

Political party vigilantism: A growing fox worth killing before it mutates into a monster

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■ Introduction

Since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1992, a major aberration in Ghana's political environment has been the worrying post-election activities of political party foot soldiers, which Bob-Milliar (2014) described as a brand of party activism that violates the norms of liberal democracy. In the Fourth Republic, foot soldiers¹ of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), the two the leading parties, have been the main culprits, though it is a known fact that all political parties harness the mobilization capacities of their foot soldiers to garner support for their party and candidates. The post-election activities of foot soldiers of political parties that win elections make their role in the country's democratic process controversial and questionable. The post-election activities of foot soldiers clearly show that their operational logic is fundamentally about sacrificing for patronage spoils after elections (see Daddieh, 2009; Whitfield, 2009; Gyimah-Boadi, 2009 & 2007). Indeed, Bob-Milliar (2012) concluded that some Ghanaians joined political parties and became activists simply to enjoy some of the incentives these parties dispense to their members when they win elections - a sort of

survival strategy. This policy brief draws from data from a number of country-specific questions in Ghana's 2012 Round 5 Afrobarometer and CDD-Ghana 2016 pre-election surveys to show that government will enjoy enormous support and goodwill from the generality of Ghanaians if it decides to clamp down on political party vigilante groups - *the growing fox that is worth killing before it mutates into a monster*.

■ Manifestations of party foot soldiers in Ghana's Fourth Republic

In 2000 when there was an electoral turnover and the NPP assumed the reins of government, the aberration of party's foot soldiers, exhibiting the operational mindset of sacrificing for patronage spoils after elections, became manifest. The NPP foot soldiers battled their NDC counterparts to take possession of some public goods, such as public offices, public places of convenience and lorry parks, which were under the latter's management at the time. These actions were characterized by violence because those managing these facilities refused to relinquish authority over these state assets. These unfortunate incidents

¹ Borrowing from Emma Birikorang and Kwesi Aning (2006). Negotiating Populism and Populist Politics in Ghana, 1949-2012 in *Managing Election-Related Conflict and Violence for Democratic Stability in Ghana* (ed) by Kwesi Aning and Kwaku Danso and published by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, we conceptualized foot soldiers or vigilante groups in this paper as youth activists or organized informal non-state militia groups of political parties whose activities are usually characterized by violence and oftentimes, attempts to supplant the powers of formal police and justice systems.

repeated itself in early 2009 when the NDC recaptured political power. This time round, NDC foot soldiers went on rampage reclaiming control over public places of convenience, offices of the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), the then National Youth Employment Programme (NYEP) and the Metro Mass Transit Ltd. They, in some cases, succeeded in getting some District Chief Executives (DCEs), managers and staff of NHIS and NYEP relieved of their positions.

With the inauguration of President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo led government of the NPP into office on January 7, 2017, the country was once again engulfed with these unlawful foot soldiers activities. NPP-affiliated foot soldiers-turned vigilante groups, mainly the Delta and Invincible Forces started taking over, in a forceful manner, state assets and public facilities (e.g. public places of convenience, toll booths, school feeding programs, invasion of passport office and Tema Ports and Harbour, 'alleged' stolen state vehicles from members of the previous administration etc.). These unlawful acts largely dented the hitherto smooth transition that the nation experienced. In fact, the international community, particularly the United Nations in a joint statement signed by the special representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, and the Resident Coordinator of the UN system in Ghana described the raid as reprehensible².

Since the emergency of political party foot soldiers in the Fourth Republic, various governments and law enforcement agencies have generally failed to prosecute and punish these party activists when they engage in criminal acts. This passivity appears to have stirred members of these vigilante groups, the Delta Force this time round, to go overboard by brazenly releasing from custody, colleagues being prosecuted in a Circuit Court in Kumasi for their involvement in the forceful removal of their own government appointed Ashanti Regional Security Coordinator from office in a brutish and undignified manner.

■ What activities do Ghanaians consider common to foot soldiers?

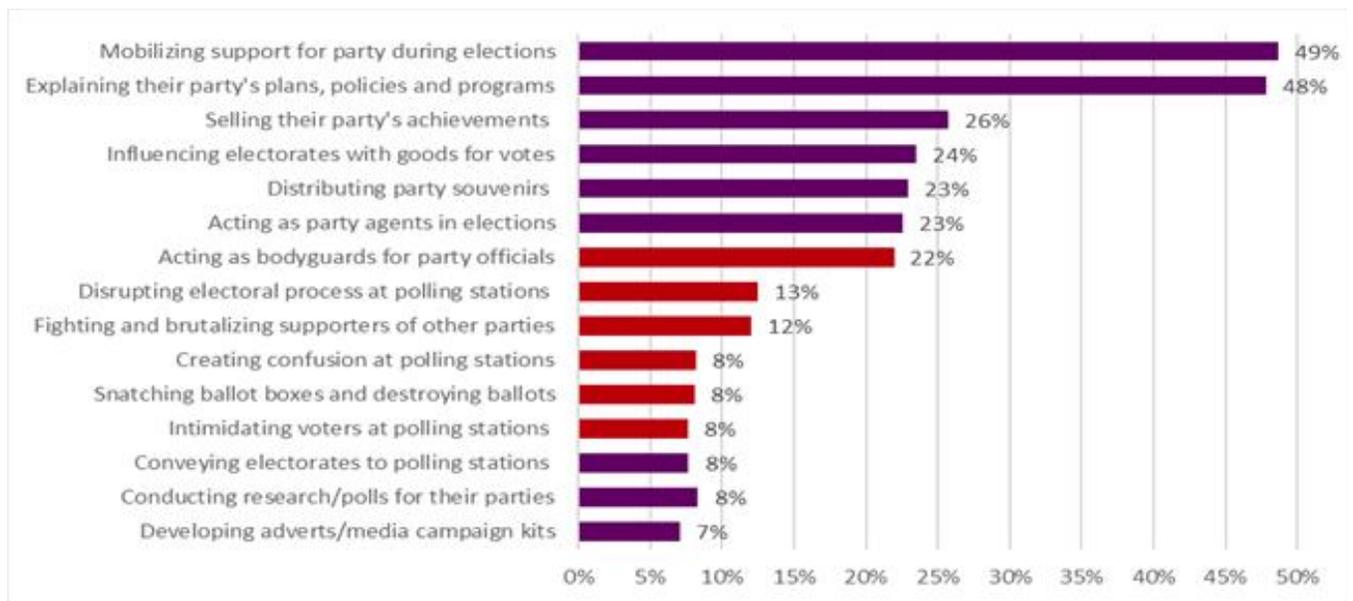
As noted in the introduction, foot soldiers are engaged by their parties and candidates for some useful activities. This is actually not lost on Ghanaians who do not see political party vigilante groups carrying out only criminal acts but also acknowledged the positive acts they undertake for their parties. For example, a country-specific question in Ghana's 2012 Round 5 Afrobarometer survey asked respondents to list three activities that they believed grassroots political party activists (or foot soldiers) primarily engage in during election campaigns and elections. Nearly half of Ghanaians mentioned mobilizing support for political parties (49%) and selling political parties' plans, policies and programs to the electorates (48%). This, notwithstanding, appreciable percentages also highlighted some activities these vigilante groups undertake that are (or have the potential to be) criminal in nature (i.e. Acting as bodyguards for party officials, 22%; Disrupting electoral process at polling stations, 13%; fighting and brutalizing supporters of other parties, 12%; creating confusion at polling stations, 8%; snatching ballot boxes and destroying ballots, 8%; and intimidating voters at polling stations, 8%) (Figure 1).

■ Why do foot soldiers engage in politics?

Though Ghanaians appear to see some positives about political party foot soldiers, they largely believe they are "*political rent-seeking*" groups. A country-specific question in the 2012 Ghana Afrobarometer survey posed the two statements - (a) *Political party foot soldiers in Ghana toil for their parties because they believe in their programs* and (b) *Political party foot soldiers in Ghana toil for their parties because they expect material rewards after winning political power*. It then asked respondents to indicate which one they agree with. Almost six in every ten Ghanaians (i.e. 59%) "*strongly agree*" or "*agree*" with the assertion that political party foot soldiers toil for their party because they expect material rewards after winning political power. A little below one-third (31%), however, think foot soldiers toil for their party because they believe in their programs (Figure 2).

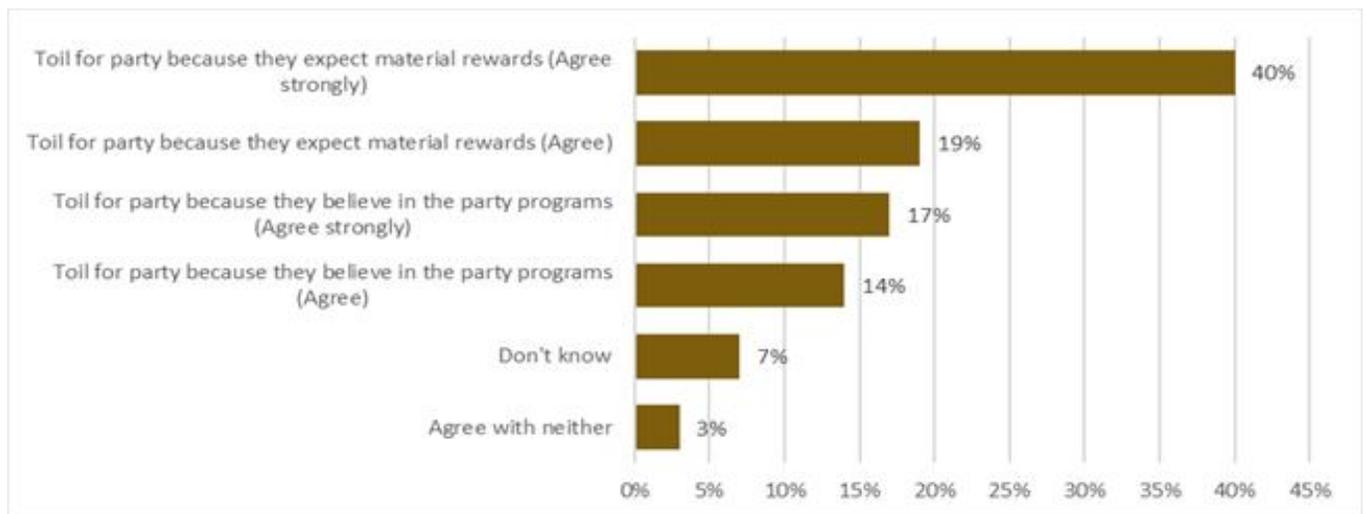
² See story at <https://citifmonline.com/2017/04/11/un-condemns-delta-force-attack-on-kumasi-court/>

Figure 1: Activities of political party foot soldiers | Afrobarometer 2012



Afrobarometer asked: *In your opinion, which three main activities would you say grassroots political party activists (or foot soldiers) primarily engage themselves in during election campaigns and elections? [Do not read options. Code from responses. Accept up to three answers.]*

Figure 2: Opinions on why foot soldiers engage in politics | Afrobarometer 2012



Afrobarometer asked: *Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Statement 1: Political party foot soldiers in Ghana toil for their parties because they believe in their programs. Statement 2: Political party foot soldiers in Ghana toil for their parties because they expect material rewards after winning political power.*

■ How sympathetic are Ghanaians towards demands of foot soldiers?

Ghanaians appear sympathetic to post-election demands of political party vigilante groups or foot soldiers even though they perceive them as “*political rent-seekers*” (despite the fact that political parties and candidates often give juicy promises in anticipation of election victory to these groups). At the national level, a little over half of Ghanaians (56%) in the 2012 Afrobarometer survey in Ghana “*strongly agree*” or “*agree*” with the statement that “*the demands of foot soldiers who toiled to get their parties elected into office are legitimate and should be satisfied by government*”. At the regional level, it is only in two regions (i.e. Greater Accra, 38%; and Brong Ahafo, 33%) that the regional averages for those who expressed this sympathetic opinion happened to be remarkably lower than the national average. Indeed, the regional averages for seven regions are higher than the national figure with those of Eastern (75%), Upper West (71%) and Western (71%) being quite prominent (Figure 3).

■ Is empathy with foot soldiers demands tantamount to support for their post-election activities?

Although there is some appreciable level of empathy with the post-election demands of political party foot soldiers, Ghanaians still do not support the actions of these groups, particularly those bordering on patronage and criminality. The 2012 Afrobarometer survey in Ghana found nearly two-thirds of Ghanaians (63%) saying they “*strongly agree*” or “*agree*” with the statement that political party foot soldiers have no right to any special treatment by government, irrespective of their efforts in getting their parties elected into office. Nearly one-quarter (24%) however expressed disagreement with the statement (Table 1, Panel A). Another 81% “*strongly agree*” or “*agree*” that failure to check the activities of these vigilante groups are likely to threaten the peace and security of the state (Table 1, Panel b). This feeling was once again echoed in the October 2016 pre-election survey where 63% of Ghanaians said the operations and activities of these private militia (or vigilante groups) of political parties

or candidates are a threat to the country's democracy and a security risk to the state (Table 1, Panel C).

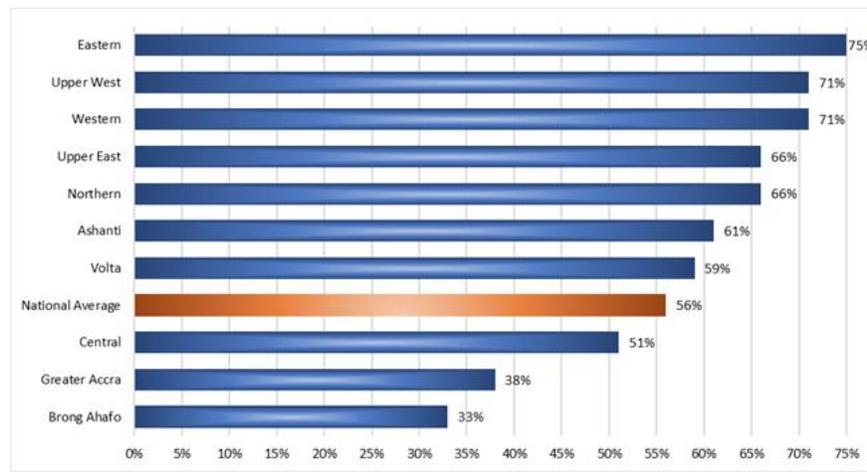
Again, a large majority of Ghanaians (88%) “*strongly agree*” or “*agree*” with the statement that some activities of political party foot soldiers that border on criminality must be prosecuted by the Police (Table 1, Panel D). Quite revealing, similar large majority (81%) believed political interference has made efforts of the police to arrest and prosecute party foot soldiers who indulge in criminal acts an impossible task (Table 1, Panel E).

Indeed, as presented in Figure 4, even among those who said the demands of foot soldiers who toiled to get their parties elected into office are legitimate and should be satisfied by government, absolute majorities call for their prosecution for criminal acts (96%). Similar large percentage views the police inability to do this as due to political interference (90%). Additionally, 88% of those who empathized with their demands still consider their activities as a threat to the peace and security of the country if left unchecked, while 69% think they deserve no special treatment just because they helped their party to win election.

■ Do Ghanaians support government handing jobs and contracts to party apparatchiks?

Generally, Ghanaians do not countenance government distributing political patronage to party members by handing them contracts and public sector jobs without regards to competence and expertise. When asked whether government appointing party foot soldiers into public office regardless of their qualification and skills is “*wrong and must be discouraged*,” “*wrong but reasonable to politicians*” or “*not wrong at all*,” 74% of Ghanaians believed such act by government is wrong and must be discouraged. In fact, for every ten Ghanaians, at least seven held the view that government awarding contracts for projects (75%) or making appointments (70%) on the basis of party membership and not expertise or competency is “*wrong and must be discouraged*” (Figure 5).

Figure 3: Popular opinion on demands of political party foot soldiers | Afrobarometer 2012



Afrobarometer asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: (a) The demands of political party foot soldiers who toiled to get their parties elected are legitimate and should be satisfied by government. (% saying “strongly agree” or “agree”)

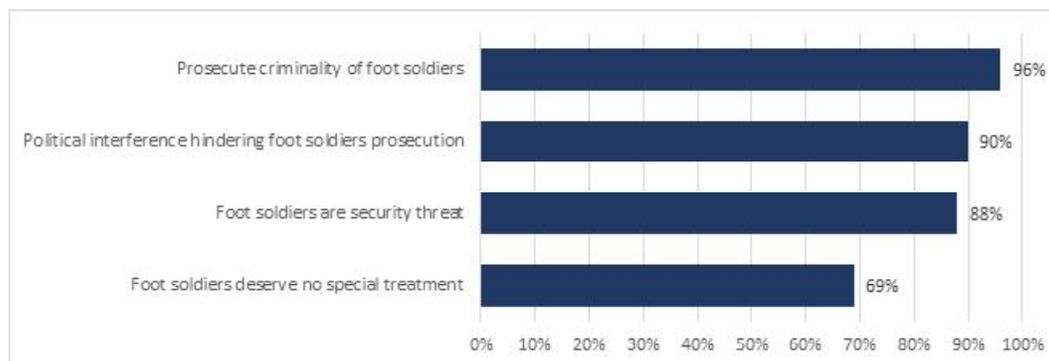
Table 1: Opinions on treatment of foot soldiers and their activities | Afrobarometer 2012 & October 2016 pre-election surveys

Panel A:		
Foot soldiers have no right to any special treatment by government despite their efforts in getting their party elected into office.	Strongly agree or agree	63%
	Strongly disagree or disagree	24%
	Neither agree nor disagree	7%
	Don't know	6%
Panel B:		
Foot soldiers' activities could threaten the country's peace and security	Strongly agree or agree	81%
	Strongly disagree or disagree	8%
	Neither agree nor disagree	5%
	Don't know	6%
Panel C:		
Activities of political party vigilante groups a threat to the country's democracy and a security risk to the state (From October, 2016 pre-election survey)	Yes, serious or somewhat a threat	63%
	Not at all or not a threat	9%
	Neither	3%
	Don't know	24%
	Refused	1%
Panel D:		
Police must prosecute criminal acts of foot soldiers	Strongly agree or agree	88%
	Strongly disagree or disagree	5%
	Neither agree nor disagree	2%
	Don't know	6%
Panel E:		
Political interference not allowing prosecution of foot soldiers for criminal acts.	Strongly agree or agree	81%
	Strongly disagree or disagree	8%
	Neither agree nor disagree	4%
	Don't know	7%

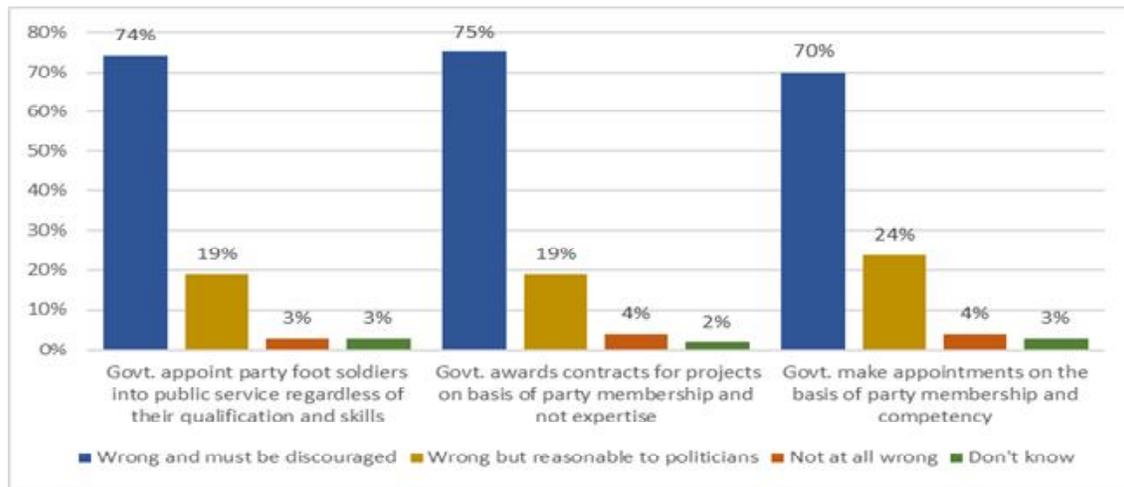
Afrobarometer asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statements: (a) Political party foot soldiers have no right to special treatment by governments in spite of their efforts to get their parties elected to govern. (b) Some activities of political party foot soldiers could threaten the peace and security of the country if left unchecked. (c) Some activities of political party foot soldiers that border on criminality must be prosecuted by the Police. (d) Political interference has made efforts of the Police to arrest and prosecute party foot soldiers who indulge in criminal acts an impossible task.

Pre-election survey asked: Thinking about the operations and activities of these private militia (or vigilante groups) of political parties or candidates, would you say they are a threat to the country's democracy and a security risk to the state?

Figure 4: Crosstab: Acceptance of foot soldiers demand as legitimate vs. other opinion on their activities | Afrobarometer 2012



Note: All crosstabs Pearson Chi-Square tests are highly significant (p-value = 0.000).



Respondents were asked: For each of the following, please indicate whether you think the act is wrong and must be discouraged, wrong but reasonable to politicians or not wrong at all: (a) Governments make appointments on the basis of party membership and not qualification and competency. (b) Governments appoint party foot soldiers into public service without regard to their qualification and skills. (c) Governments award contracts for projects on the basis of party membership and not expertise for executing such jobs.

Policy Implications

Any attempt to address the mayhem associated with political party vigilantism or foot soldiers should start by attacking the root causes. In fact, three major root factors could be accountable for this problem.

The first being the power that the constitution reposes in the president (and for that matter the party in government) and the attendant state capture. With respect to the powers of the president, for instance, a deeper and critical analysis of the problem of foot soldier menace will show that the phenomenon has its roots in the unimaginable that the constitution gives to the president. The constitution places so much power in the president who controls state resources and the prestige cum privileges of public office. Upon winning elections, these facilities are distributed to party folks not essentially on the basis of competencies, but on patronage and clientelist lines (van de Walle, 2003). Indeed, CDD-Ghana in one of its publications (*Democracy Watch No. 24*) indicated that the persistence of the party foot soldier phenomenon reflects the weakness of real checks on the abuse of incumbency and the near absence of sanctions for abuses of public and political office for personal or partisan ends. It is an open secret in Ghana's political landscape that politicians make promises to party foot soldiers having in mind the vast networks of economic and political patronage that will be at the party's

disposal after election victory. As found from the data analysis, majority of Ghanaians believe foot soldiers toil for their political parties in anticipation of material rewards after election victory. It is not surprising therefore, to see political party foot soldiers resorting to violence and forceful takeover of state assets, institutions and facilities when they feel short-changed and left out during the distribution of the spoils of election victory.

The second is the ineffectiveness of the security agencies to deal with the problem professionally because of political pandering. This ineffectiveness arises from the mistrust political parties, especially those in opposition have for state security agencies, particularly the police, which is the root of the emergence of political party vigilante or para-militia groups in Ghana. Once again, the president appoints all the heads of the various state security institutions, per the constitutional arrangements. This makes these individuals (and subsequently, the officers of these institutions) to engage in political pandering, largely please the appointing authority and to secure their positions. This situation has made political interference as mentioned by Ghanaians the main challenge for the police in prosecuting foot soldiers and party people when they fall foul to the law.

The third is the lack of legislation that restrains political parties from establishing para-militia or vigilante groups. As noted in the introduction, political

parties in Ghana, particularly the NPP and NDC have core groups (be it vigilante, foot soldiers or para-militia) that usually provide some form of security at events organized by the party. These groups are never licensed formally by the Ministry responsible for the operations of such private entities (i.e. the Ministry of the Interior) as such regulating and controlling their operations is non-existent. Meanwhile, apart from it becoming a nuisance to the society as a result of the criminal acts they perpetuate, the activities of these party militias or vigilante groups also affect the smooth rolling out of activities of the electoral management body (e.g. voter registration, exhibition of voter register etc.) towards an impending election. Notwithstanding the number of prohibitions in the country's Political Parties Law, Act 574, (2000), this legislation is silent on the formation or otherwise of party militias or vigilante groups by political parties.

■ Policy Recommendations

We therefore recommend the following policy options as solutions to the political party vigilantism:

1. Restrict and limit the powers of the president and consequently, the almost absolute control over all state resources. This demands strong political will of the very politicians who by virtue of their political positions dispense these state resources to cronies and party people. This is so because it calls for review of constitutional clauses that make the president wield so much power. For example, instead of the current situation where the president appoints board members and chief executives of state institutions, specific bodies such as Public Service Commission (or where necessary a new body altogether) could be made to assume that responsibility. In such instance, competencies and skills will override political party affiliation when considering whom to appoint into public office. This will send a clear message to foot soldiers of political parties that appointment to public service is about qualification, skills and competencies and nothing less.
2. Heads of security institutions, particularly the Police should have security of tenure if they and the institutions that they head are to be effective in enforcing the law (i.e. arrest and

prosecute) when political party foot soldiers engage in criminal acts. Such security of tenure will insulate these heads from political witch-hunting and dismissals, simply because they have ordered the arrest and prosecution persons belonging to the party in government. It will also help officers of such institutions to refuse political interference in their professional work and bring some level of sanity into the political environment.

3. The election management body, in consultation with political parties and civil society groups, should at the Inter Party Advisory Committee (IPAC) meeting propose a review of the Political Parties Law to make outlawing of political party vigilante or para-militia groups one of the prohibitions in the legislation. The election management body should under this prohibition be given the power to prosecute any political party that flouts this prohibition, irrespective of criminal prosecutions that members of these groups may face for criminal conduct.
4. Finally, political parties must educate, sensitize and re-orient members of these party vigilante groups to appreciate that canvassing for votes for their parties should be because they believe in the policies and programs' proposals of their parties and not because they expect some material rewards. They must also be helped to know that being a political party activist does not exonerate one from prosecution when conduct borders on criminality.

■ Conclusion

The 2012 Afrobarometer survey findings show that many Ghanaians are very much against the criminal activities of political party vigilante groups in the country, despite being somewhat sympathetic towards their post-election demands for spoils of election victory. Most Ghanaians also believe that political party vigilante groups are a threat to the peace and security of the state and must be checked - a sentiment that was reaffirmed by citizens in the second CDD-Ghana pre-election survey conducted in October 2016. In recent times, it appears this frightful sentiment is

becoming the reality, especially with members of a political party vigilante group - the Delta Force mustering courage to raid a law court in Kumasi to free its members who were on prosecution for criminal conduct. This lawlessness has received condemnation from the generality of Ghanaians thereby confirming the findings of the 2012 Afrobarometer and October 2016 CDD-Ghana pre-election surveys, respectively.

The opinions expressed by Ghanaians regarding the activities of foot soldiers show that any government that proceeds on a venture to stamp out these political

party vigilante groups will surely have the goodwill and support of the masses. The current NPP administration is therefore in a better position to deal decisively with these reprehensible acts of elements from its own stable to serve as a strong deterrent to other groups affiliated to it and other political parties. As a nation, if we miss this opportunity, the vandalism and criminality perpetuated by political party foot soldiers will escalate beyond our control when there is a change in government in the future.

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