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ETHNIC GROUP ACCESS TO STATE POWER IN GHANA: THE EPR CORE DATASET AND MATTERS ARISING

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INTRODUCTION

Competition for power among ethnic groups in Ghana, especially among the top five, predates the country's independence. Similar to the logic of the contest for power in other parts of the world, ethnic groups in the state forged and broke political alliances when tact and strategy necessitated the need. This in the end shaped the country's political terrain as well as the options of 'newly' crystallized state (political) elites. With respect to Ghana, and indeed, all the countries whose ethnic power relations have so far been coded, the EPR Core dataset initiative can be said to be a significant attempt to capture and present, in a simplified and accessible form, complicated ethnic alliances that may be forged in government overtime. A major innovation accompanying the compilation of the dataset is the Geographic Research on War - Unified Platform (GROW^{UP}), an interactive end portal with several useful features (see Figure 1, below).

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These commendable efforts notwithstanding, the principles established to guide the coding decisions of regional experts (Vogt 2014) contracted to identify the ethnic groups constituting the EPR Core dataset has led, in the specific case of Ghana, to data which may be at variance with the experiences in the country. Given the political realities behind the formation of its governments, it will be difficult to defend the disaggregation of various executive branches of government from 1957 to 2010 into junior and senior ethnic partnerships. In this respect, the quality of the EPR Core dataset on Ghana may be said to demand a reality check.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE EPR CORE DATASET'S CODING INCLUSION CRITERIA

The initiators of the EPR data project laid down a set of principles to aid the coding decisions that culminated in the extraction of relevant data. The coders were asked to identify “politically relevant ethnic groups” and classify the status of their power in the executive branch of government, which in turn is used as proxy for the level of access of ethnic groups to state power (see Vogt et al 2015; Vogt 2014). For an ethnic group to be deemed politically relevant, either one or two conditions have to be met: first, the political actor in question ought to lay claim to “*represent the interests of an ethnic group in the national political arena,*” second, ethnic group members ought to be “*systematically and intentionally discriminated against in the domain of public politics.*” Further, “*significant*” political actor refers to a political organization (not necessarily a party) active in national politics. “*Discrimination*” also means political exclusion directly targeted at an ethnic group by a governing elite (Vogt 2014, emphasis added). The coding regime also required regional experts to take note of and introduce what the EPR codebook refers to as “new periods” whenever changes, such as significant alterations in the status of power of the leadership of ethnic groups at the national level (i.e. in government), occur. On the basis of the information generated by the procedures outlined, the executive branch of government is disaggregated into categories wherein ethnic groups either have exclusive political power, share power or are excluded from power.

THE EPR CORE DATASET AND GHANA'S EXPERIENCE IN PERSPECTIVE

With the aid of the coding rules outlined above, data on Ghana's experience is schematically presented on the GROWup portal as captured in the screen shot (Figure 1) below. As indicated earlier, the data and the terminology accompanying it raise questions, particularly concerning their accuracy.

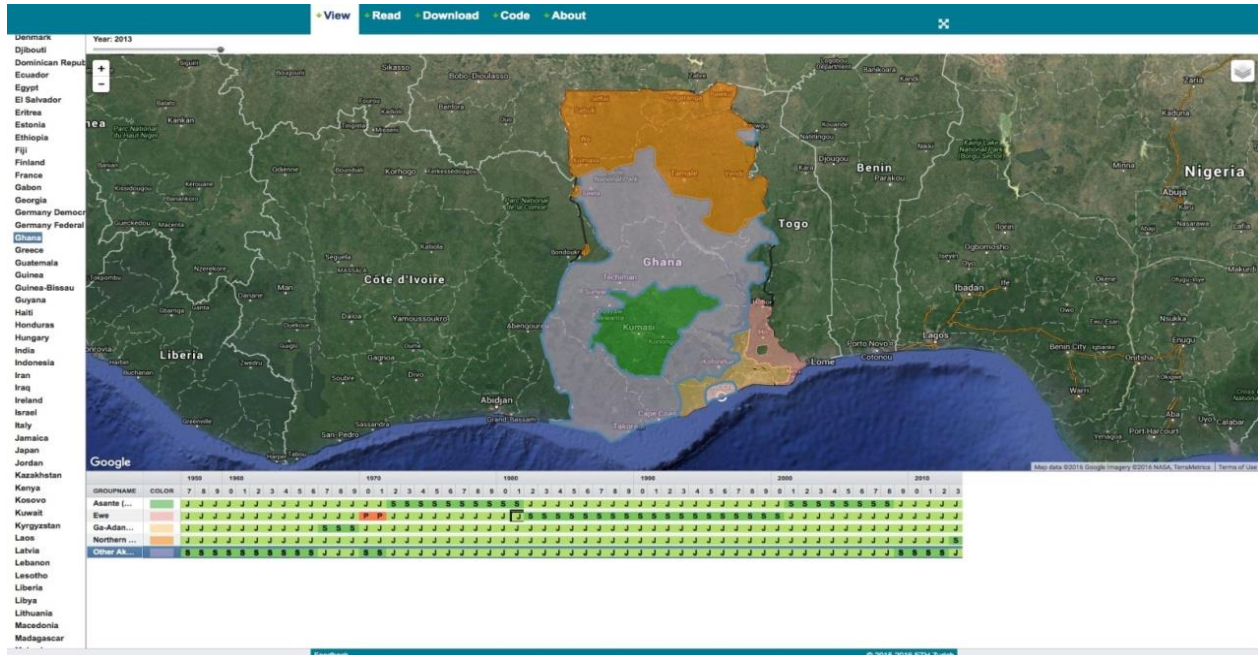


Figure 1: GROW^{UP} Ghana page (Girardin et al 2015)

There is no issue about the fact that ethnic groups in Ghana are politically significant; they represent their members, even if symbolically, in national affairs. They have consistently set the tone for politics and structured the political strategies of governing national elites. Especially in the immediate aftermath of independence in 1957, the government saw the need to undermine attempts by the leadership of ethnic groups to impose their political aspirations on the state. This resulted in policies such as the Avoidance of Discrimination Law (ADL), banning all political parties based on ethnic or regional interests. The repercussions of these measures are still being felt in the national arena today.

However, a careful reading of the composition of the executive branch of government over the period captured in the EPR Core dataset shows that to disaggregate the executive into ethnic components, and based on this to determine the level of access of such groups to state power, is overly ambitious. Ideology, collective elite mentality and the dynamics of the local context have tended to create barriers which have prevented the recruitment of the representatives of ethnic groups into government. By and large, in the Ghanaian context, the only actors who can legitimately lay unchallenged claim to politically represent ethnic groups in the national arena are traditional rulers, colloquially called Chiefs. These are persons nominated, culturally tutored, installed, gazetted and their incumbency accepted and recognized by their group members. Nevertheless, there is no record that such persons, i.e. Chiefs, ever constituted national government and represented their ethnic groups in the executive.¹

Beginning with the Convention People's Party (the CPP), in power from 1957 to 1966, government recruitment was hardly dictated by ethnic criteria. It is worthy of note that at the time of independence, Nkrumah, then the prime minister and of Akan ethnic descent, won his parliamentary seat in Accra

¹The only exception here is Nana Akuoko Sarpong Omanhene (Paramount Chief) of the Agogo Traditional Area of Ghana, who was at the same time a member of the erstwhile military government of the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC).

central, an area dominated by the Ga-Adangme and at the time an epicenter of Ga ethnic-nationalist agitations. Neither was he a Chief nor did he claim to represent any ethnic group. His broad recruitment strategy was dictated by proven ideological commitment to his party and his goal of African liberation and unity. In fact, Nkrumah's and the CPP's interference with, and disruption of, the political power of ethnic groups in the pursuit of the party's aspirations is legendary in the country's history. For example, in reference to debates in the country's CPP dominated parliament in 1960 regarding the promulgation of laws to regulate the institution of Chieftaincy, one pro-Chieftaincy parliamentarian commented that the issue under consideration "plainly demonstrates the Government's gradual destruction of the institution of Chieftaincy" and "...the chiefs themselves appear to be quite satisfied with this gradual disintegration (Rathbone 2000, 141). It is worthy of note that the CPP's confrontational relations with Chiefs as captured in 1960 parliamentary debate was clear to observers as early as 1957 (Rathbone 2000, 109). The nature of its interactions with ethnic groups at the time was described as akin to the gathering of storm clouds and that it was obvious that the party intended to destroy Chiefs as political entities (Rathbone 2000, 112).²

The effects of these measures were such that by 1964, at the height of the power of the CPP, the leadership of ethnic groups was a spent political force. Hence, there was little need for the party to contend with any direct threat they posed or to offer any incentives to co-opt them in ways that will warrant the pattern of ethnic composition of the government as suggested by the EPR Core dataset. In other words, the dataset inaccurately creates the impression that the CPP's government structure rested on ethnic entities. On the contrary, the reality was such that the government rested on individuals with anti-ethnic sentiments and their assault on Chiefs significantly reduced the latter's political clout in the political arena of the state (for a detailed account of this phase of Ghana's political history, see Austin 1970; Fitch and Oppenheimer 1966; Rathbone 2000).

The overthrow of the CPP in 1966 led to failed democratic experiments (1969-1972, 1979-1981), and a (so far) successful one since 1992. As required by the EPR Core dataset's coding principles, all these episodes have been captured and schematically presented on the EPR GROWup portal. Using the example of the second republic (1969-1972), we argue that the EPR Core dataset's depiction of the constitution of the governments of the second, third and fourth republics is just as problematic as its depiction of that of the CPP. As evidenced in Table 1 below, the PP's electoral victory, which gave it the mandate to govern, was consistent nationwide, including across regions composed of multiple ethnic groups. Going by the terminology of the EPR Core dataset, the use of the notion of ethnic partnerships creates the impression that members of the country's parliament were elected from ethnically defined constituencies and by extension were de facto representatives of their ethnic electorates. It is clear from the table, however, that this was not the case. The system of government during the second republic was of the Westminster type, where the constitution of the government is dictated by the party controlling the most (majority) seats, which in turn is also the party that is running the affairs of state under the leadership of a prime minister. Thus, the composition of the government of the second republic was based on the results presented in Table 1 below. Over the same period, the EPR Core dataset describes the PP government

² Ministers in Nkrumah's government, such as Krobo Edusei, Aron Ofori Attah, K.A. Gbedemah and L.R. Abavana, were Nkrumah's henchmen who constantly harassed their Chiefs in a bid to cow them into submission on behalf of the CPP (See Rathbone 2000, 100-112).

and its components as having consisted of the Ga-Adangbe (1969) as the senior ethnic partner and the northern Ghanaian ethnic groups as the junior ethnic partners. This state of affairs can come across as a portrayal of a republic structured on ethnic blocs/partnerships, akin to that of Ethiopia (Habtu 2003; International Crisis Group 2009).

If for purposes of argument we assume that, in the case of Ghana's second republic, the PP government was ethnically based, the EPR Core dataset's purported calibration of ethnic group's access to state power based on their status in government is disorienting when compared with the election results in Table 1. In the case of the year 1969, for example, the Asante are coded as junior partners at par with the Ewe and northerners in the EPR data. But in the elections the party won its largest number of seats in Asante (22), 9 in the North (22)³ and its least (2) in the Volta region. Obviously there is little connection between these sets of data: one based on actual election outcomes and the other on the coding principles of the EPR data project.

PARTY \ REGION	Progress party (PP)	National Alliance of Liberals (NALS)	United Nationalist Party (UNP)	People's Action Party (PAP)	All People's Republican Party (APRP)	Independents
Ashanti	22	-	-	-	-	-
Brong-Ahafo	13	-	-	-	-	-
Central	15	-	-	-	-	-
Eastern	18	4	-	-	-	-
Greater Accra	3	3	2	-	-	1
Northern	9	5	-	-	-	-
Upper	13	3	-	-	-	-
Volta	2	14	-	-	-	-
Western	10	-	-	2	1	-
National Total	105	29	2	2	1	1

Table 1: 29 August 1969 National Assembly Election (African Election Database 2016)

The dataset also captures episodes of military government in 1966 to 1969, 1979 and 1981 to 1992. Even though, given their unaccountable nature, military oligarchies have the greatest freedom to form governments based on ethnic partnerships, if they so wish, none of them chose that path in Ghana. For example, the National Redemption Council (NRC) / the Supreme Military Council (SMC) (1972-1979) was the country's only pure military government without civilian members and was opposed, in principle, to the infusion of national politics with ethnic group interests. Chazan (1982, 56) notes that the regime curtailed ethnic avenues of access to state power through an active campaign against any manifestation of ethnicity. In addition, the word "tribe" was banned from all documents "as a step to eliminate divisive and tribal forces which militate against national unity and progress." If we go by the EPR Core dataset's

³ If we lump the northern ethnic groups together, like the EPR Core dataset does, northern seats equals that of the Asante. In this sense, the dataset's lumping together of northern ethnic groups is also a problem.

characterization of members of the NRC/SMC as made up of ethnic components we will be mischaracterizing the essence of the government and the political status of ethnic groups at the time. The same can be said about the Provisional National Defense Council Government (PNDC), which was in power from 1981-1992.

Throughout the post-independence period in Ghana, there has never been an occasion where the bona fide representatives of ethnic groups, i.e. Chiefs, have formed governments. Given this, it is controversial for any attempt to be made to gauge the extent of ethnic groups' access to state power based on a census of the ethnic background of the members of government. This assertion, however, is not to suggest that the ethnic background of the members of government is irrelevant but rather to point out that the EPR Core dataset's notion of ethnic partnerships places a heavy political burden on the ethnic background of individuals in government and that the requirements of the coding process result in a characterization of governments in a manner that is at variance with the actual experiences of ethnic power relations in post independent Ghana.

RECOMMENDATIONS IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

In light of the above, we suggest that the terminology employed by the EPR Core dataset should be as neutral as possible. So for instance, rather than using the phrase or interpretation of "ethnic partnerships", which suggests the sharing of political risks (which may not necessarily be empirically accurate), the coding enterprise could simply record the ethnic background of members of government and label it as "ethnic background of members of government," and leave for further analysis the question of whether the ethnic origin of government members results in ethnic partnerships. Such an approach would be uncontroversial, empirically accurate and devoid of the latent suggestive implications embedded in the use of words and phrases that are value laden.

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