

Conservative candidate elected in Ghana: President Jerry Rawlings to step down

John Farmer, Chris Talbot
4 January 2001

Western governments and media sources have portrayed the success of John Kufuor of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) over John Atta Mills, of Jerry Rawling's ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC), in the Ghanaian presidential elections as a victory for democracy. Rawlings, who seized power in a military coup in 1981 as a young junior officer, has apparently agreed to retire from the presidency after serving two terms of office—the maximum allowed under the constitution.

United Nations secretary general Kofi Annan, himself a Ghanaian, stated after the results were announced, "With these elections, Ghana has demonstrated that democracy and its institutions continue to take root in Africa". The German newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* wrote about a "historical transfer of power," which was "a ray of hope for all Africa," and a US Embassy statement said "the transition from one elected president to another for the first time" would help make Ghana "a model for Africa and beyond".

A runoff was held on December 28 after the first round of voting, three weeks earlier failed to give Kufuor a decisive lead. In the second round, Kufuor won 57 percent of the votes compared with 43 percent for Mills. Parliamentary elections, which took place at the same time as the first round, gave Kufuor's NPP 99 of the 200 parliamentary seats, the NDC took 92 with the other seats going to minor parties. Turnout was over 60 percent of the 10.6 million registered voters.

Behind the praise for Rawlings' concession to Western pressure to bow out there was clearly concerns over Kufuor's ability to govern. This is not so much because he is mild-mannered and a poor public speaker—he is known as the "gentle giant"—but because of his own and his party's long association with pro-business politics and the wealthy Ashanti tribal leaders. His party lacks the base in the rural areas and support in the army built up by Rawlings.

Kufuor made empty campaign pledges of free healthcare and computers to be introduced in all schools. Taking advice from British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, he made his slogan "positive change"—following the lead of the Western-backed Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe. In an interview he gave to the *Financial Times*, however, he made clear his commitment to IMF free-market measures to deal with the economic crisis that has engulfed Ghana. He spoke of a

period of austerity ahead: "If that means my being unpopular, it's just unfortunate. I'm ready to be tough, but tough for a purpose." He followed IMF criticisms of the Rawlings regime, saying that it had "allowed corruption to seep into government and there was a lot of waste." His government would be "the most business friendly Ghana has had to date."

He has promised to set up a "Truth and Reconciliation" committee to look into the killings of military leaders, judges and others during the upheavals surrounding the coup in which Rawlings came to power. Divisions within the ruling elite could easily lead to violent conflict as in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire. During the elections there were sporadic outbursts of violence and an opposition Member of Parliament was stabbed to death in Ghana's capital, Accra. In an ominous speech made to soldiers during the election, Rawlings warned against using the "current democratic freedoms as a license to cause civil and industrial unrest and abuse, and vilify decent people". In a veiled threat to Kufuor he said, "God forbid another upheaval, but if it should come, the civilian front this time will pay a heavy price".

Over the last year Ghana has suffered a sharp economic decline as the prices of its two main export commodities—cocoa and gold—responsible for 70 percent of export receipts, fell sharply. This came on top of steep increases in the cost of oil imports. Ghana's inflation rate was expected to reach at least 30 percent by the end of 2000, and its fragile currency—the cedi—is expected to continue to devalue in 2001, by as much as 30 percent, following a 50 percent depreciation last year. It has a foreign debt of \$7bn, which consumes 51 percent of the country's GDP to service. The *Financial Times* comments that: "The fiscal position is dire, with high domestic borrowing made worse by mounting arrears. The external financing gap for 2000-01 stands at \$1bn, interest rates are more than 50 percent and foreign direct investment in 1999 was just \$70m—low by even African standards"

The impact on the mass of the population has been especially severe. In 1999, annual average GDP per capita was \$404. In 2000 this had nearly halved to \$232 and in 2001 the projected figure is \$191. A recent article in the *Independent* newspaper of Ghana pointed to the reduction in funding for schools and universities under Rawlings' regime as an example of the social

polarisation that has developed. University lecturers have taken strike action over their pay, now worth a mere \$124 a month. The paper points to the huge gulf between the education available to the mass of Ghanaians and that provided for the clique around Rawlings, who can afford to send their children to private Western schools and universities. This group “has really done well with the confetti of IMF/World Bank loans that have transformed residential Accra into a gleaming landscape rivalling the best in Hollywood,” the *Independent* writes. In threatening Kufuor and his section of the business elite, Rawlings “is counting on the material and moral support of this newly minted middleclass with its powerful networks in the army, the security services and international finance.”

The legacy of Jerry Rawlings

The particular history of Ghanaian politics helps to explain why many working people and rural poor have voted for such a right wing pro-IMF president as Kufuor. Jerry Rawlings came to power in a country, which, more than anywhere else in Africa, was associated with the politics of Pan Africanism.

In 1957, the British colonial rulers of Ghana, then the Gold Coast, brought Kwame Nkrumah out of prison to lead a country that was the first in a whole series to be granted independence. Nkrumah became the leader of a growing movement of African working people who saw in national independence the possibility in overcoming the poverty and colonial oppression of the continent.

Nkrumah's Pan Africanism, whilst employing socialist rhetoric, was actually a form of nationalism espoused by many of the leaders of the newly independent African states in the decades following World War Two. Nkrumah's vision of building a self-sufficient economy in his tiny African country was heavily influenced by Stalinism, and was soon revealed to be bankrupt. He never seriously challenged the imperialist system that had placed him in power, and after an initial wave of popular support began to suppress his opponents, including trade unionists. By 1966 he was removed in a military coup backed both by business interests in Ghana and the Western powers.

There followed 13 years of military rule, apart from the government headed by Kofi Busia, which was elected in 1969. Unable to deal with the economy, especially the repayment of huge foreign debts, this pro-business government was overthrown by a military coup after 27 months. John Kufuor was a cabinet minister under Busia.

By the late 1970s the economy was in a state of collapse, with inflation as high as 300 percent. There were widespread strikes and student protests, leading to the overthrow of the regime by a group of young army officers in June 1979. Flight Lieutenant Rawlings was let out of jail—he had led an attempted coup the previous month—to head the army officers' regime. Leaders of the previous military regimes were executed and “people's tribunals” set up to try supporters of the old order.

Elections were then held and another brief period of civilian

rule followed, but by 1981 the economy was still in disarray and a further wave of strikes swept the country. Rawlings' “second coming” took the form a coup which had popular support at the end of 1981. Rawlings used Marxist rhetoric throughout this period—stating for example that he wanted to build a new order which “must be anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist and must aim at instituting a popular democracy.” He leant on the examples of Cuba and Libya, setting up Workers' Defence Committees, People's Defence Committees, which were supposed to form the basis of popular democracy, but were in fact tools of his rule. His commitment to socialism and democracy was merely rhetorical, however. Within months, Ghana became one of the first countries to accept the World Bank/IMF Structural Adjustment Programme and became the example, heralded by Western politicians, of the supposed advantages of free-market policies. As Rawlings' finance secretary put it: “It would be naïve and unrealistic... to think that the request for economic assistance from the World Bank and its affiliates means a sell-out of the aims and objectives of the Ghanaian revolution to the international community... It does not make sense for the country to become a member of the bank and the IMF and continue to pay its dues only to decline to utilize the resources of these two institutions.”

Having pursued IMF policies with extensive Western loans and aid, the Ghanaian economy saw a period of growth in GDP terms, which lasted into the 1990s. Now it is moving into recession, and the IMF are blaming Rawlings for a lack of “transparency” and sufficient commitment to swallow further free-market medicine. Accompanying a huge growth in social polarisation and collapse into poverty, the widespread alienation from the self-proclaimed “socialist” politics of Rawlings, and before him Nkrumah, have so far hindered working people from developing an alternative to the pro-business Kufuor.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact