

## Chapter 3

# The Campaign and the News Media

Campaigning for the 1996 Presidential and Parliamentary elections officially began when nominations closed in September. By the time we arrived on 27 November the campaign was well under way.

Few political parties had actually produced a written policy manifesto. It soon emerged from our meetings that the opposition parties were directing their efforts to convincing voters that they were more capable managers of the apparatus of state than the incumbent administration. The main issue was whether the voters wanted to continue with Flt-Lt Rawlings and the NDC for a further term, or whether they wanted change.

Party flags, banners, posters and elaborate decorated structures of the different political parties were to be seen not only in the main urban areas but in villages throughout the country. Extensive use was made of rallies by all political parties, and we were able to visit several of these. The parties also canvassed door-to-door and made effective use of loudspeaker vans. More traditional methods were also used: in some parts of the country contingents of drummers were organised by the parties to stimulate extra enthusiasm for their campaigns.

### Level Playing Field?

The opposition complained that the elections were not taking place on a level playing field. The NDC, they said, had many more financial and material resources at its disposal, and was making disproportionate and unfair use of the advantages of incumbency. An oft-quoted example was the opposition's lack of transport facilities, and it was pointed out that in 1992 the Interim National Electoral Commission had provided vehicles to the parties, whereas this had not been done in 1996. The opposition parties also alleged that official vehicles and other state resources were being misused in the Progressive Alliance's campaign.

They added that they had been unable to draw fully on contributions from their supporters in the business community as the latter had been starved of government contracts and were in economic difficulty. In the course of our travels across the country, we noted a significant disparity between the resources available to the ruling party and those at the disposal of the opposition, evidenced by the larger number of vehicles, billboards, posters, flags, T-shirts and other manifestations of the NDC campaign.

### Calm Campaign?

The campaign was not without violence and tension, and there were clashes between party workers in a number of regions. Talk of the training of special 'commando' squads increased apprehension and each side charged that the other was using 'macho-men' to intimidate voters.

Our attention was drawn to the activities of the youth wings of the two main parties and the presence of 'Keep-Fit Clubs' in some regional centres. Such clubs were often affiliated to a particular party and we were told that their members would behave provocatively in the streets. This led to clashes from time to time and in one regional capital Keep-Fit Clubs were closed by the security forces in the last days of the campaign.

Considerable efforts were made by the Electoral Commission, traditional leaders, religious leaders, the security forces and the party leaders and candidates to contain violence and by and large the campaign was peaceful. One major exception was in Ashanti Region where, a week before election day the authorities in the regional capital, Kumasi, banned all political rallies within a 19km radius of the city after a youth was killed and the offices of the NDC and NPP attacked. Further tension was aroused a few days later when a truck ploughed into an NPP rally near Kumasi, killing ten people: the driver was immediately lynched.

## The Media

The state-owned Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) helped the parties to get their messages across by allowing each of the three presidential candidates ten minutes airtime each week on television and radio.

In addition, each of the political parties had:

- a weekly ten-minute party political television and radio broadcast;
- two appearances on a television news conference programme;
- a slot on a popular radio phone-in programme; and
- an invitation to take part in two television discussion programmes.

These arrangements were in line with the constitutional requirement that 'the State shall provide fair opportunity to political parties to present their programmes to the public by assuring equal access to the state-owned media.'

However, free airtime failed to tackle the problem of bias in news reporting. The National Media Commission guidelines on political reporting require that all state-owned media shall afford 'fair opportunities and facilities for the presentation of divergent views and dissenting opinions'. But the opposition parties believed that the two state-owned newspapers and the GBC – which has a monopoly of television in Ghana and the only countrywide radio network – gave a disproportionate amount of coverage to the incumbent President and his party.

The National Media Commission, which was established to promote the freedom and independence of the media, is generally considered to be ineffective. The term of its first chairman came to an end on 4 October 1996. Consequently it was inactive during the elections. Moreover, its constitutional right to appoint the head of GBC and the state newspaper group has been disputed by the Government and remains before the courts.

Leaders of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) told us that in their view the National Media Commission had no effective control over the state-owned media. They pointed out that the statutory provisions on equal airtime applied only to elections, and it was important to look back beyond the official campaign period to see the difficulty of the opposition political parties in gaining access to the state-run broadcast and print media. They said that a culture of exclusion had been in place for the past 15 years.

## Television

We observed that the Progressive Alliance received more television coverage. President Rawlings and members of his Government were seen nightly on television news during the campaign performing official duties and making speeches, sometimes back-to-back with a political rally. On the evening of Friday 6 December, Flt-Lt Rawlings addressed the nation as Head of State, calling on each citizen to exercise her/his right to vote responsibly. While the Government stated that the President was carrying out his executive responsibilities, the opposition parties saw this as an abuse of office and made an official protest to the GBC as there were no similar slots for Mr Kufuor and Dr Mahama.

Officials from the People's Convention Party (PCP) told us that the state-owned broadcast media 'always finds an excuse' not to attend its political functions, arguing they did not have cameras or transport. We learnt from the GBC that its coverage was affected by a shortage of resources: there was only one television camera in each of Ghana's ten regions and they were often in disrepair, which meant news events there went uncovered.

One staff worker of Ghana television said that "if the President 'goes out' the camera will automatically follow him and the ruling party is well aware of the advantages of that." There was also a shortage of vehicles and, when they were available, they tended to be commandeered by broadcasting executives, leaving reporters and cameramen without any transport. This made them even more dependent on news material provided by the Government.

Some television editors had loaned video camcorders to officials from the other political parties to cover events that reporters could not reach. However, we were informed that this

arrangement generally did not work – the officials were not professionals and the film was usually unusable.

### **Radio**

Ghana has several independent radio stations, which have a large and growing public following in Accra where they are based. During the campaign, radio 'hosts' interviewed many of those involved in the political process, including our Chairperson and the leaders of other international observer groups. However, the broadcasts did not reach listeners much beyond a 200km radius of the capital. The rest of the country had access only to the state-run radio, whose news bulletins in English and the vernacular were similar to those of state-run television.

### **Print Media**

As the opposition parties saw it, the nature of the Ghanaian Press compounded the problem. Since 1992, when ownership and registration restrictions on Ghana's media were lifted ahead of that year's elections, there has developed a lively independent press. But only one opposition newspaper, *The Chronicle*, was published daily and that only during the final two weeks of the campaign. The two state-controlled newspapers – *The Daily Graphic* and *The Ghanaian Times* – are published daily.

Of all the country's newspapers, *The Daily Graphic*, Ghana's biggest selling newspaper, is the least sensationalist and its prose is measured, though its presentation often favours the Government. For instance, while a front page headline on Thursday 5 December proclaimed 'NPP, PCP Sure of Victory', adjacent to this was a coloured 'Vote NDC' box showing a sample of a presidential ballot paper and a thumb stamping the space for Flt-Lt Rawlings. It was not immediately obvious that this was a paid advertisement. At the other side of the page was a warning from the Minister of Finance that there would be an economic downturn if the Great Alliance won on 7 December.

In similar vein, on Tuesday 3 December *The Daily Graphic* reported in measured prose on the front page the clash in Kumasi between activists from the two main parties and a photograph showed damage done to the NDC party office. The reader would need to turn inside to the middle of the paper before she/he would find another photograph showing the similarly wrecked building of the NPP headquarters.

We are of course aware that a distinction must be drawn between paid political advertisements and editorial policy. In the latter respect, *The Daily Graphic* was on balance circumspect. It is important to be aware that the state-owned newspapers accounted for most, if not all, of the advertising. We were told that businesses were reluctant to invest and advertise in newspapers or magazines that might criticise the Government for fear of being targeted and excluded from official business.

As for the rest of the print media, many of the independent or 'free press' do not hide their political allegiance but rather devote their pages to attacking their opponents, notably the Government, in what might elsewhere be regarded as libellous language. We were told that the free press was more concerned with selling papers than with the actual facts of a story and that the private print media are under no obligation to provide access to any organisation.

The Ghanaian Journalists' Association (GJA) told us that although its code of ethics and that of the Private Newspaper Publishers' Association emphasise the importance of fairness these provisions were seldom observed. Some 50 libel cases were before the courts. According to the GJA, journalists had little experience of political reporting and specialist training in this field would be beneficial.