

The Politicisation of a Chieftaincy Conflict: The Case of Dagbon, Northern Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the chieftaincy succession conflict in Dagbon, Northern Ghana. It traces the history of the struggle for the kingship title between the two feuding clans, the Abudu and the Andani clans, and analyzes in detail the clashes of March 2002 which resulted in the death of the incumbent king of Dagbon and several of his supporters. Using data and information gathered from key informant interviews and an analysis of newspaper and internet sources, the paper concludes that the conflict has been highly politicised because chiefs, royals and the educated elite in Dagbon have a tradition of being involved in national politics and have often used their influence in government to attain high traditional office. Furthermore, the desire of Ghana's two main political parties for electoral votes in the keenly contested elections has contributed to the politicisation of the Dagbon conflict since the return to civilian rule in 1992.

Keywords: *chieftaincy conflicts, Dagbon, Northern Ghana, politics in Ghana, chiefs and politics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of the chieftaincy institution has not waned in most parts of Ghana despite the entrenchment of democratic rule and the expansion of state powers since the return to civilian rule in 1992. On the contrary, many people still hold their traditional leaders in high esteem and support for the institution of chieftaincy remains strong throughout the country. This is particularly the case amongst the centralised and hierarchically organized ethnic groups such as the Ashanti and the Gonja, Mamprusi, Dagomba and the Wala of northern Ghana. Chiefs do not only command considerable respect amongst their subjects, they also have access to considerable resources including the labour of their subjects, land, livestock, minerals, water and trees of economic value. These factors explain why the desire to become a chief is high amongst both the rural and the educated urban population in Ghana (Arhin 1985; Awedoba and Odotei 2006). In many parts of northern Ghana the contest for chieftaincy titles, particularly at the divisional, paramountcy or kingship level, is extremely competitive. Becoming a chief is not merely a contest between individual members of the royal group but involves the contestants' families, lineages and clans as well as their friends and supporters (Hagan 2006; Tonah 2011).

Although chieftaincy conflicts are found throughout Ghana, there is a widespread perception in the country that northern Ghana is particularly prone to such conflicts. This is probably because some conflicts in the north have been very violent and protracted, involving several ethnic groups living over a wide geographical area. Most of the conflicts are typically succession disputes, involving two or more gates laying claim to a chieftaincy position or title. Such conflicts usually involve determining who is the best qualified person to occupy a particular position; which traditional rituals constitute the “enskinment”¹ process and whether the individual selected has gone through the appropriate rituals administered by the traditionally designated persons (Abubakari 2008; Anamzoya and Tonah 2012). When the contestants are from different lineages, clans or ethnic groups, such conflicts often tend to be expanded to involve members of the entire lineage, clan or ethnic group.

Besides being violent and protracted, a few chieftaincy conflicts in the north have also been politicized, with the ruling government and the main opposition party interfering directly and indirectly in the conflict and supporting the different factions in the conflict. Furthermore, conflicts in the north have also been recurrent, often defying numerous attempts at a resolution by the government, traditional authorities and civil society (Linde and Naylor 1999; Bogner 1996, 2009). The violent nature of chieftaincy and other conflicts in the north has frequently been explained by the long period of colonial and post-colonial exploitation and neglect of the region, the widespread poverty and low levels of education and the dearth of socio-economic infrastructure in the area. Furthermore, Northern Ghana covers a wide geographical area and is generally sparsely populated, with a very minimal presence of state institutions and public personnel including the security forces, police stations, and courts (Botchway 2005; Plange 1979; Saaka 2001).

This paper examines one of Northern Ghana’s intractable chieftaincy succession conflicts, an internecine conflict involving two feuding clans (the Abudu and the Andani clans) about who has the legitimate claim to install the Ya Na, the king of the Dagomba people. This conflict, although dating back to the colonial period, resurfaces with every change of government with the conflicting parties jockeying for support among the ruling elite and the political parties in the country as they seek to change the prevailing status quo and profit from links with the new government. The paper describes in detail the recent violent eruption of the Dagbon conflict in March 2002, the entanglement of Ghana’s two main political parties with the two factions in the conflict, and the futile attempts to resolve the conflict.

¹ Traditionally, chiefs in Northern Ghana sit on skins of animals such as the lion, leopard and other wild beasts. The coronation process is thus referred to as the “enskinment” of the chief. This is in spite of the fact that many chiefs today sit on pillows made of foam or feather rather than animal skins.

2. STUDIES ON CHIEFTAINCY CONFLICTS IN NORTHERN GHANA

There have been a considerable number of studies on chieftaincy conflicts in Northern Ghana. These studies have either analyzed conflicts within one specific ethnic group or those involving two or more ethnic groups. Intra-ethnic conflicts occur over claims to chieftaincy titles involving persons from the same ethnic group or smaller units within the group such as the clan and the lineage. Intra-ethnic conflicts in northern Ghana have mainly been as a result of chieftaincy succession disputes. Lentz (1993; 2000) has described in detail the succession conflict amongst the Dagara of Nandom which involves two candidates from the same clan claiming the position of the Nandom Na. Similarly, among the Nanumba of the Northern Region two persons from the royal gate of *Gbugmayili* lay claim to the position of the Bimbilla Na, the king of the Nanumba people. In this conflict which has been ongoing since 1999, both contestants claim to have been selected and enskined by the appropriate traditional authority (Anamzoya and Tonah 2012). In the West Mamprusi District the rejection of a candidate selected to be the paramount chief of Wungu by his competitors and the youth of the town resulted in a decade-long dispute that frequently turned violent (see Tonah 2005, 2006). Similar succession conflicts involving persons from the same ethnic group, clan or extended family have been documented among the Wala (Tenkorang 2007; Wilks 1989) and the Gonja (Brukum 2000–2001).

Inter-ethnic conflicts in Ghana's north usually involve two or more ethnic groups laying claim to a particular territory as well as the authority to select the paramount chief of the area. Lund (2003) and Bombande (2007) have described in detail the inter-ethnic conflict between the Mamprusi and the Kusasi in Bawku. Similarly, Bogner (1996), Jonsson (2007) and Schmid (2001) have analyzed the dispute between the Nawuri and the Gonja about who has sovereignty over Kpandai. Finally, inter-ethnic conflicts between the Nanumba and the Konkomba in 1981 and the so-called "guinea fowl war" of 1985 between the Konkomba, Nawuri, Nchumuru, and Basare on the one hand, and the Dagomba, Nanumba, and Gonja on the other, were particularly violent (see Awedoba 2009; Brukum 2001; Akurang-Parry 2003).

While several studies have analysed chieftaincy conflicts in Northern Ghana and the role that the various Ghanaian governments have played in resolving these conflicts, only a few of these studies examine in any detail the role that politics and political machinations play while these conflicts unfold. The notable exceptions are Ladouceur's (1972) study of the Dagbon conflict, Lund's (2003) analysis of the Bawku conflict and Lentz's (1993) study of the Nandom dispute. In a sense, this study of the Dagbon conflict can be considered as an update of events, occurrences and political developments since Ladouceur's research in the 1970s. The next section provides a theoretical reflection on the elite and chieftaincy in Ghana. This is followed by an overview of the study area and the

research methods employed. There is a description of the background to the conflict and a detailed analysis of the violent conflict of March 2002. We then proceed to analyze the politicisation of the conflicts by the protagonists as well as Ghana's two main political parties.

3. THE ELITE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHIEFTAINCY

Traditional rule in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa has been the preserve of a small group of privileged persons who claim to be patrilineal or matrilineal descendants of the founding members of the community. Traditional societies are therefore frequently divided into two main social groups – the small group of royals who constitute the “traditional elite” and the majority of the population referred to as the “commoners”. Membership of the traditional elite from which the leadership of the group is chosen is often the desire of most residents. Whilst being a royal is itself desirable, the goal of every royal is to become a chief and eventually rise to the paramount chiefship or the kingship position (Tonah 2005). In the pre-colonial and colonial periods, chiefs had considerable economic, administrative, religious and spiritual powers. Eric Wolf (1983) has characterized the traditional state as a “tributary state” whereby resources such as cattle and grain are requisitioned, either by custom or by coercion, from a hinterland area and then redistributed to subject in that same hinterland so as to sustain the power of those who control the tributary state apparatus.

The post-colonial period has seen the emergence of new political, economic and social groups as well as the creation of state institutions. In many countries, political power has been largely transferred from the traditional elite to a new crop of leaders emerging from the political leadership, the military, religious and professional groups as well as civil society organizations. This new elite group consists mainly of wealthy businessmen, professionals, high ranking security officials and top civil and public servants. Initially, the relationship between the traditional elite who were mainly chiefs and the new elite who wrestled power from the colonialists was quite sour as both groups competed for political power and attempted to establish their dominant position in the newly independent countries. There were frequent conflicts between the national leaders and some prominent chiefs in the post-independence period (Rathbone 2000). Relations between the two groups, however, improved as the various post-colonial governments recognized the importance of chiefs in national life and restored some of their powers (Anamzoya 2008; Brempong 2001).

Nevertheless, the expansion of the capitalist economy as well as the emergence of a new elite group transformed the chieftaincy institution and the nature of chiefly rule in Ghana and elsewhere. The exploitation of Ghana's natural resources, the growth of export crops, and the expansion in the services sector boosted the economy and substantially increased the wealth of the new elite group of leaders. One result of these developments has been the scramble

for chieftaincy titles amongst Ghana's new elite since the 1970s. Brempong (2001) was one of the first to highlight this phenomenon by indicating that many paramount chiefs in Ashanti are high level professionals or university graduates. This development has increased the competition for chieftaincy positions as more and more persons, including non-royals, consider themselves eligible for chiefly office by virtue of their high educational qualification and/or their wealth (cf. Hagan 2006).

Today, chieftaincy titles, particularly those involving high offices, are mainly given to wealthy, educated and politically-influential persons who can use their contacts with government officials, local and international NGOs, donors, foreign embassies and Ghanaians abroad to bring in development projects and raise funds to administer the palace and their territories. The chief's ability to requisition resources from his subjects has been considerably reduced. Generally, many people are less willing to contribute to development projects in their communities. Instead, chiefs are expected to mobilise resources from external agencies and urban residents. Chiefs, just like government officials, have thus become "development agents", transferring resources from the urban metropolis to the impoverished rural communities (Awedoba 2006, 2009).

4. STUDY AREA, POPULATION AND RESEARCH METHODS

4.1 STUDY AREA AND POPULATION

Dagbon is one of the Mossi-Dagomba states set up in the Volta basin of Northern Ghana about the 14th or 15th century. The kingdom was established following the defeat of the autochthon group by a band of warriors from the Sahelian region. The victorious warriors are, however, said to have integrated the autochthon population into their fold and adopted their culture and religious practices (Tamakloe 1931; Staniland 1975). Today, Dagbon is a multi-ethnic society with a population of more than one million inhabitants.² Besides the autochthon Dagomba population, there are many migrants of Mamprusi, Gonja, Dagaba and Akan extraction. The vegetation in the area is largely savannah with tall grasses and small trees (mainly shea, acacia, baobab and mango), dotting the entire landscape. The area experiences a single rainfall season (April-October) accompanied by a long dry season (November-March) that brings in the harmattan winds. Dagbon is overwhelmingly rural with few urban settlements including Tamale, Yendi, Gushiegu, Savelugu and Karaga. The inhabitants are mainly agro-pastoralists engaged in food crops and livestock production. Dagbon has a dearth of basic social and economic infrastructure. The population

² This estimate is based on a total population of 2,468,557 for the Northern Region during the 2010 census. The Dagomba constitute about 41 per cent of the population in the area and many Dagomba live in other parts of Ghana (see GSS 2002).

is overwhelmingly Muslim (79%) with ancestor worship common amongst the rural population (GSS 2002).

Dagbon is a centralized, hierarchical state under the leadership of the Ya Na. The state consists of several levels of authority (mainly at the kingship, paramountcy, division and settlement levels) with leaders, chosen from members of the royal group, administering the various levels. The Ya Na also appoints royal members to administer various settlements under his direct authority. Chiefs at one level of the political hierarchy owe allegiance to an appointing chief at the next higher level of the system. Nevertheless, all chiefs enjoy considerable autonomy in the administration of areas under their control (Staniland 1975; Anamzoya 2004). Brukum (2004) has aptly described the political system in Dagbon as a “rotating chieftaincy” in which royal members initially appointed to chieftaincy positions at the settlement and divisional levels aspire to become paramount chiefs, and if luck is on their side, to the topmost position of the Ya Na.

4.2 RESEARCH METHODS

Data and information for this paper was initially collected between 2007 and 2008 as part of a study into conflicts in northern Ghana. The author observed events and conducted interviews with residents and key informants (mainly royals, chiefs, political leaders and teachers) in Yendi, Tamale and Savelugu. This was complemented with secondary materials from journal articles, books, newspapers, internet, and radio reports. Furthermore, the campaign manifestos and speeches at political rallies of Ghana’s two main political parties during the 2004 and 2008 elections were monitored and analyzed.

5. THE DAGBON CHIEFTAINCY DISPUTE

5.1 BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT³

The Dagbon conflict involves members of two clans (the Abudu and Andani) both of whom are laying claim to selecting the Ya Na, the king of the Dagomba people. They are also contesting the procedure for the selection of the king, as well as the institutions or persons whose responsibility it is to do the selection (Awedoba 2009; Tsikata and Seini 2004). The conflict between the two clans can be traced back to 1948 following the death of Ya Na Mahama II from the Andani clan. His son, who subsequently became the regent, failed in his bid to

³ We have provided only a brief overview of the Dagbon conflict. For a more detailed description, see Anamzoya (2004); Awedoba (2009), Ladouceur (1972), Staniland (1975) and Tsikata and Seini (2004).

succeed his deceased father as the king of Dagbon. Ya Na Mahama III from the Abudu clan was instead installed as king. In accordance with the principle of rotation, after the death of Mahama III the next king should have been chosen from the Andani clan since the deceased king was from the Abudu clan. Instead, another member of the Abudu clan (Abudulai III) was selected to be the Ya Na in March 1954. This selection generated considerable dissatisfaction, particularly amongst the Andanis who felt they had been robbed of the high office. The conflicts raged on throughout the struggle for independence with the Andanis refusing to recognize Abudulai III as king and using all means at their disposal to remove the reigning king. These, however, failed. Ya Na Abdulai III survived the crisis until his death in 1967 (Staniland 1975; Anamzoya 2004).

The turbulent and divisive political situation during the independence struggle had an impact on the Dagbon conflict with the elite within the two factions aligning themselves with the two main political parties in the country. The Abudu faction aligned itself with the United Party (UP) while the Andani was associated with the Convention Peoples Party (CPP). In 1960 the Nkrumah government (1957–66) brokered an agreement between the two factions which attempted to restore the rotational succession system in Dagbon. It was agreed that on the death of Abdulai III the next king should come from the Andani clan. In line with this agreement Andani III from the Andani clan was selected as the Ya Na in 1968 following the death of Abdulai III in 1967. In 1968 the National Liberation Council government (1966–69) that overthrew the Nkrumah regime set up the Mate Kole Committee to inquire into the Dagbon chieftaincy conflict. The Committee's report declared Ya Na Andani III's enskinment as not being in accordance with Dagbon custom and therefore annulled his enskinment. Instead, Gbonlana Mahamadu was to be installed as Ya Na. The Committee's report was accepted by the Busia government (1969–1972). On 9th September 1969, fighting broke out in Yendi following attempts by the security forces to forcibly remove members of the Andani clan from the royal palace resulting in the death of 30 members of the Andani clan. Gbonlana Mahamadu was thus subsequently installed as the king with the support of the ruling Busia government (Ahorsu and Gebe 2011; Ladouceur 1972; Olawale 2006).

In 1972, Acheampong's military government (1972–78) that overthrew the Busia regime set up the Ollenu Committee to ascertain the correct custom and customary practices for the nomination, selection and enskinment of a Ya Na. This followed continued agitation by members of the Andani clan for a review of the decisions of the Male Kole Committee. The Ollenu Committee declared the deskinment of Ya Na Andani III as illegitimate and subsequently called for the removal of Mahamadu Abudulai IV as Ya Na. Based on the recommendations of the Ollenu Committee, Yakubu Andani II was enskined as Ya Na in 1972. Ya Na Yakubu Andani II was never really accepted as their overlord by the Abudu clan. However, their attempts at changing the status quo during the PNDC regime (1981–1992) failed. Furthermore, Ghana's Supreme Court in December 1986 ruled in favour of the Andani clan as it upheld the recommendations of the Ollenu Committee. It also affirmed the principle of the

rotation system between the two clans as being fundamental to traditional rule in Dagbon. However, the ruling of the Supreme Court did not settle the matter. It appears the Abudu clan were biding their time for a change in government (Anamzoya 2004; Mahama 2009).

5.2 THE MARCH 2002 INCIDENT

In the 2000 general elections, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) which had been in opposition since the return to civilian rule in 1992 defeated the ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) party. Following the NPP's assertion to power, members of the Abudu clan, sensing that there was now a government more sympathetic to their cause, gradually resuscitated their demand for the performance of the funeral of their deposed king, Mahamadu Abdulai IV. They also challenged and tried to undermine the authority of reigning king, Ya Na Andani II. These include organising a parallel celebration of key traditional festivals and ceremonies, particularly the Bugum and the Eid-ul Adha in 2001 and 2002 and allegedly appointing chiefs to traditional offices without recourse to the Ya Na (MacGaffey 2006; Olawale 2006). Ya Na Andani II considered any parallel celebration of the Bugum and other festivals and the security provided to the Abudu group by NPP government officials as an affront to his office and a clear sign of tacit government support for the Abudus. The Andanis were determined not to let this continue.

In March 2002, there were reports in the Ghanaian media that the two factions were preparing for war. On 23rd March, the government, acting upon the recommendations of the Northern Regional Security Council, imposed a curfew on Yendi (the traditional capital) and cancelled the celebration of the Bugum festival. The curfew was, however, unilaterally lifted by the Regional Minister following assurances by Ya Na Andani II that there would be no disturbances during the celebration of the festival. Ya Na Andani II was clearly unhappy about attempts by government officials to scuttle efforts to celebrate the Bugum festival in 2002 and saw this as another sign of government support for the Abudus. The lifting of the curfew and the ban imposed on the celebration of the Bugum festival was therefore considered a "victory" by the Andanis. The general mistrust between the two factions, the stockpiling of arms by both factions, and the tension in the town during the celebration of the Bugum festival created the conditions for the outbreak of violence in Yendi. On March 25th 2002 an attack on an emissary of the Ya Na by a group of Abudu youth and the destruction of his bicycle ignited the violent conflict between the two sides. Three days of fighting between supporters of both factions resulted in the death of Ya Na Yakubu Andani II and 30 of his supporters as well as the destruction of 36 houses (Macgaffey 2006; Wuaku Commission 2002).

6. GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE MARCH 2002 INCIDENT

The response of the ruling NPP government to the violent conflict included the following:

6.1 RESIGNATION OF GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

It took the ruling NPP government under J. A. Kufuor quite some time to respond to public outcry about the security lapses that resulted in the death of the Ya Na and the inability of security agencies to intervene in violent communal clashes that lasted over three days. Following public pressure, the government accepted the resignation of the Minister of Interior, the National Security Adviser as well as the Northern Regional Minister.

6.2 ESTABLISHMENT OF A COMMISSION OF INQUIRY

In April 2002, President Kufuor constituted a Commission of Inquiry headed by Justice I. N. K. Wuaku “to investigate the disturbances of 25th to 27th March, identify the perpetrators and make appropriate recommendations to the President”. The Wuaku Commission concluded that the 2002 incident was a cumulative effect of the poor management of past phases of the Dagbon dispute. The commission traced the origin of the 2002 phase of the problem to the non-observance of the funeral of the late Abdulai IV in 1974 as demanded by tradition. His son, Mahamadu Abdulai, who was considered by the Abudu clan to be their Bolin La Na (regent), was also denied the opportunity to become the king by the Andani clan (Wuaku Commission 2002). The Commission also found several lapses within the security apparatus that resulted in the death of Ya Na Andani II and recommended the prosecution of several individuals involved in the violence, including the Northern Regional Minister. The report, however, exonerated two other senior government officials who had earlier resigned from government. The Commission also recommended the official reprimand of military officers in command over the area where the fighting took place.

6.3 PROSECUTION OF CULPRITS

In December 2002, the Kufuor government accepted most of the findings and recommendations of the Wuaku Commission and preferred charges against 15 persons cited by the Commission for aiding in the killing of the Ya Na. The government, however, declined to prosecute the Northern Regional Minister.

Charges brought against the 15 persons accused of complicity in the murder of the Ya Na were dismissed in court for lack of evidence. The decisions of the court did not surprise the Andanis as they claimed that the government had only reluctantly prosecuted “its allies” from the Abudu clan. Besides, the security agencies were accused of doing a shoddy investigation into the violent conflict thus making it difficult for the accused persons to be convicted in court.

6.4 COMMITTEE OF EMINENT CHIEFS

In 2003 President Kufour constituted a Committee of Eminent Chiefs comprising of four prominent Ghanaian kings and charged them with the responsibility of finding a durable solution to the chieftaincy dispute in Dagbon. After a long period of deliberations and negotiations, representatives of the two feuding clans in Dagbon signed a “Roadmap to Peace” on 30 March, 2006. The “Roadmap to Peace” enumerated five major benchmarks in the peace building process. These include the burial of the late Ya Na Andani II; the installation of the regent of the late king; the performance of the funeral of the deposed Ya Na, Mahamadu Abdulai IV; the performance of the funeral of Ya Na Yakubu Andani II; and finally, the selection and enskinment of a new Ya Na for Dagbon. Eight years after the signing of the roadmap only the first two proposals have been implemented with the remaining being shelved due to continuing disagreement between the two factions.

7. POLITICISING THE CONFLICT: THE RESPONSE OF THE OPPOSITION PARTY

The Dagbon chieftaincy conflict has been one of the most divisive conflicts in the country since the return to civilian rule in 1992. Although the differences between the two clans remained unresolved for a long period, members of the Abudu clan were much aware that they could not change the status quo as long as the National Democratic Congress (NDC) party remained in power. Similarly, the Andanis and their supporters were apprehensive about any changes in government and were very much aware of the implications of a New Patriotic Party (NPP) victory in the 2000 elections. The Dagbon conflict became an election issue during the campaign for the 2000 elections. There were rumours that the NPP would depose Ya Na Yakubu Andani II if it won power. Similarly, the NPP is also alleged to have promised to assist the Abudu clan perform the funeral of their deposed king, Ya Na Mahamadu Abdulai at the

Gbewaa palace.⁴ Though these rumours were denied by the presidential candidate of the NPP, it did not dispel the fears of the Andani clan about an NPP victory in the 2000 general elections. The Abudus, on the other hand, had high expectations from an NPP victory (Ahorsu and Gebe 2011).

There was considerable public outcry about the killing of the Ya Na and the inability of the ruling NPP government to control fighting in Yendi in a conflict that lasted three days. This situation was exploited by the opposition NDC who argued that functionaries of the NPP government left the Ya Na and his Andani supporters to their fate after they had been attacked by the Abudus. Many residents also believed that fighting could not have continued for three days in Yendi without complicity on the part of some top government and security officials at the regional and national levels. Following the incident, the opposition NDC accused key government officials as well as some top security officials of being members or supporters of the Abudu faction. The NDC also tried to implicate the National Security Adviser as well as the Interior Minister both of whom were well known members of the Abudu clan in the death of the Ya Na. They drew attention to the fact that the Vice President and the District Chief Executive for the Yendi Municipality were all members of the Abudu clan (Ahorsu and Gebe 2011). The NDC were persistent in their call for the resignation of top government and security officials believed to be sympathizers of the Abudu clan. Following public pressure, the government acceded to the demands of the opposition parties as well as civil society organizations to probe the circumstances that led to the murder of the Ya Na and 30 others.

The opposition NDC disagreed with the government's characterization of the March 25–27, 2002 incident as a conflict between two warring factions. While the NPP government stressed that the Ya Na was killed under a war situation and thus the two parties should be brought together to resolve the issues leading to the conflict, the NDC indicated that this was a clear case of murder and the government should go after the killers of the Ya Na. The NDC persistently called on the government to find incriminating evidence to convict those responsible for the killings in Yendi.

Between 2002 and 2008, the NDC left no opportunity unutilized to castigate the ruling NPP government for complicity in the murder of the Ya Na. Media establishments close to the NDC ensured that this issue remained on the agenda, despite attempts by the ruling government to resolve the problem through the Wuaku Commission, the Committee of Eminent Chiefs, and other interventions by civil society groups. The NDC described these efforts as attempts by the NPP to whitewash the situation. Indeed, throughout the eight year rule of the NPP, the government continued to be haunted by the March 2002 incident and their

⁴ NPP government officials, however, indicated that they only promised to assist the Abudus with organizing the funeral of their deposed Ya Na, Mahamadu Abdulai and no force was intended to be used. See <http://wacsi.org/en/site/publications/864/Governance-and-Security-in-Ghana-The-Dagbon-Chieftancy-title.htm>.

inability to resolve the matter. The NDC used the death of Ya Na Andani II as a major campaign issue in the 2004 and 2008 general elections. Indeed, the party promised in its 2008 election manifesto to “set up a new and truly non-partisan and independent Presidential Commission to re-open investigations into the murder of Ya Na Yakubu Andani II and his elders in March 2002” (see NDC 2008 Manifesto, page 34). The founder of the NDC, former President Rawlings was also very vocal in calling for justice on the Ya Na issue. He frequently called for the re-arrest and trial of the suspected killers. Rawlings also claimed to have in his possession a tape that recorded some of the events during the murder of the Ya Na. He offered to provide the tape to the government to be used as incriminating evidence against the killers of the Ya Na. Kofi Adams, spokesperson for the former president, reiterated this point thus:

“The tape we are talking about does not say that it was a tape that saw somebody cutting the head of the Overlord, no. but it would be part of (government’s) information gathering. You could see faces, faces that would aide you to arrive at who and who could have masterminded these killings.”⁵

7.1 RETRIAL OF SUSPECTS

In 2008, the NDC government defeated the ruling NPP government in the general elections. In line with their promise to arrest and prosecute those who killed the Ya Na, 15 persons were re-arrested and charged with various offences in 2009. These included most of the persons who had been tried and discharged by a high court during the NPP administration. However, in a landmark ruling, an Accra Fast Track High Court on 29th March, 2011 acquitted and discharged all 15 persons arraigned before the court for their complicity in the murder of the Ya Na because “the prosecution failed to establish a prima facie against the accused persons”. The court further indicated that “the prosecution could not discharge the burden of proof needed for the court to convict the accused persons and the evidence was manifestly seen to be so unreliable that no reasonable court or tribunal could convict the accused persons.”⁶

The decision of the Fast Track Court was a major set back to the Andanis, and by extension, the ruling NDC government. The Andanis were clearly disappointed about government’s failure to find and punish the killers of the Ya Na as promised. Some Andani youth groups threatened not to vote for the NDC government during the next general elections in 2012 if it did not fulfil its promise. As expected, both the NDC and the NPP reacted differently to the court’s decision to release the 15 accused persons. The NPP felt vindicated as it

⁵ Source: <http://www.ghanatoghana.com/Ghanahomepage/kofi-adams-ya-na-yakubu-andani-ii-killers-tape-government-custody> (Accessed: October 15, 2011).

⁶ Source: <http://www.modernghana.com/news/322532/1/accused-persons-in-ya-na039s-murder-case-freed.html> (Accessed: October 15, 2011).

had all along claimed that the NDC had merely politicised the issue of the death of the Ya Na for electoral gains. The Head of Communications of the New Patriotic Party indicated that:

“the NDC whilst in opposition claimed to know the killers and embarked on a propaganda campaign, promising to arrest and prosecute them once they were elected into office. The people of Dagbon accepted the message by the NDC, voted out all the then NPP Parliamentarians and brought in those of the NDC. The Andani youth kept their side of the bargain only for the government to betray them by not finding the killers of the Ya-Na as promised.”⁷

The NDC, however, blamed the NPP for the fiasco in the court. According to the Deputy Chief of Staff:

“the erstwhile New Patriotic Party must be held responsible for the difficulties by the current government in finding the killers of the overlord of Dagbon, Ya-Na Yakubu Andani... the first crucial 48 hours after the incident ought to have been used to find incriminating evidence which would then have been used to prosecute the killers but the government failed because its whole investigation was flawed.”⁸

Another leading member of the NDC commented on the court’s decision to release the 15 accused persons thus:

“We have not disappointed anybody, we promised to do everything to bring them (the Andani) justice but we didn’t say that we will just arrest people. We will conduct proper investigation and use lawful means... we plead with them to exercise patience... When speaking on a political platform, there is vim, I can promise to do something but when I am speaking on a political platform, I might say it in a forceful manner. Besides President Mills never said when he comes he will arrest anybody. He only said we will do everything to bring them (Andanis) justice.”⁹

⁷ Source: <http://politics.myjoyonline.com/pages/news/201111/76371.php> (Accessed: October 15, 2011).

⁸ Source: <http://politics.myjoyonline.com/pages/news/201111/76371.php> (Accessed: October 15, 2011).

⁹ Source: <http://elections.peacefmonline.com/politics/201111/78594.php> (Accessed: October 15, 2011).

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Chieftaincy succession conflicts are widespread in Ghana's north and take very different forms. While some of these conflicts are often quickly resolved, there are still a considerable number of unresolved conflicts in the area. However, only a few of them have been politicized to the extent that local, regional and national leaders have been drawn into the conflict by the factions, their supporters as well as the elite. In this sense, the politicization of the Dagbon chieftaincy conflict is an exception rather than the rule in northern Ghana. No other chieftaincy conflict has so passionately divided the political elite in the country as the Dagbon conflict. As has been shown in this paper, the Dagbon conflict has a long history of local alignment to different political parties dating as far back as the pre-colonial era. The conflict has defied numerous attempts by various governments at finding a solution. Typically, a losing faction reluctantly accepts the decisions of a ruling government while it bides its time for a favourable government to be in power so that it can attempt to reverse the unfavourable decisions of the previous government, a Commission or Committee of Inquiry or even that of a court.

One of the factors that have accounted for the politicisation of the Dagbon conflict has to do with the emergence of Dagbon as the political and administrative centre of northern Ghana and the role given the traditional Dagomba elite during the colonial and the post-colonial era. Following the choice of Tamale as the administrative capital of the North, the city benefited disproportionately from the administrative and educational infrastructure provided by the colonial government. Its central location on the north-south road axis transformed Tamale from a small, rural settlement into a major trading and marketing centre in the entire north. The location of numerous educational institutions in the city also attracted people in search of educational opportunities, skills training, urban life and social advancement from other parts of the north to Tamale (Bawumia 2004; Bening 1975, 1990).

Accompanying the rise of Tamale was the increasingly dominant position of the Dagomba elite in the political administration of the north. Thus, the Dagomba, by virtue of hosting the administrative capital of the north as well as being one of the largest ethnic groups invariably came to dominate the political administration in the region. Many amongst the Dagomba who were given political appointments during the colonial and immediate post-colonial periods were from the traditional elite, that is, royals and chiefs of Dagbon.¹⁰ The result of this was the emergence of a close association between the traditional elite and political leaders at the regional and national levels. Chiefs were given ministerial positions or appointed into high public office by successive governments as part

¹⁰ Notable amongst these include Ya Na, Abdulai III, a key supporter of the Northern Peoples Party. J. H Allasani was a Ministerial Secretary during the Nkrumah regime. Yakubu Tali (Tolon Na), B. A Yakubu (Gushiegu Na) and Ibrahim Mahama all served in the National Liberation Council (NLC) government.

of efforts to show a national character in the distribution of political appointments. Such chiefs and royals quickly saw the benefits of having contacts with persons in government in securing not only financial, material and human resources but also the political support required for maintaining their traditional positions or for contesting for vacant traditional offices. It was common for the traditional elite to mobilise state power in the competition for chieftaincy positions (Ladouceur 1972, 1979).

Political leaders, on the other hand, associated themselves with chiefs in Dagbon in the hope to get the support of these chiefs and their subjects. The political support provided by chiefs as well as the presumed ability of chiefs to increase the electoral fortunes of political parties have been the main motivating factor for politicians and political parties to get involved in the Dagbon chieftaincy crisis. In the March 2002 incident which we analyzed in this paper, it is quite clear that whilst in opposition, the NPP tried to maximize its votes in Dagbon by promising to assist the Abudus perform the funeral of their late king when it gets into office. Similarly, increasing its electoral fortune in Dagbon was also the main motivation for the NDC to place the murder of the Ya Na on top of its campaign message in the 2004 and 2008 elections. The NDC believed that the March 2002 incident would increase support for the party and, consequently, weaken support for the ruling NPP in Dagbon and beyond. Although we do not doubt the sincerity of both parties in seeking justice for affected persons and ultimately resolve the Dagbon conflict, they sort to exploit the factionalism that existed in Dagbon to their electoral advantage.

The extent to which the March 2002 incident and indeed the NDC's campaign promise of finding the killers of the Ya Na improved the electoral fortunes of the party during the 2004 and 2008 general elections is difficult to determine. In the 2000 elections, the NDC obtained 50.7% of the votes in the Northern Region, where about 40% of the population are Dagombas. Its share of the total votes increased to 56.9% in 2004 and then to 61.6% in 2008. It is likely that the Ya Na issue may have mobilized more Andani supporters, particularly in Tamale, to go to the polls in the hope that the ruling NPP government is defeated in the elections. This, however, remains to be proven.

Finally, one major lesson to be derived from this study is that the Dagbon conflict has become politicised to such an extent that it cannot be resolved without the active involvement of Ghana's political and educated elite and the two main political parties. While agreeing with those who blame political interference for the recurrent escalation of the conflict, it asserts that a lasting solution cannot be found without the involvement of the country's political class, particularly the Dagbon elite. The paper does not therefore support ongoing attempts at resolving the conflict exclusively through the mediation efforts of eminent chiefs and civil society organisations although the Committee of Eminent Chiefs has done a yeoman's job. The feuding clans are likely to reject solutions that do not favour them as long as they can pressurise future governments to reverse these decisions. They will be more willing to make compromises and reach an amicable solution when they realise they cannot play

one political party against the other and can no longer count on the support of one of the two main political traditions in Ghana to support their cause. This, of course, is only possible if the elite, and indeed the political parties, will depoliticise the Dagbon conflict by agreeing not to make it an electoral issue and by not seeking to make electoral gains from the conflict. Whether they will be able to do this is yet to be seen.

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