

## Security Update - Presidential and Parliament Elections

**Ghana, a beacon of a well-functioning democracy in a region that has recently experienced political instability, held its presidential and parliamentary elections on Monday 7 December 2020 in a vote that is expected to be a tight race between two veteran leaders.** Incumbent Nana Akufo-Addo is seeking re-election for a second term in office and faces a challenge from former President John Mahama. Ghanaians also voted in parliamentary elections on Monday for 275 members of parliament.

Polls opened at 07:00 local time on Monday and closed at 17:00, with more than 17 million Ghanaians eligible to vote. In the northern city of Tamale, people began queuing overnight ahead of Monday's general election. On voting day, COVID-19 protocols were enforced across the country and those not wearing facemasks were not allowed to vote. People were also advised to return home after casting their ballots.

In the lead-up to election day, Ghana's electoral commission called for peace on the day of the vote and in the days ahead as the country awaits the results. While Ghana is considered one of the most democratic countries in the West African region, previous elections have been marred by clashes that were instigated by vigilantes hired by politicians. To combat this violence, in 2019 the government passed a law banning vigilantism and making it punishable by a 10-year minimum sentence. While the vote on Monday passed off largely peacefully, local media in the Central Region of Ghana reported that a polling station had been fired on. Unidentified gunmen shot and injured at least two people near the Steps of Christ polling station in Kasoa.

As of Tuesday 8 December, vote counting has started and while the final results are not expected to be released until later in the week, initial results suggest that incumbent Nana Akufo-Addo is ahead of his rival, former president Mahama. The ruling National Patriotic Party (NPP) is also reported to be leading in the parliamentary polls, though former President Mahama's party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), is disputing this.

On 9 December, activists and supporters of the opposition NDC party gathered in central Accra, including at the Electoral Commission's headquarters and at the International Conference Centre. The conference facility is being used by the Electoral Commission in the tabulation of Ghana's 7 December presidential election. While it remains unclear why the activists have gathered, it is likely that the group is calling for the announcement of former president John Mahama as the victor of the vote. However the Electoral Commission has yet to declare a winner.

### *Preserving Democracy*

Monday's vote marks Ghana's eighth election since the country returned to a multiparty democracy in 1992. Since then, Ghana has had five presidents and three hand-overs of power, with the political transitions being carried out in a largely peaceful manner. The 2020 presidential election also marks the third time that the two main candidates, incumbent Akufo-Addo and long-time rival former President Mahama, are running against each other for the presidency. In the first contest in 2012, Mahama unexpectedly became his party's candidate after then President John Evans Atta Mills died just five months before the presidential vote. Mahama went on to defeat Akufo-Addo who had been the favourite to win the election. While the results were challenged in court on the grounds of electoral fraud, after eight months Ghana's Supreme Court upheld Mahama's narrow win. By 2016 however Akufo-Addo was

able to get his revenge, winning the election against Mahama. In a recent interview, Mahama disclosed that an ailing economy, a power crisis that he resolved a little too late and “fake news from opposition’s social media troll factory” led to his defeat in 2016. While it remains unclear who will win the presidency this year, what is evident is that there will not be a fourth face-off between these two candidates as whoever wins will be automatically ruled out of future elections as the country’s constitution limits candidates to serving two terms in office.

The December 2020 election comes nearly a month after the passing of former President Jerry Rawlings, who died at the age of 73 on 12 November following a short illness. The former leader, who oversaw the return of multiparty politics to Ghana, had remained popular after stepping down. He backed the ruling NPP in the 2016 election, and his support for Akufo-Addo resulted in disaffection in the opposition party and ultimately cost it votes. Former President Mahama has stated that more than 80,000 NDC supporters in various constituencies across the Volta region, which is the party’s stronghold, did not vote in the 2016 election. In a bid to not repeat what occurred in the last election, prior to Rawling’s passing the NDC had made efforts to mend its relationship with the former leader. While NDC party officials have indicated that they are confident in the 2020 election, matters have been complicated further with the fact that Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings, the former president’s widow, is the presidential candidate of the National Democratic Party (NDP).

The December 2020 election also comes at a time when separatist groups have intensified their calls for independence from Ghana to form their own country - Western Togoland. After almost two decades of silence, calls for self-determination re-emerged in 2017 when two new militant splinter groups were formed. In September of this year, one of these new groups, the Western Togoland Restoration Front (WTRF), staged violent attacks, mounting roadblocks, attacking a police station, seizing weapons and burning down a bus terminal. While the central government deployed the military to the Volta Region ahead of the December election in a bid to thwart any attempts to disrupt the vote, questions remain about the future of this region, and whether further violence will erupt.

No doubt, this year’s election campaigning was different due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which changed the way that the campaigns were carried out. This situation however led to frustrations amongst both politicians and Ghanaians. Instead of holding mass rallies across the country, political parties used social media to express their messages ahead of the vote. The country’s main political parties used Twitter and Facebook to post and share counter-messages while radio, television and bulk text messages were also used throughout the campaign period. However in the final campaigning days, many politicians opted to meet with crowds of supporters, in a move that has led to growing concern that this could lead to a surge in new COVID-19 infections in the coming weeks.

### *MS Risk Advisory*

Anyone current in Ghana is advised to exercise increased personal vigilance in the wake of the 7 December presidential election. As the vote counting process goes forward, tensions may be heightened in the coming days as the country awaits the election results. Travellers are advised to avoid all demonstrations as a standard security precaution and due to the possibility of political violence. You should keep away from areas where security personnel appear to be deploying. In the event that clashes break out, take shelter in a safe, non-governmental building. Travellers are advised to monitor local news sources, should keep up-to-date with ongoing developments and should follow all security personnel instructions.

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