Regional Reorganisation, Communal Context and Conflicts in Ghana

By Dennis Penu

Abstract

On 27 December 2018, a landmark referendum in Ghana mandated the creation of six new subnational regions by separating four of the existing ones. The *Western North* region was carved out of the *Western* region, the *Ahafo* and *Bono-East* regions from the *Brong-Ahafo region*, *Oti* Region from the *Volta* region, the *Savannah* and *North-East* regions from the *Northern* region. With this region creation (RC), Ghana implemented its constitutional rules for broader regional reorganization (RR) that saw its regional administrations increase from 10 to 16. Per Ghana's unitary status, these regional administrations are direct extensions of the central government, and hence, do not exercise any devolved powers over policy, legislation, or finance. Nevertheless, the 20-month RC referendum process, which began in June 2017 and was concluded in December 2018, was a delicate issue with conflict outcomes that threatened the social stability of the largely peaceful West-African state. The paradox, however, is that the tensions were observed in some regions but not in others.

As part of the referendum process, stakeholders campaigned for and against the region's creation. This process unfolded in mainly two patterns of either conflict or cooperation. For some areas, the campaigns progressed without incident. In others, the pro- and anti-region-creation campaigns were so fierce that the police and military intervened to deter violent outbreaks, warning journalists about possible attacks on the referendum day. Considering that these regional administrations had no devolved powers and that the same constitutional procedure was (to be) applied in all the cases, it is intriguing that such contrasting outcomes ensued.

Hence, the empirical focus of this dissertation was to explain the social conflict outcomes of regional reorganisation in Ghana, using Set-Theoretic Multi Methods Research (SMMR) design and an analytical framework built on considerations about the social, political, cultural, and economic content of Ghanaian society (communal context). This contributed to the wider theoretical debate about why some processes of territorial reorganisation lead to conflicts in

some cases and not in others. The dissertation is organised in seven chapters. The contents are summarized as follows:

- **Chapter 1 (Introduction):** In this introductory chapter I present the background to the research question and its relevance within Ghana. By recounting the empirical contrasts between the contentious and non-contentious events that characterised the separation of the regions, I justify the relevance of the systematic, multi-method and comparative approach of inquiry adopted throughout the study. I discuss how this empirical puzzle is related to the concept of *decentralisation* and under the broader theme of *territorial reorganisation*. Yet, I argue that the observed process was different from many others and that it was relevant to study the *process* as an important means to understanding the *outcomes*. This justifies the study's focus on analysing the *historical background*, *features*, and *process* of regional reorganisation in Ghana.

- **Chapter 2 (Theoretical Framework):** In this chapter, I delve deeper into the concepts that were central to the research agenda, including *region creation*, *regional reorganisation, decentralisation, conflict*, the *communal context*, among others. I conceptualise region creation in Ghana as a feature of the country's broader processes of regional reorganisation and that this process was an atypical form of decentralisation rarely seen in the empirical literature. There are studies showing the link between political decentralisation (federalisation, devolutions) and conflict, and there are those that show the link between administrative sub-national (re)demarcations and conflict. In the case of region creation in Ghana, these two strands are merged, in which a process usually seen in political decentralisation is used to achieve an administrative objective. This makes it unique in the known schemes of decentralisation and I justify why a lens of separatism is useful in this instance. Using the insights from the literature review, I develop an analytical framework based on the expectation that region creation in Ghana would yield conflicts under a particular set of conditions, namely, the *region's characteristics*, the *type of actors involved* and the *nature of the transition process through which the reorganisation was procured*.

- **Chapter 3 (Methodology):** In this chapter, I design a Set-theoretic Multi-method Research (SMMR) strategy for answering the research questions. It details the conceptual rather than spatial definition of research units (cases), operationalises the conditions and outcome under study (analytical framework) as well as reflections about the strengths and weaknesses in the analytical strategy. The chapter also presents

a detailed phase-by-phase description of fieldwork, the diverse data collection methods and sources, and their specific link to the research questions. Generally, the analysis follows a comparative approach, involving three analytical techniques. It begins with a *historical institutional analysis,* which combines gradual institutional change and critical-juncture analytical lenses to explain *how* and *why* Ghana came to have her current regional governance architecture. This is followed by *qualitative comparative analysis* that compares seven cases of region creation along seven conditions to find an explanatory model for the observed conflict outcomes. It ends with *(comparative) causal process tracing* which evaluates the explanatory model using evidence in two cases with contrasting outcomes to identify a mechanism explaining the conflicts. These were used to answer the research questions.

- **Chapter 4 (How has Ghana's rules for regional reorganisation evolved since independence?):** In this first analytical chapter,[1] I trace how the constitutional rules for general regional reorganisation in Ghana have evolved over the past 63 years (from 1957 to 2020). Using a historical institutionalist lens, I show that both gradual change and agency-based critical juncture mechanisms have contributed to a weakening of the broad-based citizen-centered referendum provisions and thresholds for altering regional boundaries. From the strict rule of changing regional boundaries by consent of two-thirds of all regional assemblies in Ghana, it is now possible that regional boundaries are changed only by referendums involving the inhabitants of one part of a region. Despite the constitutional safeguards against such easy changes at independence, the status quo defenders were unable to prevent a *displacement* of the rules in the 1960 constitution. Subsequently, after a *critical juncture* between 1966 and 1968, the referendum requirement was re-introduced in a weaker form in 1969. Then there was a *layering* of more rules around this requirement in 1979 and 1992. In 2018, the application of the 1992 provisions contributed to a conversion of the rules to make the strictness of regional boundary change even weaker. With these findings, my analysis shows that this process of institutional change in Ghana was congruent with (combined) historical institutionalist theories of change. The findings in this chapter also help to justify the selection of seven cases for the analysis in the next chapter.

---

[1] There is also a related publication: Penu (2022), Explaining defederalization in Ghana*, Publius: The Journal of Federalism,* 52(1)

- **Chapter 5 (What conditions are associated with region creation conflicts in Ghana?):** In this chapter, I use the qualitative comparative analytical approach to compare seven cases of region creation in Ghana across a set of seven conditions. From this, I find that three cases were conflictual (Volta to Oti region, Northern to Northeast Region and Ashanti to Brong-Ahafo Region). I also identify three conditions that were associated with the conflictual cases. The conflicts occurred within *regions with relatively high support for the largest opposition political party*, when there was the combined *presence of competing dominant (traditional) elites on either side of the region* and *controversies regarding claims to (traditional) political legitimacy*. Also, contrary to popular expectations from the literature, conditions such as *ethnic differences* and *natural resource presence* were less implicated in these conflict outcomes. Further, instead of inequalities regarding social infrastructure, inequalities in the political representation of chiefs mattered for the conflicts to occur. This finding that chiefs are key to explaining region creation conflicts shows the persistent influence of chiefs in Ghana's political spaces despite the longstanding efforts to exclude them from such spaces.

- **Chapter 6 (How do the identified associated conditions contribute to the region creation conflicts?):** In this chapter, I delve further into the three conditions associated with region creation conflicts (i.e., regional support for opposition party, competing traditional political elites, and controversies over claims to political authority). I trace how these conditions interact to produce the outcome. I apply a comparative causal process tracing analysis of two contrasting cases (i.e., Volta to Oti region compared to Western to Western-North region). The analysis identifies a *bottom-up causal mechanism for the contentions around region creation*. I find that in the contentious case involving the separation of the Volta Region to create the Oti Region, the high political opposition in the stump region created a fertile context for resistance over what was considered a government-sanctioned separation to gain political advantage. This resistance *developed in four phases from community to regional to diaspora and national levels, as follows:* (1) Chiefs in some communities initiated the resistance because the separation threatened the ethnopolitical capital within their community. (2) In solidarity, other chiefs and actors in the region faulted the separation procedure proposed by the Commission of Inquiry and tried to stop it through court suits. (3) When these suits failed, some of these chiefs and their diaspora

affiliates adopted ethnopolitical frames of grievance to mobilize the resistance further. (4) Finally, agents of the national political opposition party and secessionist actors rode on the resistance to advance their political and secessionist goals, respectively. These built-up tensions culminated in the high-security alert in the contentious case on referendum day. In contrast, in the non-contentious case of separating the Western Region to form the Western-North Region, the *resistance from the community began, but the momentum for a bottom-up mechanism halted*. This was because the proponents of the idea withdrew the perceived threats to disputed traditional territories, which was also accepted by the commission of inquiry. A causal inferential evaluation of the evidence underlying this mechanism found little support for the popular claim by some actors that the resistance was mainly on the grounds of institutional impropriety (the logic of appropriateness). Instead, it found evidence suggesting that the primary motivation for the contention related to fears over the material consequences that a new region (or otherwise) could present (the logic of consequence). The claims over inappropriate procedure were the tip of the iceberg, if not a smokescreen, of the material motives for the contention.

- **Chapter 7 (Summary, conclusions, and recommendations):** In this chapter, I highlight the main findings and what insight they contribute to understanding *social conflicts*, *sub-national territorial politics*, and *qualitative set-theoretic multi-methods research*. I offer a conceptual definition for region creation in Ghana and there are also few notes on the *societal or policy relevance* of the findings.