






Democracy in practice: Civil Society perspectives on the performance and constraints of Ghana's Fourth Republican Democracy in the Tamale Metropolis

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ABSTRACT

This study examined Ghana's Fourth Republican democracy from the perspective of civil society in the Tamale Metropolis, focusing on democratic performance, citizen participation, and governance quality. A qualitative case study design was used to capture rich, contextual insights, using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Twenty (20) participants were purposively sampled for their extensive knowledge and experience of Ghana's democratic system since 1992, ensuring depth and diversity of perspectives. The results indicate that, while Ghana has maintained political stability, regular elections, and peaceful power transitions, the substantive quality of democracy remains uneven. The multi-party system, dominated by the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC), promotes competition and accountability but is constrained by political polarisation, ethnic voting patterns, and executive overreach. Civil society actors play a critical role in promoting accountability, civic engagement, and oversight, although resource constraints and partisan influence limit their impact. Anchored in the Participatory Theory of Democracy, the study recommends that judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, civic education, and participatory platforms are essential for consolidating democracy, increasing citizen trust, and promoting inclusive and responsive governance.

Keywords: Ghana, Fourth Republic, Participatory Democracy, Civil Society, Democratic Governance.

INTRODUCTION

Since gaining independence in 1957, Ghana has undergone a profound political transformation, culminating in the establishment of a constitutional multiparty system under the Fourth Republic in 1992. After decades marked by authoritarian interruptions and military rule, Ghana's democratic governance has lasted for more than three decades, earning the country a reputation as one of Africa's most stable democracies. Regular elections, peaceful political competition, and adherence to

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constitutional procedures have positioned Ghana as a reference point for democratic governance in West Africa.¹

Competitive elections have been a defining feature of Ghana's democratic record, with the Electoral Commission widely recognised for institutional autonomy and technical competence. Peaceful power transitions in 2000, 2008, 2016, and 2024 further reinforced this stability, signalling elite commitment to constitutionalism and electoral legitimacy. These achievements are often cited as evidence of democratic consolidation and have shaped Ghana's international reputation as a democratic success story.

However, democratic consolidation extends beyond procedural regularity. Ghana's formal pluralism is dominated by two major parties, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), raising concerns about political exclusion, constrained representation, and limited ideological diversity.² Most assessments of Ghanaian democracy focus narrowly on elections and institutional form, often overlooking how democratic processes function in practice and how citizens and organised civil society actors experience them.

Contemporary scholarship on democratic quality challenges these minimalist conceptions, highlighting substantive dimensions such as accountability, responsiveness, inclusiveness, and meaningful citizen participation.³ From this perspective, democracy is evaluated not only by the existence of formal institutions but also by how effectively they enable citizens to exercise voice, influence decision-making, and hold authorities accountable. Therefore, democratic legitimacy depends on lived experiences rather than procedural compliance alone.

This concern is particularly relevant in Africa, where democracy is often assessed using externally defined benchmarks that prioritise elections and power exchanges, reflecting Western normative assumptions.⁴ Although important, such criteria provide only a partial account of democratic practice. Scholars argue that African democracies should also be evaluated by the extent to which governance resonates with local values, societal expectations, and institutional responsiveness.⁵ Ghana exemplifies this tension and meets international electoral standards, yet many citizens equate democracy primarily with voting rather than sustained participation or policy influence.⁶

Civil society plays a central role in addressing this gap. Beyond facilitating participation, civil society monitors state performance, articulates collective interests, and enhances accountability, providing a vital bridge between citizens and political institutions.⁷ Organised civil society actors are particularly well-positioned to evaluate democratic quality, as they experience governance processes firsthand and mediate state–society relations. Their perspectives reveal the strengths and systemic limitations of Ghana's democracy that remain invisible in elite-driven or election-centred analyses.

This study examined Ghana's democratic system through the lens of civil society in the Tamale Metropolis. Focusing on this region is analytically significant, as historical political marginalisation, evolving civic engagement patterns, and active civil society networks provide a context in which democratic quality can be critically assessed. By centring the experiences and evaluations of civil society actors, the study goes beyond procedural metrics to assess participation, responsiveness, accountability, and citizen influence in everyday governance.

Existing research on Ghanaian democracy has emphasised elections, institutional frameworks, and elite behaviour while largely neglecting how organised civil society experiences and shapes

¹ D. Armah-Attoh and D. Robertson, "Ghana's Democracy: Deepening Political Participation," 2014.

² S. Agyei-Mensah, "Political Parties, Elections and Democratic Consolidation in Ghana," *African Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (2018): 45–62.

³ Quinton Mayne and Brigitte Geißel, "Don't Good Democracies Need 'Good' Citizens? Citizen Dispositions and the Study of Democratic Quality," *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 1 (2018): 33–47; C. Wegscheider, "Democratic Quality and Political Trust," *European Political Science Review* 12, no. 1 (2020): 1–20.

⁴ H. Kriesi, "The Politicization of Democracy," *Political Communication* 33, no. 1 (2016): 13–36.

⁵ O., Akin and T. . Ade, "Beyond Elections: Rethinking Democratic Governance in Africa," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 12, no. 4 (2018): 67–78.; A. Cronert, "Democracy, Elections and Legitimacy in Africa. Democratization" 27, no. 4 (2020): 641–59.

⁶ S. Osafo-Danso, "Electoral Participation and Democratic Understanding in Ghana," *Journal of African Elections* 14, no. 1 (2015): 78–97; A. R. Mohammed, "Citizen Perceptions of Democracy in Ghana," *African Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 2 (2023): 112–29.

⁷ Eboe Hutchful, "The Civil Society Debate in Africa," *International Journal* 51, no. 1 (1996): 54–77.

democratic practice. This study addresses this gap by exploring how civil society perceive the Fourth Republic's democratic system, identify its limitations, and articulate the aspirations for more inclusive and responsive governance. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on participatory democracy, democratic quality, and the future of democratic governance in Ghana and Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ghana's democracy exemplifies a procedural, election-centred system with limited participatory depth. While the country has maintained regular elections and peaceful transitions of power since 1992, citizen influence beyond these electoral moments is constrained. Participatory democratic theory exposes this gap by distinguishing formal institutional stability from substantive democratic quality, highlighting the critical role of continuous citizen engagement in shaping governance outcomes.

The democratic quality literature emphasises that legitimacy depends not only on elections, but also on inclusivity, responsiveness, and accountability.⁸ In contexts where participation is shallow, institutions may appear legitimate procedurally while failing to reflect citizens' preferences. African critiques of electoralism stress that multiparty systems often mask elite capture, patronage politics, and procedural compliance that obscure substantive citizen influence.⁹ Electoral democracy, while necessary, is insufficient to ensure democratic responsiveness.

Civil society emerges conceptually as a bridge between procedural democracy and participatory quality. It provides platforms for citizens to articulate interests, mobilise collectively, and hold authorities accountable. However, civil society is not inherently democratic; power relations and elite dominance can limit its inclusivity and efficacy.¹⁰ By providing the participatory energy and accountability mechanisms that procedural systems lack, civil society ensures that democracy is experienced as a meaningful practice rather than a formal compliance exercise. In Ghana, this conceptualisation frames the focus of the study on civil society perspectives, highlighting areas where electoral democracy does not translate into citizen empowerment.

Ghana's Fourth Republican democracy demonstrates notable procedural stability. Electoral processes have produced credible outcomes, peaceful power transitions, and institutionalised political competition between the NPP and NDC.¹¹ Judicial oversight of elections, including rulings in 2012 and 2020, has reinforced constitutional adherence and improved elite and citizen commitment to democratic rules.¹² At the formal level, this has positioned Ghana as a model of African electoral democracy.

Despite this procedural strength, participatory deficits remain evident. Political engagement outside of elections is limited, parties dominate agenda-setting, and citizens often lack meaningful influence over policy decisions.¹³ "Winner-takes-all" dynamics and ethno-regional voting patterns reinforce elite control and constrain deliberative inclusion. Public perceptions of selective justice, media partisanship, and politicisation of public institutions further erode trust and weaken accountability.¹⁴ These patterns confirm the participatory thinness of Ghanaian democracy, demonstrating that electoral integrity alone does not equal democratic quality.

Civil society provides critical avenues for addressing these deficits. Local associations, cooperatives, faith-based organisations, and community advocacy networks facilitate deliberation,

⁸ T. Christiano and S. Bajaj, "Democracy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. N. Zalta (Ed.) (Stanford University Press, 2021); Jane Mansbridge et al., "A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy," *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, 2012, 1–26.

⁹ O. Akin and T. Ade, "Beyond Elections: Rethinking Democratic Governance in Africa," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 12, no. 4 (2018): 67–78; N. Nwogwugwu, "Electoralism and Democratic Deficits in Africa," *African Review* 47, no. 1 (2020): 1–18.

¹⁰ D. Silander, "Civil Society and Democracy Promotion," *Democratization* 26, no. 6 (2019): 1049–67; I. Zhuravleva, "Civil Society and Democratic Development," *Journal of Civil Society* 11, no. 3 (2015): 303–20.

¹¹ F. Oduro, M. Awal, and D. Maxwell, "Political Party Financing in Ghana. CDD-Ghana.," 2014; G. Strouboulis, P. Takyi, and A. Frempong, "Electoral Integrity and Party Competition in Ghana.," *African Affairs* 122, no. 486 (2023): 1–24.

¹² S. A. Paalo and R. E. V. Gyampo, "Judicialisation of Politics in Ghana," *Journal of African Law* 63, no. 2 (2019): 197–219.

¹³ G. M. Bob-Milliar and J. W. Paller, "Political Settlements and the Politics of Exclusion in Ghana," *African Affairs*, 117, no. 469 (2018): 561–83.

¹⁴ J. Y. Asomah, "Media Partisanship and Democratic Accountability in Ghana.," *Journal of African Media Studies* 12, no. 2 (2020): 189–205; S. Stoecker, "Democratic Backsliding and Institutional Trust in Africa.," *Democratization* 29, no. 4 (2022): 689–707.

mobilisation, and policy influence beyond electoral cycles.¹⁵ Evidence from field studies indicates that these mechanisms enhance political awareness, civic norms, and collective problem-solving.¹⁶ Nevertheless, uneven access, resource constraints, and elite influence limit the reach and inclusivity of participatory spaces.

Empirical findings highlight a clear gap between procedural stability and substantive citizen engagement. Although citizens trust electoral processes, their opportunities to shape governance outcomes are mediated through elite-dominated institutions. Civil society acts as a necessary intermediary, translating episodic participation into sustained engagement and accountability. These dynamic underscores the central argument of participatory democratic theory: democratic quality depends not only on procedural compliance but on continuous, meaningful citizen involvement, facilitated by robust civil society participation.

By linking theoretical, conceptual, and empirical insights, this literature review demonstrates that Ghana's democracy, though procedurally stable, participation is thin. Participatory democratic theory offers analytical tools to evaluate this gap, while civil society provides the mechanisms through which democratic quality can be enhanced. This perspective shifts the evaluation of democracy from electoral procedures to lived experiences, responsiveness, and inclusive citizen engagement, providing a coherent foundation for the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in the Participatory Theory of Democracy, which reconceptualises democracy as a dynamic process of citizen engagement rather than a system defined solely by elections. Participatory democracy emphasises continuous involvement of citizens in decision-making, arguing that democratic quality depends on the degree to which people are actively empowered to influence outcomes that affect their lives.¹⁷ Pateman's foundational contribution highlights that democracy extends beyond periodic voting, requiring participation in multiple governance spheres.¹⁸ Participation, in her formulation, is both a tool of influence and a process through which citizens develop civic competence, political efficacy, and democratic norms, making it particularly relevant in emerging democracies where institutional stability may coexist with weak empowerment of citizens.

Beyond the procedural dimension, participatory democracy functions as a lens for assessing democratic quality, shifting attention from institutional formality to substantive citizen engagement. Democratic quality is measured by responsiveness, inclusiveness, and accountability, rather than by elections alone.¹⁹ Citizens' capacity to articulate preferences, influence policy, and hold authorities accountable is central to this perspective. Sustained interaction between citizens and governing institutions fosters legitimacy and ensures that governance outcomes reflect social needs rather than elite priorities. This approach highlights the gap between formal electoral legitimacy and substantive democratic practice, providing a nuanced framework for evaluating democracies that appear stable on paper but have limited participatory depth.

Civil society serves as the critical conduit through which participatory democracy is operationalised. Civic associations, community organisations, and advocacy networks provide platforms for deliberation, mobilisation, and influence on decision-making, extending participation beyond electoral moments.²⁰ Embedded in these structures, citizens can exercise influence, cultivate shared norms, and reinforce accountability mechanisms. Therefore, civil society is not merely an auxiliary feature of democracy but a central analytical bridge that links participatory theory to observable democratic practice. In contexts such as Ghana's Fourth Republic, perspectives of the civil society shed light on whether formal institutions promote sustained participation, whether citizen voices are

¹⁵ Donald Leslie Craythorne, *Municipal Administration: The Handbook* (Juta and Company Ltd, 2006); Neelmani Jaysawal, "Civil Society, Democratic Space, and Social Work," *Sage Open* 3, no. 4 (2013): 2158244013504934.

¹⁶ Dryzek et al., "The Crisis of Democracy and the Science of Deliberation."

¹⁷ R. Post, *Democracy, Expertise, and Academic Freedom* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge university press, 1975).

¹⁹ J.-P. Gagnon, "The Democratic Theory of Participation," *Democratic Theory* 1, no. 1 (2010): 89–107; C. Saunders, "Deliberative Democracy and Participation," *Political Studies* 58, no. 3 (2010): 425–45.

²⁰ John S Dryzek et al., "The Crisis of Democracy and the Science of Deliberation," *Science* 363, no. 6432 (2019): 1144–46.

incorporated into governance processes, and whether democratic quality is reflected in everyday political and social interactions. By centring participatory engagement and civil society, this theoretical lens enables a rigorous assessment of democracy as both an institutional framework and a lived social process, offering a coherent foundation for examining democratic strengths, limitations, and prospects for deepening inclusion and responsiveness.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to examine the quality of Ghana's Fourth Republican democracy from the perspectives of organised civil society actors. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable when the objective is to explore how democracy is experienced, interpreted, and evaluated by actors who actively engage in governance processes, rather than simply participating as voters.²¹ Given the study's focus on democratic performance beyond electoral procedures, specifically accountability, participation, responsiveness, and inclusion, qualitative inquiry enabled an in-depth exploration of meanings, interpretations, and institutional interactions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone.²²

Research Design

A qualitative case study design was employed, with the Tamale Metropolis serving as the focal case. Case study design enables an in-depth and context-sensitive examination of a contemporary political system within its real-life setting.²³ Tamale was selected analytically rather than descriptively. As a major urban centre in Northern Ghana, the metropolis presents a context characterised by historical political marginalisation, uneven state responsiveness, and a vibrant landscape of civil society organisations engaged in advocacy, development, and governance monitoring. This combination provides analytical leverage to examine democratic quality in a setting where procedural democracy coexists with persistent governance deficits.

Study Population and Sampling Strategy

The study population comprised organised civil society actors operating within the Tamale Metropolis. Civil society actors were defined as individuals who hold leadership or active membership roles in non-governmental organisations, faith-based organisations, community-based organisations, advocacy groups, youth and women's associations, and governance-focused civic platforms. These actors were selected because of their sustained engagement with democratic processes, policy advocacy, civic education, and state accountability mechanisms.

Purposeful sampling, specifically criterion-based expert sampling, was employed to select participants with demonstrable experience in democratic engagement.²⁴ Selection criteria included: (1) active involvement in a civil society organisation for a minimum of five years, (2) direct engagement with governance or accountability-related activities, and (3) sustained residence in Ghana since the inception of the Fourth Republic, with no extended absence exceeding six months. This sampling strategy ensured that participants had institutional memory and practical experience necessary to evaluate democratic performance.²⁵

Sample Size

A total of 20 participants were recruited. This sample size was sufficient to capture diversity across organisational types while allowing deep, context-rich inquiry. Data saturation was reached after the

²¹ John W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (SAGE Publications, 2018).

²² Lesley Eleanor Tomaszewski, Jill Zarestky, and Elsa Gonzalez, "Planning Qualitative Research: Design and Decision Making for New Researchers," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (January 1, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920967174>.

²³ Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*.

²⁴ Stephen J Gentles et al., "Sampling in Qualitative Research: Insights from an Overview of the Methods Literature," *The Qualitative Report* 20, no. 11 (2015): 1772–89.

²⁵ Jeovany Martínez-Mesa et al., "Sampling: How to Select Participants in My Research Study?," *Anais Brasileiros de Dermatologia* 91 (2016): 326–30.

eighteenth interview, with subsequent data reinforcing existing thematic patterns rather than generating new analytical categories, consistent with qualitative sampling principles.

Data Sources

Primary data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with civil society actors. Secondary sources, including academic literature, policy documents, civil society reports, and governance assessments, were used to contextualise findings and support analytical triangulation rather than to substitute for primary data.²⁶

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). A total of 20 participants were interviewed in individual interviews, which allowed participants to articulate personal experiences, organisational perspectives, and critical reflections on the democratic system of Ghana.²⁷ In addition, one FGD comprising 6–8 participants drawn from the interview sample was conducted to stimulate collective reflection and interaction.

The participants in the FGD were purposively drawn from those who had previously participated in the interviews. This approach enabled the study to build on emerging themes from the interviews and explore these issues through group interaction, further allowing for validation, refinement, and contestation of individual perspectives within a collective setting. The FGD also facilitated the emergence of shared concerns, contested interpretations, and consensus-building processes that mirror real-world dynamics of civic engagement.²⁸

All interviews and the FGD were conducted in English and relevant local languages. Where local languages were used, translations were undertaken with careful attention to preserving conceptual meaning rather than literal wording. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

Data Analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach.²⁹ The analysis followed a systematic process of familiarisation, open coding, theme development, and iterative refinement. Coding was done manually to maintain close engagement with the data. Emerging themes were continuously compared between participants and organisational categories to identify convergences and divergences in democratic evaluations. The analytical process was guided by democratic quality dimensions of accountability, participation, responsiveness, and inclusion while remaining open to emergent themes grounded in lived experiences of participants. Reflexive memoing and peer debriefing were employed to minimise interpretive bias and strengthen analytical transparency.

Analytical Rigour and Trustworthiness

To ensure analytical rigour, the study used prolonged engagement and member validation to strengthen credibility. Transferability was supported through detailed contextual and procedural description, while dependability was enhanced by maintaining a transparent audit trail of methodological decisions. Confirmability was reinforced through reflexive documentation and systematic data management to minimise researcher bias.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Participants gave their informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and respondents retained the right

²⁶ Robert K Yin, "Study Research: Design and Methods," *Third Addition, Applied Social Research Methods Series 5* (2009).

²⁷ I. Seidman, "Interviewing as Qualitative Research (4th Ed.).," *Teachers College Press*, 2013; S. Kvale and S. Brinkmann, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015).

²⁸ P. N. Shamdasani, "Focus Groups: Theory and Practice (3rd Ed.)" (SAGE., 2015).

²⁹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (January 21, 2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.

to withdraw at any stage without consequence. All data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Procedural Democratic Stability and Electoral Legitimacy

Results from interviews and focus group discussions indicate that Ghana has maintained sustained democratic stability, a functioning multi-party system, and regular elections since 1992. The respondents described democracy as a system that guarantees political stability, representation, and protection of fundamental rights. One respondent stated: "*Democracy in Ghana can be described as stable, with a history of successful political transitions, a fairly free press, an active civil society, and an independent judiciary.*"

These perceptions are consistent with Owusu's and Asante's studies, which indicate that constitutionalism and judicial autonomy contribute to democratic consolidation.³⁰ Public support further reinforces stability, as citizens actively participate in electoral processes and trust institutions.

The multi-party system, particularly the alternating dominance of the NDC and NPP, promotes competition, policy debate, and accountability.³¹ A respondent emphasised: "*I can vote freely during general elections and elect a leader of my choice and any political party I want. It also provides access to independent institutions and freedom of speech.*"

Despite these strengths, political polarisation and ethnic-based voting occasionally challenge inclusivity.³² Fluctuating voter turnout from 50.16% in 1992 to 85.12% in 2004 and 79% in 2020 reflects both citizen engagement and the influence of competitive politics.³³ Periodic elections are recognised by respondents as the cornerstone of democratic legitimacy:

"One of the most significant strengths of our democracy is its regular elections... Coupled with the rule of law... and a multi-party system that represents diverse groups, these institutions ensure that citizens can freely align with any political party and exercise their right to free speech."

Participation Beyond Elections: Formal Inclusion, Substantive Constraints

Ghanaians demonstrate a strong commitment to democratic norms, particularly through active political participation and adherence to the electoral process. Peaceful transitions of power over the past decades underscore this civic dedication and reflect the consolidation of democracy under the Fourth Republic. One focus group participant observed:

"Ghana, compared to other African countries, has maintained a strong and stable democracy since the Fourth Republic. Power has consistently transferred every four years through a multi-party system, with several parties competing for governance. Although not entirely without incidents, these transitions have generally been very peaceful, with few casualties recorded in recent elections."

This interview response reinforces the view that Ghana's democratic system is characterised by institutional continuity, political pluralism, and a populace that values the legitimacy of electoral outcomes, contributing to overall political stability. Although procedural democracy is robust, respondents highlighted that meaningful participation extends beyond voting. Participation includes involvement in public consultations, civic organisations, and policy forums. One participant observed:

³⁰ M. Owusu, "Constitutionalism and Democratic Resilience in Ghana.," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 16, no. 2 (2022): 56-71.; R. Asante, "Judicial Independence and Democratic Consolidation in Ghana.," *African Journal of Law and Society* 6, no. 1 (2020): 85-103.

³¹ M. Ferazia, S. Jolly, and C. Mudde, "Two-Party Dominance and Democratic Quality. Party Politics" 26, no. 4 (2020): 451-63; Lee Drutman, *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

³² C. Taylor, "Political Polarisation in Emerging Democracies," *Democratization* 23, no. 7 (2016): 1131-52; C. Sefa-Nyarko, "Ethnicity and Voting Behaviour in Ghana," *African Studies Review* 63, no. 3 (2020): 563-86.

³³ K. A. Anaman and C. Bukari, "Voter Turnout and Electoral Competitiveness in Ghana's Fourth Republic.," *African Journal of Governance and Development* 9, no. 1 (2020): 22-41.

"One fundamental reason we adopted democracy was that there was political unrest... so for participation and inclusiveness in the governance of the country."

However, participants also reported significant challenges that restrict full participation. Judicial processes were described as susceptible to political influence, and resource limitations and partisan pressures often limited the operations of anti-corruption institutions such as CHRAJ and EOCO. One respondent observed:

"The judiciary is very poor and is not going well. It seems that whichever party is in power controls the judiciary, although it is supposed to be neutral. An ordinary person cannot get justice if they do not belong to a particular group."

These accounts reveal that, despite the formal structures that allow participation, the effectiveness of Ghana's democracy is undermined by political polarisation and public corruption. Political polarisation emerged as another critical constraint, with party loyalty frequently superseding national interest. Respondents observed that appointments, media narratives, and electoral processes are often influenced by partisanship and ethnic alignment.

"With political polarisation in the early 2000s, we did not face such issues, but now the case of polarisation we have these days does not help. When a particular government is in power, only people in that ruling party get positions and appointments, while other opposition members get nothing. Additionally, some media houses defend the government of the day instead of holding it accountable."

The findings resonate with the Participatory Theory of Democracy, which emphasises that democracy is not merely procedural but requires citizen empowerment and meaningful access to decision-making. Even with formal rights enshrined in the 1992 Constitution, structural barriers such as limited civic education and political interference prevent the full realisation of participatory democracy.

Accountability without Consequence: Rule of Law under Political Pressure

Respondents consistently identified the rule of law as central to democratic governance. The 1992 Constitution guarantees fundamental rights, separation of powers, and judicial independence. One participant noted: *"A stable, just, and democratic society depends on constitutional law. It gives clear rules for how the government should operate and ensures that no one becomes too powerful."*

Participants highlighted that the rule of law also strengthens economic growth by providing legal certainty, protecting property rights, and encouraging domestic and foreign investment. As one respondent explained:

"I can vote freely during general elections and elect a leader of my choice. It has also provided me with independent institutions, enjoyment of human rights, and opportunities to join any political party or contest for political positions if qualified."

The responses from the respondents are consistent with Naseem's study, which reveals that socially, the rule of law promotes equality, curtails corruption, and constrains government actions within constitutional limits, thereby reinforcing democratic governance and sustainable development.³⁴ Nevertheless, accountability mechanisms often operate under political pressure. Respondents highlighted selective prosecution, corruption, and resource limitations in anti-corruption institutions:

"Corruption is a major concern because funds that could have been used for development end up in private pockets, and the fight against corruption is not progressing effectively."
"The judiciary is very poor... it seems that whichever party is in power controls the judiciary."

³⁴ M. Naseem, "Rule of Law and Democratic Consolidation," *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 64, (2021): 100457.

These accounts indicate that while formal mechanisms exist, the practical enforcement of accountability remains inconsistent. This contrasts with Naseem and Keil literature, suggesting that institutional frameworks should theoretically safeguard democratic integrity.³⁵

Transparency and accountability were recurrent themes in the results findings. Respondents underscored that open government operations and decision-making processes build public trust in institutions.³⁶ Institutions such as CHRAJ, EOCO, the Auditor-General's Department, and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) are legally mandated to enforce these principles. However, participants reported political interference, selective enforcement, and resource limitations that compromise the effectiveness of these bodies. A respondent articulated these challenges:

"Those are the things that have made our democracy dysfunctional because when you look at corruption, there is no accountability. Everybody does things the way they want because they know that, at the end of the day, they will not be held accountable for their actions."

Again, cases like the Ghana Youth Employment and Entrepreneurial Development Agency (GYEEDA) scandal in 2013 and the Agyapa Royalties controversy in 2020 were cited as concrete examples of systemic failures in transparency and accountability. Respondents argued that such incidents erode public trust and promote political apathy, threatening the sustainability of democratic governance. Limited access to information, bureaucratic resistance, and inadequate civic education further constrain citizens' capacity to demand transparency. A respondent observed the following.

"We have laws like the Right to Information Act, but most citizens do not know how to use it. Government agencies resist sharing information, and without awareness, people cannot hold leaders accountable."

Civil Society as a Democratic Intermediary and Corrective

Civil society actors were described as critical intermediaries that support democratic governance by promoting transparency, accountability, and civic engagement. Respondents highlighted the role of NGOs, advocacy groups, and think tanks as watchdogs:

"The significant strength of our democracy is that it ensures peace because there will always be a transition of power... It also brings tolerance among ethnic and religious groups, as people now identify more with their political party than their tribe."

Participants emphasised that a free press, anti-corruption agencies, and international partners reinforce institutional checks, even amid persistent corruption. Civil society facilitates citizen mobilisation, provides oversight, and strengthens adherence to democratic norms, consistent with PTD's emphasis on active citizen agency in governance.

Aspirational Democracy and Demands for Deepening Participation

The interview responses revealed that citizens aspire to meaningful participation in decision-making, transparent and accountable governance, adherence to the rule of law, and socio-economic transformation. The findings highlighted that civil society actors recognise participation as a fundamental pillar of democratic governance. Participation encompasses multiple activities, including voting in national and local elections, engaging in public consultations, joining civic organisations, and contributing to community development initiatives. Voting was identified as the most direct form of participation, allowing citizens to select representatives who reflect their interests and policy priorities. As one respondent explained:

"One fundamental reason we adopted democracy was because there was political unrest in the country and the voices of the people were not heard, so for participation and inclusiveness in the governance of the country."

³⁵ Naseem, "Rule of Law and Democratic Consolidation"; S. Keil, "Rule of Law and Democratic Governance," *Democratization* 24, no. 2 (2017): 318–35.

³⁶ O. W. Gabriel et al., "Political Participation and Civic Engagement," *Routledge*, 2019.

Qualitative responses revealed citizens' aspirations for a democracy characterised by active participation, accountability, transparency, and socio-economic transformation. Voting was considered fundamental, but citizens also sought avenues for engagement in policy formulation, consultative forums, and public accountability: *"By ensuring accountability because it's a major foundation of democracy... if we strengthen accountability, I think we can consolidate our democratic system."*

The participants also identified economic security as crucial to democratic stability: *"If the economic situation improves and citizens have sustainable employment... it positively affects democratic stability."*

The respondents called for constitutional reform, decentralisation of executive powers, and improved civic education to deepen participatory governance. These findings underscore the aspirational nature of Ghana's democracy, highlighting the ongoing gap between institutional arrangements and the lived experiences of citizens, reinforcing the need for a democracy that is both procedural and substantive.

The findings demonstrate that ordinary Ghanaians aspire to a democratic system characterised by active participation, accountability, transparency, and constitutional governance. These aspirations reflect the participatory theory of democracy, which stresses that democracy is most legitimate when citizens are directly involved in decision-making and oversight processes. Although Ghana has made progress in embedding democratic norms, persistent challenges such as corruption, limited transparency, inadequate civic education, and executive overreach impede the full realisation of participatory governance. Addressing these challenges is essential to strengthening democracy, improving citizen trust, and ensuring that governance reflects the collective aspirations of civil society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To deepen Ghana's democratic governance beyond procedural stability, reforms must prioritise accountability, substantive participation, and institutional independence. First, judicial independence should be strengthened through improved resourcing, merit-based appointments, and effective oversight mechanisms to address persistent perceptions of political interference and selective justice. Restoring public confidence in the judiciary is essential to sustaining the rule of law.

Second, anti-corruption efforts must shift from formal commitment to effective enforcement. The passage of the Conduct of Public Officers' Bill should be prioritised to strengthen asset declaration and sanctions. Key institutions such as CHRAJ and EOCO require greater financial autonomy, prosecutorial capacity, and insulation from partisan pressures to address the problem of accountability without consequence identified in the study.

Third, democratic participation should be expanded beyond elections. Civic education must move beyond voter mobilisation to include rights awareness, use of the Right to Information Act, and sustained engagement in policy processes. Strengthening decentralised participatory platforms such as town halls and district-level consultative forums would enhance citizens' substantive influence in governance.

Finally, institutional reforms are needed to rebalance executive dominance and safeguard electoral integrity. Strengthening parliamentary oversight, ensuring the independence of the Electoral Commission, promoting media neutrality, and sustaining inter-party dialogue are critical to reducing political polarisation and consolidating Ghana's democratic legitimacy and stability.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Ghana's democratic system under the Fourth Republic has maintained largely stability, characterised by regular elections, peaceful power transitions, and adherence to democratic norms. The multi-party system has played a central role in promoting political competition, representation, and accountability, allowing citizens to hold leaders responsible and enhancing the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Despite enduring challenges such as political polarisation, corruption, and economic inequality, the consistent practice of free and fair elections underpins Ghana's democratic resilience. This stability aligns with the participatory theory of democracy, which asserts that

the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance depend on meaningful engagement of civil society in decision-making processes.

The rule of law remains a foundational pillar, ensuring equality, justice, and accountability while regulating institutional behaviour and protecting individual rights. The respondents noted that political polarisation and corruption undermine the legal frameworks and institutional effectiveness, erode public trust and constraining the capacity of civil society to engage meaningfully in governance. These findings highlight the critical need to strengthen legal and institutional mechanisms to support transparency and civic oversight, consistent with participatory democratic principles.

Civil society participation, transparency, and accountability were identified as essential for consolidating democracy. Participation extends beyond voting to engagement in civic organisations, community forums, and local governance structures, enabling citizens to shape policies and demand responsible governance. Transparency allows scrutiny of government operations, while accountability ensures that public officials are responsible for their actions. Respondents highlighted weaknesses in access to information and oversight mechanisms, which limit civic engagement and undermine democratic stability.

Constitutional rule provides the legal framework that delineates powers, safeguards individual liberties, and maintains institutional balance. However, excessive presidential powers and limited representation constrain citizen participation, indicating the need for constitutional reform. Sustainable democratic consolidation in Ghana requires addressing political polarisation, reinforcing anti-corruption measures, enhancing transparency, and expanding avenues for civil society engagement, ensuring accountable leadership, social cohesion, and inclusive development.

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