

BIRTH OF A NARCO-STATE

In Ghana, greater self-sufficiency, improvements in health care and a reduction in poverty have all contributed to its stability over the last 20 years. However, the result of the national election to be held in December 2012 has the potential to destroy these gains.

A post-election narco-state may be looming. **By Andrew Craig**

Over the last decade, drug trafficking throughout West Africa has boomed. With many of their old smuggling routes closed off, South American cartels have increasingly turned their attention to this region. Porous borders, fragile governance and widespread corruption are conditions that are open for exploitation by drug barons. So much so, that the World Bank estimates that in 2008 cocaine with a street value of \$6.8 billion was trafficked through West Africa. Seizures have risen from 100 kilos a year to 6,500 kilos a year in the decade to 2009. The United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) maintains that there are regional drug cartels emerging across the whole of West Africa. At the centre lies Ghana.

Although having relatively stable institutions and a functioning democracy, there is increasing evidence of the influence that the drug trade is having over Ghana's political parties.

The centre-right New Patriotic Party (NPP), in particular, has been associated with obtaining financial support from the regional trade in illicit drugs. Wikileaks have cited connections between drug cartels and the NPP. Their defeat in the 2008 elections caused some commentators within Ghana to claim that a narco-state had been averted. There was a perception locally that there had been a surge in activity by cartels during the preceding years under NPP rule.

The current administration of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) has acknowledged on several occasions that the drug trade poses a threat to the country's institutions, while simultaneously appearing unable to combat it. It is reported that in February 2010, President Mills told a U.S. Secretary of State official that Ghana was struggling with drug trafficking and increased drug use and that he feared "a bleak future for Ghanaian people". According to Wikileaks, the U.S. Embassy in Accra concluded in 2009 that the Ghanaian authorities directed 'little or no effort at pursuing middle and high-level traffickers'. It is said that Janet Douglas, a senior British Foreign Office official in Accra, warned that the drugs trade was 'becoming institutionalised' in the area. Wikileaks also revealed that a 2009 American Embassy cable claimed President Mills was aware that 'elements of his government' were 'already compromised' and that officials at Kotoka Airport in Accra tipped-off drug traffickers about 'Operation Westbridge' (a British funded and managed security programme targeting drug mules boarding planes to the U.K.).

The Director of Ghana's Narcotics Control Board (NACOB), Mr. Akrasi Sarpong, has counselled Ghana's politicians against using drug money for political gain. He claims that there is a long-standing relationship between drug money and the funding of Ghanaian

political parties. He has also stated that NACOB have information that some current politicians are heavily funded by drug barons. With the 2012 national elections pending, he warned last year in a radio interview that "NACOB will deal with any politician caught to be using proceeds from the illicit trade notwithstanding the party that the person belongs to". However, some in the political ranks have taken issue with NACOB's stance. Jake Obetsebi Lampety, Chairman of the NPP ordered Mr Sarpong to "provide evidence of his claims and avoid speaking loosely". Mr Sarpong countered that NACOB cannot be forced to disclose the identities of the individuals under surveillance, but they need to be aware that they are being observed in order to deter them from further dealings with cartels. It is debatable how capable NACOB is of influencing a politician's choice of financial backer, but its publicly aggressive stance has ensured that the issue of drug-related corruption will feature prominently throughout the election campaign. Clearly, there have been attempts to politicise this matter. However, Ghanaian political history shows that individuals involved in drugs have come from all backgrounds and are not aligned to any particular party.

Others with an interest in West Africa have expressed their unease over the deteriorating situation in Ghana.

In June 2011, the Washington-based

Center for Strategic and International Studies published a paper on Ghana entitled *Assessing Risks to Stability*. In it, the Centre makes reference to Ghana's system of patronage and weak institutions that encourages corruption and 'increases the risk of violence surrounding elections'. It rightly suggests that drug trafficking, 'particularly its increasing role in financing patronage politics' could have a destabilising impact on the country over the next decade. It further proposes that the 2012 election could feasibly act as a trigger for this. It goes on to speculate that this election 'is likely to be far more confrontational and runs the risk of being violent, with the potential to produce chaos'. President Mills' sudden death while in office in July of this year is likely to contribute further to the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of December's voting.

The UNODC reasons that, unless attempts are made to oppose the drug trade in Ghana, the legitimacy of the state risks being undermined. It is also sceptical that either of the two main parties will 'remain immune to the attractions of drug money' as the election draws near.

Kofi Annan, himself a Ghanaian, has signalled his growing concern over the proliferation of drugs being moved around West Africa. In an article written for *The Guardian* in January this year, he expressed his uneasiness over drug-funded corruption which can 'undermine good governance and the rule of law', thus threatening both democracy and security within states.

Kwesi Aning (Head of Research at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre) arrived at a more worrying conclusion in claiming that the "very fabric" of Ghanaian society is at risk. "Narcotics are beginning to pose both a political and security threat to this country". He further asserted that "the trade is growing as it has been discovered that between eight and fifteen percent of the narcotics entering mainland Europe comes through Ghana".

Some diplomats and other international officials fear that certain West African countries could develop along similar lines to Mexico within the next five years. In Mexico, drug gangs have a symbiotic relationship with political parties, and this appears to be occurring in Ghana. Politicians can be bribed and coerced into the drug trade. Those who attempt to confront



trafficking may find that they meet with people and networks that wield far more power than they do. This influence appears to run through the security services. There is evidence that seizures of cocaine have vanished from police surveillance, and substances earlier confirmed by police to be cocaine were later reclassified as sodium carbonate. Along with the sabotage of efforts to combat drug smuggling, these are all common features of failing states. Dr. Clement Apaak, Convener of the Ghanaian Forum for Governance and Justice, stated that 'We must all be worried because these are the acts capable of turning Ghana into a narco-state like Mexico'. Further parallels can be drawn. Mexico also became a conduit for drugs after other more established routes from South America were closed off. The slums of Ghana's cities are ideal hunting ground for cartels to recruit members and operate in areas with little or no policing. They are able to provide local communities with facilities that the State does not supply. There is evidence that there is a growing number of addicted young people in Ghana. These same characteristics are exploited by cartels in Mexico.

The conditions necessary for Ghana to become a narco-state are evident. As Mexico has discovered, the potential impact of drug-related crime on communities cannot be understated. Like Mexico, the legitimate economy in Ghana is likely to suffer as businesses are deterred from investing in the

country. Both nations suffer widespread poverty and unemployment and the cartels provide money-making escape routes for those who are prepared to take on the risks of violence and criminality that go with drug-trafficking. And, if Mexico provides a parallel, it also seems unlikely that Ghanaian security services will be able to suppress narco-related violence, or prevent a narco-state from arising. Across the developing world, political coups often emerge out of civil unrest, and drug cartels can exploit such circumstances and expand their influence – Ghana could fall victim to such a scenario.

Some commentators have called for the establishment of a Presidential Commission to investigate the role that drugs have played in Ghanaian politics. The aim would be to develop strategies to eliminate drug-related influences from political activity. However, similar actions have been attempted in Mexico over the last decade with little success – initiatives introduced to prevent cartels accessing their politicians and security services have shown to be ineffective. Without addressing the fundamental issues that give rise to corruption in Ghana, it is unlikely that any counter-narco offensives implemented there will be successful. Until then, a contested election result may prove the catalyst for the world's latest narco-state.

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