, they were supposed to begin voter registration which is a core element of the pre-election period in April 2020. But this has now been shifted to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2020. This means that the Commission has just six months to compile a new register and conduct an election. Many commentators have also questioned the feasibility of compiling a new register when the infections in the country keep rising. The Commission which is bent on compiling a new register argued that they were going to ensure safety protocols during the registration.

## **5. ALTERNATIVE MOBILIZATION STRATEGIES FOR PARTIES**

Voter mobilization is one of the most important activities of an election. This determines the ability of a candidate or party to win an election. Endersby and Petrocik [19] contend that mobilization is the most critical component in the modern-day presidential campaign. This is because it is during party mobilization that parties and candidates sell their campaign messages to voters. Candidates also use campaigns to convince the voters on why their campaign messages are better than that of their opponents [20].

It is significant to state that the traditional methods of campaigning in Ghana include campaign rallies, door-to-door campaigns and town hall meetings. These activities according to the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [21] are a significant portion of a vibrant and inclusive democracy. Campaign activities offer citizens the opportunity to participate in democracy and offer them the opportunity to put their concerns before political parties and their candidates. But with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on every facet of the Ghanaian society, political parties are currently denied the opportunity to engage in these democratic party mobilization activities. Despite the fact that parties are denied the opportunities to the campaign, the pandemic according to this paper is also presented political parties with a cost-effective party mobilization method. Political parties can now engage in campaign activities that are cost-effective because they do not need to bus party supporters to rally grounds and are not compelled to influence their supporters by sharing money during door-to-door campaigns. The alternative mobilization method for parties during this pandemic includes;

First, the use of the internet as a platform to campaign and mobilize voters. Political parties in Ghana in the wake of this virus must adopt the use of the internet as a platform where they can engage voters and share their campaign messages with them. We have less than six months to the general elections and parties cannot wait till the ban on the campaign is lifted. Any party that is serious and hungry for power must make use of the internet and social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. These platforms will offer candidates the opportunity to engage with the voters and making it possible for the voters to share their problems with the candidates. The use of these platforms offers candidates and the voters an alternative platform since there are restrictions on the social gathering [21].

## **6. ALTERNATIVE VOTING METHODS**

The demand for moving services online across the globe has witnessed an exponential increase in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak of the pandemic does not only offer negative impacts, it is also providing services providers like Election Management Bodies such as the EC in Ghana to be more innovative and move away from the traditional way of doing

things. The introduction of new technologies in elections presents both new opportunities and mammoth risk to the election management bodies and the citizens [15]. In the wake of this pandemic and the constitutional demands to conduct regular and free and fair elections, there is the need to adopt alternative voting methods to reduce the risk of the virus on the voters. The only method of voting in Ghana is the one that all the eligible voters will queue on the election day to cast their votes.

It is important to state that in this era of the virus, having people to queue all day to cast their votes is not a good practice. Hence, this paper recommends that the Electoral Commission of Ghana should introduce new voting methods to reduce the number of people who have to go to the polling centers on the election day. The EC must present some special voting arrangements that will reduce in-person voting. It is must be noted that political distrust may dent the confidence in any alternatives, although possible threats to the integrity of elections can weaken the viability of alternative voting options [21]. Some of the alternative voting methods available for the EC to adopt include;

First, the EC should introduce online voting for the 2020 elections. The introduction of this form of voting will help mitigate the risk the pandemic will pose to the voters. Elections have suddenly become one of the means through which the virus can be spread easily. The virus can spread from polling stations where voters queue to vote and the counting of votes by the EC officials at crowded polling stations. The online voting will allow the citizens to cast their votes online through the use of computer software or mobile phone applications without going to the polling stations. Despite this method of voting will mitigate the health hazards presented by voting in person, IDEA [21] however, argues that most countries will not be able to introduce it because of cost and the limited time for training the officials who will handle it. Similarly, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems [15] argues that most countries will not be able to implement online voting due to the high levels of planning, preparation and testing it requires. The IFES, therefore, suggests that for any country to introduce online voting, it must first evaluate it base on these five parameters; cost, efficiency, participation, security and trust. For the 2020 general elections in Ghana to receive a higher voter turnout, the EC should introduce online voting to allow citizens to participate in the voting

process without necessarily going to the polling centers on the day of elections.

Another way to enhance our democratic process in Ghana and citizens given the opportunity to participate in the 2020 elections is through the introduction of postal voting. This is another form of voting that reduces contact with people. Essentially, the EC should introduce the postal voting method in Ghana so that citizens can conveniently vote without going to the polling station. In Bavaria, Germany and Geneva in Switzerland, the postal voting method was introduced to replace person voting so that they mitigate the possibility of spreading the virus through contact with infected persons [1,22]. IDEA [21] argues that postal voting requires a large-scale logistical effort. These efforts include acquiring reliable postal services and recruiting ballot-counting staff. If the EC decides to introduce the postal voting method in Ghana for the 2020 elections, it has the opportunity to choose from an array of postal service companies in Ghana including the Ghana Post Company Limited, DHL and FedEx. Counting posted votes under close supervision would also be challenging to conduct safely under a viral pandemic like the COVID-19. It must be noted that this form of voting is not intended to replace the traditional form of voting, but to complement human contacts. It is admissible that this form of voting is also largely uncontrolled, and could undermine the integrity of the elections (ibid).

Also, the EC must also introduce early voting to allow voters to cast their votes before the election day. Though Ghana currently has a provision for early voting, it is only limited to the security personnel and people who will be engaged by the EC on the election day. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is recommended that the EC expands the early voting right to other ordinary citizens so that the number of people voting on the day of the election will be reduced. This will enable the citizens and the EC to observe the protocols that have been laid down by the president to contain the spread of the virus. In as much as this will help the EC to reduce the burden on election day, the mistrust that exists between the EC and the now opposition party will make the effort of introducing early for the general public cumbersome. It is pretty clear that there will be a lot of allegations that the EC is massaging the early votes to favor the ruling party, this, however, does not mean that the introduction of early voting will not be successful.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This paper explored the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the 2020 elections in Ghana. The paper also looked at the opportunities that the COVID-19 pandemic presents to political parties and the Electoral Commission to be innovative in their activities. In addition, we also explored government responses towards mitigating the spread of the virus in the country. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the pandemic on Ghana's election 2020 is very significant. A global pandemic that is having immediate health and economic dire consequences on a larger population across the globe is also likely to have a calamitous consequence on the political activities of a country. The paper, therefore, holds the view that the consequence of political activities presents some opportunities for countries and public service providers like the Electoral Commission of Ghana must embrace.

The paper argues that the COVID-19 pandemic poses some negative impacts on the conduct of the 2020 elections. Some of the likely impacts of the pandemic on the conduct of the 2020 elections are that it may lead to low voter turnout, it has already affected the electoral time table since the Electoral Commission had to postpone the voter registration exercise from April 2020 to June 2020. Additionally, the pandemic has also affected the activities of political parties since the traditional way of campaigning has been banned as part of the measures to contain the virus spread. The most dangerous likely effect of the virus on the 2020 election is a postponement of the election scheduled to take place on the 7<sup>th</sup> December 2020.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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