Chapter 18

Political Vigilante Violence as a Weapon of Empowerment Among Socially Excluded Ghanaian Youth

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to draw the connection between social exclusion, disenchantment, and political vigilante violence in Ghana. The chapter frames political vigilante violence as an alternative weapon of empowerment for deprived and disenchanted Ghanaian youth. It argues that in the face of the post-independent Ghanaian state's inability to attend to the needs of the increasing youthful population leading to patterns of marginalization, many of the youth align themselves with political parties as a form of social, economic, and other existential security. Drawing on the experiences of the young population of Agbogbloshie, a slum area of Ghana's capital city, as a focal point, the chapter presents political vigilante violence as a function of social exclusion and presents an analysis of the ways in which disenchanted Ghanaian youth deploy violence as a channel to gain a voice and recognition in the public arena.

INTRODUCTION

In modern societies, violence is frowned upon as an anathema (Keane, 2004) and unfathomable (Lee, 2019) in democracy. While political vigilante episodes are not an uncommon feature of Ghana's democratic growth, the year 2017 recorded increased political thuggery in the country (Citifmonline, 2017; Gyampo, 2017). With the assumption into office of the newly installed New Patriotic Party government in January 2017, vigilante groups aligned with the ruling party engaged in diverse forms of violence. In

particular, they forcibly removed some officials of previous administration from their office and official residence, and physically attacked others (Dapatem, 2017). Not only that, these groups have also assaulted the ruling government's appointees whose appointment they disagreed with, locking up government offices, disrupting party activities, and destroying state property. These young men and women who are party supporters deployed these manners of violence as a protest of unmet hopes of employment.

This chapter, therefore, aims to draw the connection between social exclusion, disenchantment and political vigilante violence in Ghana. The chapter frames political vigilante violence as an alternative weapon of empowerment for alienated and disenchanted Ghanaian youth. The Ghanaian young population plays a pertinent role in the country's democratic maturation particularly when it comes to mobilization of electorates and other electioneering activities. This notwithstanding, the youth also constitute a sizeable proportion of the socially excluded categories of society, with youth unemployment being a significant challenge to the country. According to Ghana's recent (2021) Population and Housing Census, 13.4% of the youth are currently unemployed.

In the face of the post-independent Ghanaian state's inability to attend to the needs of the increasing youthful population leading to patterns of marginalization, many of the youth align themselves with political parties as a means of social, economic and other existential security. Seen in this perspective, the youth are an incredibly powerful means of political mobilization and assurance of electoral victory. Even so, their situation remains unchanged after electoral victory. Disappointed in the system, a good portion of these disenchanted youth have resorted to political vigilante violence. In Ghana and other parts of the world, forms of violence include defacing of party posters, burning of car tires, putting party offices under lock (Amenuveve, 2016; Dapatem, 2017; Duodu, 2019). Indeed, very often, some even engage in spiritual vigilantism appealing to the authority of the spiritual forces as a means to register their displeasure in the political system (Otecfmghana.com, 2020; Tawiah, 2020).

We frame political vigilante violence as both an alternative form of livelihood for the youth and an avenue to register their displeasure in the structural violence meted out to them (Kyei & Berckmoes, 2021). Gilligan's (1999) analysis of structural violence is helpful here as it allows for an interrogation of the manner in which society places certain avoidable limitations on groups from accessing their basic necessities. Drawing on the experiences of Ghana's Fourth Republican regime as a focal point, the chapter presents political vigilante violence as a function of social exclusion and presents an analysis of the ways in which disenchanted Ghanaian youth deploy violence as a channel to gain a voice and recognition in the public arena. The chapter is structured into five sections. Section 2 frames the discussion within the context of social exclusion, empowerment and political vigilantism drawing insights from relevant studies relative to the field. Section 3 explains the methodology and the settings within which the study took place. In section 4, we consider the key issues that emerged from the study in relation to the living conditions of the residents of Agbogbloshie. Section 5 closes the discussion with a summary and highlights of the key issues involved in this chapter.

THEORETICAL AND SCHOLARLY CONTEXT

The concepts of political violence, social exclusion and youth empowerment have each been extensively discussed in literature. However, the connection between these concepts needs to be clarified. This section, thus, attempts to elucidate the relationships between these concepts and contextualize their meanings as none appears to be universally accepted. The rationale is to provide a foundation upon which we later

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