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Democracy in postcolonial Ghana: tropes, state power and the defence committees

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the Jerry Rawlings military government, the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) in Ghana, framed its political agenda using liberal tropes about participatory democracy as a strategy to manufacture legitimacy and mediate political-economic crisis. The People's Defence Committees (PDCs) and Workers' Defence Committees (WDCs), created in 1981 and dissolved in 1984, were presented by the PNDC as innovative programmes aimed at nurturing citizen participation representative of the highest form of democracy. However, the introduction of these reforms came at a time when the ruling PNDC faced critical problems of legitimacy, administrative incapability and popular opposition to austerity measures associated with structural adjustment programs (SAPs). We utilise primary source material from the University of Ghana National Reconciliation Commission collection to argue that the discourses and practice of the PDCs/WDCs functioned simultaneously to violently consolidate state power, depoliticise alternatives, and manufacture legitimacy to mediate political-economic crisis while simultaneously being a vehicle for illegitimacy by providing constrained opportunities for individual nepotism, grassroots empowerment and claim-making against the state.

Introduction

This article examines how the Jerry Rawlings military government, the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), framed its political agenda using liberal political tropes about participatory democracy and civic engagement as a strategy to manufacture legitimacy and mediate political-economic crisis. The People's Defence Committees (PDCs) and Workers' Defence Committees (WDCs), created in 1981 and dissolved in 1984, were presented by the PNDC as innovative programmes aimed at nurturing citizen participation representative of the highest form of democracy. However, the introduction of these reforms came at a time when the ruling PNDC faced critical problems of legitimacy, administrative incapability and popular opposition to austerity measures associated with structural adjustment programs (SAPs). We utilise primary source material from the National Reconciliation Commission collection at the University of Ghana to argue that the discourses and practice of the PDCs/

WDCs functioned simultaneously to violently consolidate state power, depoliticise alternatives and manufacture legitimacy to mediate political-economic crisis while simultaneously being a vehicle for illegitimacy by providing constrained opportunities for individual nepotism, grassroots empowerment and claim-making against the state.

By inquiring how these programmes were framed using democratic tropes and the extent to which they served as mechanisms for regime legitimation or illegitimacy, this article draws attention to the discursive intent, context and practice of the defence committees. We argue that they were instruments of governmentality, part of broader strategies to affirm regime legitimacy, manage social-economic crisis, and violently respond to political criticism and opposition. However, despite being instrumentalised by the PNDC to further statist agendas, these strategies also provided constrained opportunities for group empowerment, nepotism and claim-making outside of state control. These findings are significant given resurgent scholarly and policy interest in promoting grassroots civic and political participation, as well as the elasticity of using the discourse of participation by authoritarian regimes. The analysis of the use of democratic tropes by postcolonial authoritarian governments that we offer invites reassessment of the ways in which postcolonial states manufacture legitimacy and the political and economic impulses that drive and shape these processes.

This article is divided into four sections. The first section outlines the literature on postcolonial African states and the defence committees in Ghana centred on the question of how states manufacture legitimacy. It also provides a discussion on case study methodology, which flows directly from unanswered questions in the literature. The second section introduces and explores the political and economic context of the defence committees – the PDCs/WDCs – exploring their composition and how they were conceptualised and implemented by the Rawlings government to mediate crisis and manufacture legitimacy. The third section examines the functioning of the defence committees and the explicit links between the PDCs/WDCs and state violence. The fourth section explores how the defence committees function as vehicles for democracy against government interests. In conclusion, we argue that the democratic tropes about participation exemplified in the Rawlings defence committees provide insights into how we can conceptualise the relationship among legitimacy, democracy and state power in postcolonial Ghana, particularly in the context of the longevity of autocracy and corruption among politicians. The defence committees were simultaneously tools for manufacturing regime legitimacy while also functioning as vehicles for asserting regime illegitimacy in the form of grassroots empowerment and claim-making outside of state control.

Manufacturing legitimacy in postcolonial Ghana

In its first 25 years of independence Ghana experienced a variety of governments, ranging from parliamentary to one-party, military, multi-party and revolutionary, each with its own notions of legitimacy and value systems justifying its rule and policy mandate.[1] The very idea of Ghana, whether liberal, socialist, Pan-Africanist or non-aligned, and who it would represent, has continually been reshaped. Each successive ruling power has sought to construct a collective identity, rooted in tradition, in history or in the popular aspirations of the people. This reflects a broader trend in postcolonial African politics in which ruling powers have attempted to manufacture legitimacy, some more successful than others.

The project of postcolonial state-building in Africa since the 1980s has promised account-ability, legitimacy and transparency to ensure popular participation of ordinary citizens in governance.[2] African states, particularly autocratic and military-run states, have been chiefly concerned with achieving legitimacy and promoting democratic governance publicly while consolidating state power and implementing diverse political and economic reforms.[3] As Anyang Nyong'o identifies, even the most authoritarian and repressive governments have attempted to legitimise themselves in democratic terms.[4] This study therefore examines the manufacturing of legitimacy by the Jerry Rawlings military government, the PNDC from 1981 to 1984, and the centrality of discourses about participatory democracy to Rawlings' self-described people's revolution. We do this by focussing on the defence committees, heralded by the PNDC as the 'highest form of democracy', and their links to political repres-sion and the advent of controversial political and economic reforms. Confronted with implementing SAPs and legitimising a military takeover, Jerry Rawlings' PNDC turned to liberal democratic tropes about political participation to mediate crisis and manufacture legitimacy, equating his military-installed government with the popular will of Ghanaian citizens.

Early Africanist scholarship describes postcolonial legitimacy in terms of the propagated myths and symbols that informed public perceptions and justified governments' policies on the basis of that legitimacy or lack thereof. It also emphasised how citizen perceptions of legitimacy shape expectations about leaders and their policies. Political legitimacy there-fore involves conceptions of norms, procedures and directives, implying recognition that the government 'ought to be obeyed because the regime is based on accepted generalised norms'.[5] More recently, political legitimacy has been largely conceived of in terms of ille-gitimacy tied to colonial boundaries, the legacies of colonialism and internal struggles against homogenising nationalisms, or as constituted by development outcomes and polit-ical reforms. Using an institutionalist approach, some argue that the primary determinant is historical legitimacy.[6] Others emphasise that illegitimacy correlates to a weak state.[7] The question of regime legitimacy is of great importance, particularly in Ghana in which suc-cessive postcolonial governments and military coups have each embarked on strategies to manufacture legitimacy, whether through anti-colonialism or Pan-Africanism, or as artic-ulated through tropes about democracy.

In the context of Ghana, Richard Crook has drawn attention to how legitimacy has failed to overcome its colonial basis, claiming that no postcolonial government has emerged that has been able to address this legacy and decolonise from it.[8] For Crook, legitimacy must derive from traditional indigenous institutions and political concepts.[9] This is in line with decolonial perspectives on legitimacy that are grounded in the colonial constitution of postcolonial governance institutions, styles and personalities.[10] In Ghana, the attempt to promote legitimacy and the struggles for control over the state by suc-cessive post-1957 authorities are rooted in the contested question and vision of the state. In contrast, more recent works suggest that to avoid the risk of romanticising non-state actors and traditional institutions, more attention should be paid to the internal tensions and contestations within those spaces.[11] Or, as Eric Scheye describes it, the postcolonial state is characterised by 'the rule of the "intermediaries", a series of networks and polities that substitute and compensate for the lack of authority of the central, legally constituted state and its ability to deliver essential public goods and services'.[12] It is precisely this focus on intermediaries that draws our attention to the defence committees, as they are

essential to regime legitimation but also function as vehicles to mobilise grassroots participation.

In dealing with the question of legitimacy and the persistence of autocracy, Maxwell Owusu has centred on historical development and patterns of governance and participation to explain the persistence of military coups in Ghana.[13] Owusu is interested in exploring the 'total cultural setting' of Ghana through the colonial experience/legacy and the political culture of corrupt and autocratic leaders.[14] His work draws attention to the Asafo companies and their populism as a method of social organisation among peoples developed in response to social, political and economic changes. Owusu argues that the question of legitimacy is a common theme through different historical junctures. He states that 'there is a basic sense in which Asafo populism, the pre-independence Convention People's Party (CPP)-led mass anti-colonialism, and the postcolonial, corrective-reformist coups of Ghana are very similar in character, their broad aims, and sources of legitimation'.[15]

While Asafo companies originated as military protectors, they have developed into potent political actors and arbiters of custom, allowing participants to be involved in the social and political affairs of the community while also reflecting shifting political currents within the country. The anticolonial populism of the CPP also provided legitimacy for Kwame Nkrumah's implementation of Nkrumaism and one-party rule in Ghana. Therefore, this paper seeks to further Maxwell's questioning of legitimacy by exploring the role of defence committees in both reproducing and undermining PNDC legitimacy.

Furthermore, in support of Osuwu's findings, Mike Oquaye describes the PNDC as being a revolutionary regime that pragmatically sought to retain political power through policies that were democratic in name only. He describes the defence committees as part of a strategy to retain political power that simultaneously avoided direct grassroots participation.[16] Oquaye further notes that because of the authoritarian relationship between the people and the PNDC, Rawlings did not install democracy but instead centralised political authority. Paul Nugent further describes 1982–1983 as a period of economic reform and political closure in which the ambiguities of the 1982 revolution led to a surge of class struggles and a crisis in political economy.[17] Not only did Rawlings inherit institutions and power structures that were not democratic, but the relationship between wealth and political power went unaddressed and reproduced class antagonisms.[18] Therefore, legitimacy is a complex phenomenon that can serve to reproduce and mask underlying historical and present power asymmetries within society.

Beyond a binary reading of the Jerry Rawlings years

In contrast to these debates about legitimacy, the broader literature on Rawlings and the PNDC period often fails to consider the insights of postcolonial perspectives on legitimacy or the roles of the defence committees, and thereby reproduces a binary reading of the period as either excessively authoritarian or overly democratic. Jeff Hayes, for example, draws attention to the violation of civil liberties committed by Rawlings and the tensions between the government and interest groups.[19] He further identifies the unwillingness of the government to engage with domestic criticisms that strayed from International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictates. The PNDC ruled in an authoritarian manner in which participatory politics and human rights activism were seen as subversive. Haynes notes that it was not necessary for the PNDC to mobilise Ghanaians for special participatory efforts. IMF/World Bank-style

SAPs did not seek popular participation. Rather, according to Hayes, it was seen as 'a threat for workers and citizens to involve themselves in the "revolution" in any ways other than to enhance economic growth'.[20]

While the description of the anti-democratic and anti-human rights posture of the Rawlings government that Hayes provides is largely accurate, his claim that participation was not required to pass controversial policies does not reflect the ways in which the defence committees were simultaneously used to manufacture legitimacy while providing opportunities for nepotism, repression and grassroots claim-making as the government implemented unpopular and controversial policies. Contrary to the claim that it was 'not necessary' to mobilise Ghanaians for participatory efforts, the discourses of democracy and participation embodied in the defence committees were essential instruments with which the government cultivated participation and implemented controversial policies and political-economic reforms.

At the other end of the binary, Richard Jeffries contends that Rawlings' political project was democratic and that he was a 'believer in what he terms "participatory democracy" as the eventual goal of his revolution'.[21] Hussein Adam furthers this interpretation of Rawlings as a democratic reformer and notes that despite 'opposition charges of unfairness and fraud', Rawlings had the legitimacy to continue his mandate of participatory democracy.[22] What both of these narratives ignore is the ways in which democratic tropes and the defence committees were used by Rawlings to manufacture legitimacy and control participation while implementing a controversial political and economic agenda. Autocratic states are thereby able to reproduce power through the use of democratic tropes. By exploring the functioning of the defence committees as a mechanism for the PNDC to promote its 'people's revolution', as instruments for manufacturing legitimacy and as vehicles for nepotism, grassroots empowerment and claim-making, a more holistic account of the PNDC, defence committees, and the reproduction of autocracy in Ghana emerges.

In addition to the Africanist literature, much discussion on participatory governance has focussed on established or emerging democracies in Europe and Anglo-America. Scholars have problematically paid less attention to the politics and processes of political participation outside the framework of democratic regimes or specifically under postcolonial military governments, especially in non-Western contexts. A few studies have explored political participation in communist and transitioning post-communist countries.[23] Not satisfied with the model of communist states as 'closed' authoritarian and totalitarian societies, some scholars have explored the types and extent of citizen participation in political and civic life in communist USSR, Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam and Cuba.[24] Authoritarian governments have utilised discourses of 'the people' and 'people's revolution' to characterise and justify their political-economic and socio-cultural projects. In Africa, participatory governance has mostly been framed in terms of good governance,[25] poverty reduction,[26] conflict resolution,[27] and security and post-conflict peace-building.[28] However, recent contributions have highlighted how the state co-opts and draws on discourses of participation to mediate political and social concerns. These include, for example, the ways in which social movements and participation become co-opted by developmentalist agendas in Rwanda and the complex ways in which hierarchies of power co-constitute participatory movements and interventions.[29] In the context of post-Apartheid South Africa, efficiency and delivery in policymaking – improvement in public-sector performance – quickly became a priority over inclusive democracy and empowerment.[30] Instead, the participatory discourses used publicly by the African

National Congress (ANC) functioned to extend state power and the political hegemony of the ANC.[31]

The reason for the relative neglect of autocratic states in the discourse of political participation is obvious. Our long-standing and deeply rooted understanding of democracy is that it is the political framework that makes collective agency possible. Democracy protects individual freedom and nurtures collective agency in which citizens share as participants in democratic co-authorship.[32] In contrast, autocratic governments are, by definition, characterised by repression and the absence of grassroots citizen participation.[33] This, of course, is not always true. Some authoritarian regimes allow limited space for political and civic participation as a means of legitimising their regimes and justifying specific policies, if not deflecting criticism of undemocratic rule or administrative-economic mismanagement. As with democratic governments, autocratic regimes also sometimes require citizen participation. Most significantly, citizen participation, especially at the grassroots level, allows autocracies to keep a finger on the pulse of the citizenry. By cultivating citizen participation in governance, however limited and constrained, autocratic states can cultivate grassroots support to counter opposition and 'manufacture' legitimacy around specific social, political and economic agendas.

The literature on state co-option of civic movements and that of participation in governance and development further contributes to our conceptualisation of legitimacy in post-colonial Ghana. However, co-option tends to denote overgeneralised narratives of elites and 'sell-outs', over-emphasising top-down state level agency. This approach has been criticised generally for leading 'us away from a relational analysis of linkages' towards relying on analytically limiting binary conceptions of state and society.[34] These conversations have nurtured cross-discipline exchanges about the relationship between state co-option in participatory and in development processes. These conversations highlight the challenges of locating relationalities between the state, participation (both in discourse and practice), and socio-political and economic change. It provokes a consideration of 'more fundamental critiques of the discourse of participation' within contexts of institutional transformation and development processes.[35] Participatory processes, such as sharing knowledge, inclusive deliberation, political power negotiations and political activism, should not be seen solely in terms of oppositional state–civil society relationships. These processes also come to conceal the exercise of state power, or sustain political oppression, or are entwined with institutional and development change.[36] As David Mosse argues, participatory ideals are often constrained by institutions and formal 'systems of representations' that do not reflect local practice.[37]

In this sense, civic participation, when utilised by the state or by other actors, reflects a more complex matrix of power hierarchies, colonial histories and postcolonial politics that produce alliances and tensions among those involved. These patterns were evident in Ghana. Within a context of navigating economic and potential political unrest, the defence committees were portrayed publicly by Rawlings to democratise governance, empowering citizens to participate in the decision-making of the country. However, they functioned as instrumentalised mechanisms deployed by the state to legitimise governance and to assert state authority through coercion and violence while simultaneously creating platforms for individual nepotism and claim-making outside of state control. The defence committees were a strategy to manufacture legitimacy of the PNDC people's revolution while simultaneously being tied to state violence, repression and constrained opportunities for nepotism and claim-making. Thus, understanding the defence committees also becomes essential for

looking into the ways in which politicians secure favour with elements of the grass roots, reproducing legitimacy through anti-democratic corrupt practices.

The core questions that guide our inquiry are: How were the PDCs/WDCs conceptualised as participatory and/or democratic and how did they function in practice? How were the PDCs/WDCs integrated into legal-political processes of regime legitimisation and the exercise of state violence? In answering these questions, we draw upon the relevant secondary source literature and primary source analysis of discursive speech acts made by Rawlings as well as the records of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) held at the University of Ghana, Accra. Established by the government in 2011, the NRC was charged with promoting national reconciliation among Ghanaians by establishing 'an accurate and complete historical record' of human rights violations related to killings, disappearance, detention, torture, ill treatment and seizure of property during the periods of unconstitutional government. The commission conducted two years of investigations, and public hearings where it heard testimonies from over 2000 victims and 79 alleged perpetrators. The NRC's final report and the 3114 petitions submitted reveal the relationship between the PDCs/WDCs and rights abuses committed during the period.[38] They detail specific cases of state violence and how, more generally, Rawlings' 'people's revolution' engendered state repression and widespread human rights abuses. The use of democratic tropes by Rawlings within the context of the repression and violence committed by the PNDC in the name of the revolution, as documented by the NRC report, contributes to our understanding of participation and regime legitimation in author-itarian postcolonial contexts. With the available primary source material, we were able to map the scale of abuses committed by the PNDC in relation to the total number of NRC petitions.[39] The NRC itself was also a product of political exigencies and is not neutral or objective; its findings are selective and heavily concentrated on addressing the 'Rawlings years'.[40] Despite this limitation, we utilise available primary sources within a secondary source context to capture the relationship between the defence committees and processes of man-ufacturing legitimacy and illegitimacy within the context of the PNDC, regime legitimisation, state repression and grassroots participation.

The initiatives introduced by the Rawlings government, framed as participatory, were aimed at cultivating political and civic participation in ways that could be controlled by the state, with the goal of manufacturing legitimacy. In this context, the defence committees in Ghana emphasised civic grassroots participation that did not pose a threat to autocratic authority, but instead served to strengthen and legitimise the PNDC's political and economic programmes. These participatory programmes encouraged membership in local non-polit-ical civic groups, volunteer community service and cultivating civic values in ways that rein-forced statist agendas and regime loyalty. Discourses of political and civic participation were driven by statist goals of cultivating legitimacy and crisis management – a theme that has received much less attention in the conceptual and theoretical discourses of participatory governance and democratic innovations. Statist grassroots participatory governance pro-grammes initiated by the PNDC illustrate the dynamics of citizen empowerment and legit-imation. Focussing on the case of the defence committees in Ghana, we draw attention to the ways in which the language and practice of participation and innovation can exist as strategies to manufacture legitimacy and further the aspirations of autocratic powers responding to political, economic and social crisis. Yet despite this instrumentalisation, these spaces also hold the potential to become uncontrollable sites of oppositional politics, anti-government protests and grassroots claim-making.

Description and composition of the defence committees

Ghana was the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence from Britain, in 1957. This ushered in a wave of decolonisation across the continent in the 1950s and 1960s. Half a century of colonial rule was replaced by a democratically elected government under the leadership of the charismatic Pan-African politician, Kwame Nkrumah. Nine years after it gained independence, the Nkrumah government was overthrown in a military coup, beginning an era of political instability and military dictatorships characterised by successive and counter military coups. One such coup occurred on 4 June 1979, when the junior ranks of the Ghanaian national army, under the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), launched a rebellion against the Supreme Military Council led by the head of state General Fred Akuffo. After conducting government 'house cleaning', the AFRC was forced to dissolve, rebranding itself as the June 4th Movement (JFM) and installing the People's National Party under Hilla Limann on 24 September 1979. Despite the outcome of elections in 1981 that saw the JFM-favoured People's National Party (PNP) candidate winning the popular vote, the charismatic military leader Jerry Rawlings organised an overthrow of the new government on 31 December 1981, forming the PNDC.

Rawlings had previously gained popularity after he was publicly tried for attempting to organise a military coup, on 15 May 1979, against the ruling military state led by General Akuffo. Akuffo had imprisoned Rawlings for mutiny, but those loyal to Rawlings within the military orchestrated his release on 4 June 1979. In the second coup, Rawlings accused the Limann government of corruption and justified the move as laying the foundation for the establishment of a radical revolutionary democracy led by mass grassroots participation through decentralised networks of defence committees.[41] Rawlings conceived of this transfer of power as a populist revolution, promising democratisation from continued post-1966 military dictatorships. In a 1981 national broadcast, Rawlings clarified that

> This is not a coup … I ask for nothing less than a revolution – something that will transform the social and economic order of this country. In other words, the people, the farmers, the police, the soldiers, the workers, you – the guardians – rich or poor, should be part of the decision-making process of this country.[42]

By empowering local populations to participate in budgeting, governance and development, Rawlings envisioned a radical transformative democracy that would decentralise state authority with local participation in communities and workplaces. The primary mechanism to achieve these objectives was, in part, the self-described innovative and legitimate expression of the people, the organised grassroots PDCs and WDCs.

The conception of the PDCs/WDCs was woven within the politics of Rawlings' self-described people's revolution and was a pragmatic response to post-coup political instability. Before coming to power, Rawlings, on behalf of the JFM, had advocated for the formation of 'revolutionary committees' throughout Ghana as a strategy to resist Limman's PNP. Rawlings sought to organise students, workers, peasants, soldiers and the urban unemployed youths as a populist base he believed was essential for political success. This formed the main ideas behind the creation of the PDCs/WDCs in 1981, which were centred on reinforcing centralised political power through decentralised means.

Membership of the defence committees began with those who participated in the overthrow of the Limann government, but also citizens mobilised by the rhetoric of participation

and those who sought to gain political-economic influence. Participants were also drawn from junior military officers, other ranks and 'radical intellectuals' on the Left whom Rawlings trusted.[43] The defence committees were seen as innovative vehicles that would foster democratic participation in the name of the revolution to ensure social and political transformation. In keeping with Rawlings' aim, the PNDC formed supporting governing coalitions and institutions in an effort to promote interest group inclusion within national decision-making. These coalitions and institutions – the Citizens' Vetting Committees (CVCs), Regional Defence Committees (RDCs), and National Defence Committees (NDCs) – also took a committee structure, ostensibly representing the authentic democratic will of various segments of society. As decision-making was local, these committees were tasked with nurturing respective participation and decision-making, with the 'expectation to expose corruption and antisocial activities'.[44]

Mediated by the values of Rawlings' revolution, the PDCs/WDCs were designed to nurture participation and democratic processes at the local level. The official publication of the JFM and then the PNDC, *Workers Banner*, describes the revolutionary committees as representing the 'highest form of democracy' through which people would participate in governance and their collective decision-making would become 'the law of the day'.[45] As the government publication states in 1981:

> The people's committees represent *the highest form of democracy* – grassroots democracy – because through them all the people will participate in taking vital decisions and in running the country. This way, power will not be concentrated at the top any more, and nobody at the top can enslave us because there is no way anybody at the top, whether he is a saint or a devil can do what he likes. Budget proposals will be debated by the farmers in their villages, the workers in their factories, mines and on the shop floors, the soldiers in their barracks and their collective decisions will become the law of the day.[46]

This meant that the state would devolve local decision-making and service delivery, ranging from infrastructure, goods distribution and healthcare to loosely coordinated non-state committees, in line with the values of Rawlings' PNDC. Addressing Ghanaians' experience of government corruption, this particular issue of the *Workers Banner* further noted that the government would make no decision 'without the consent and authority of the people'.[47] Through mechanisms of local deliberative committees, people would be empowered and the state would become decentralised, laying the foundation for a radical social, political and economic transformation in line with 'the highest form of democracy'.[48]

Defence committees as tools for manufacturing legitimacy and controlling the grass roots

Despite the rhetorical force of Rawlings' and the PNDC's use of democratic tropes, there were no financial, codified regulations or organisational assistance given to the defence committees. The PDCs/WDCs had no formal operating guidelines or direct-support mechanisms to receive assistance.[49] Their operating procedures were loosely outlined in an official handbook that was published by the PNDC in the *Workers Banner* to address growing uncertainty over their role in governance. Each committee secretariat was to organise a 'Projects and Programs Section' that was responsible for identifying and remedying public works and infrastructure problems, as well as undertaking tasks related to mobilising the community to attend

participatory deliberations.[50] This handbook did not provide specific details, again tasking the PDCs/WDCs with broadly defined and overgeneralised goals such as 'local decision-making' or to 'defend the revolution', with limited oversight from the Interim National Co-coordinating Committee (INCC).[51] The INCC, however, was in theory to support the operations of the defence committees and to make sure that they were being operated effectively. Coaxed within the language of subservience to the PNDC, this 'effective operation' included to 'defend the rights of ordinary people; expose and deal with corruption and other counter-revolutionary activities … maintain collective national discipline … [and] afford everyone the opportunity to participate in the decision-making of this country'.[52]

Yet the defence committees were expected to eventually take over the administration of local governments in their areas while also serving as 'watchdogs of the revolution, checking corruption, waste, mismanagement, misuse of state property … and all other kinds of sabotage of the revolution'.[53] An Arbitration Committee was also set up as a dispute resolution mechanism to deal with local disputes and customary practices. However, since there were no operating guidelines or direct-support mechanisms, the defence committees were plagued with internal conflicts.[54]

Defence committees were responsible for their own planning and operation of daily tasks and projects that sometimes resulted in conflicts between committees and within their communities as well as with the PNDC. At the local level, public works were deliberated without resources for implementation. The lack of administrative and financial support meant that crucial public works issues went unaddressed. Committees also developed into pro-Rawlings networks of state surveillance to uphold the 'values and principles' of the 'popular' revolution and to actively seek out and suppress counter-revolutionary forces. The defence committees were situated alongside other legal state mechanisms implemented to punish political dissent and acts of sedition, as well as part of a wider strategy to foster political participation through linking communities with other sectors of the population such as students/youth.[55] Fines were imposed on community members who were deemed not 'enthusiastic enough' with the policies of the PNDC.[56] These fines extracted from 'corrupt counter-revolutionary' segments of the society were supposed to help fund the PDC/WDC activities but instead became a new source of mismanagement.[57] In an overall environment of state repression and control, members of defence committees faced harassment, intimidation and coercion when they sought to withdraw their membership. Many were labelled traitors and subjected to close monitoring and legal penalties. Local political disputes played out through the PDCs/WDCs, sometimes escalating to political imprisonment and execution.[58]

Providing opportunities for participants to deliberate budgeting and public works and assess the needs of the local community or workplace, Rawlings utilised the PDCs/WDCs to gain political support, prevent widespread unrest, deter regime critics and legitimise the PNDC government. They functioned as instruments of state power and legitimacy within a context of political-economic crisis. This is particularly important as the PNDC began to implement the first phase of its Economic Recovery Program (ERP) in 1983, two years after taking power.[59] Economic austerity policy measures, including the reduction of public expenditures and social services, were aggressively introduced to attract foreign direct investment and meet the structural adjustment requirements of lender financial institutions.[60] There was a lack of sustained public expenditures on social services and institutions, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) was falling by 2% annually, and production capacity had

declined leading to high unemployment and inflation.[61] Not only were Ghanaians suffering economically, there was a considerable perception within Ghana that Rawlings had taken power illegitimately.[62] An internal Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) memo, created 27 January 1982 and declassified publicly in 2007, reveals that when Rawlings took power his government had extreme difficulty attracting prominent citizens to serve, and that there was widespread 'dissatisfaction' and a lack of 'enthusiasm' amongst the general population.[63] The call for radical democratic innovation in the name of participation was thus essentially a response to an intensifying crisis; it became a political-normative discourse and an over-generalised set of policy mandates that functioned, in part, to mediate crisis and maintain legitimacy. Despite the unpopularity of the reforms the PNDC was taking, Rawlings and the Secretary for Finance, Kwesi Botchwey, argued that it was necessary to nurture national development and improve individual livelihoods.[64]

Within the context of economic grievances and the potential for political unrest, the PDCs/WDCs played a significant role in perpetuating state violence and legitimation. The PNDC generally responded strongly to public acts of dissent by framing critics as counter-revolutionaries and created a tribunal system to punish political and economic corruption including espionage against the revolution. Those who expressed opposition or criticism to policies were routinely arrested and detained. This was a form of 'selective repression' where the PDCs/WDCs were favoured over alternative civil society organisations.[65] State repression was justified in terms of upholding the integrity of the populist revolution. According to Rawlings, a 'people's justice was needed for a people's revolution'.[66] The PNDC established public tribunals in 1982 with broad jurisdiction over political and economic matters, while local committees retained responsibilities over local dispute resolution. These tribunals became de facto judiciaries of the government acting outside the existing legal structures to punish crimes against the people. Supporters of the government defended the tribunals as 'fundamental to a good legal system' and reflective of a 'growing legal consciousness on the part of the people'. Critics, however, regarded them as legalising 'otherwise extra-judicial acts of the PNDC'.[67]

Like the tribunals, the PDCs/WDCs had the power to identify 'counter-revolutionary activities/individuals'. Human rights activists and organisations such as Amnesty International reported that defence committees were responsible for hundreds of political imprisonments.[68] The defence committees also had an important role in coordinating their activity with the PNDC security forces. It is reported that on 23 March 1984 military dissidents from Côte d'Ivoire, led by L/Cpl Alidu Giwa, and Togo entered Ghana to overthrow the government. Giwa and his men were arrested while the Togo group 'was discovered in the Ningo area, and arrested by the local PDC's'. Once arrested and taken to the Air Force Station, '[a]fter a brief interrogation, they were executed one after the other, by firing squad'.[69]

This connection to state violence was even evident in the operation of 'People's Shops' in residential areas and at workplaces by defence committees, which provided economic opportunities and a strategy to regulate the market. They distributed a variety of commodities to their members at controlled prices, which often would be re-sold by market women.[70] This meant that members were able to use their position for potential financial gain. However, this form of averting price controls would also lead to punishment, beatings, imprisonment and torture by security forces if they were caught or reported by competing shops. Three weeks after Rawlings seized power, Dutsonya Apetorgbor was arrested for selling garden eggs above the set price and sent to Gondar Barracks.[71] The NRC petition indicates that a PDC

informant made the report. Apetorgbor was deemed too old to receive punishment, and her daughter was subsequently 'arrested and beaten on behalf of her mother'. In a petition to the NRC's investigation of past regime abuses, Apetorgbor's daughter describes her treatment:

> one of the soldiers used a lighter cigarette on her left arms twice without even asking what the problem was. Other soldiers who were present used weaved electrical wires and canes to beat them up. One of the soldiers used the butt of his rifle to hit her repeatedly on her head resulting in her falling down. A broken beer bottle was used to shave their heads, resulting in scars on her head …. Before being released, they were asked to chew and swallow the garden eggs upon which her mother was arrested.[72]

Such documented human rights abuses and wanton killings of regime dissidents came to characterise the PNDC 'revolution' and the context in which the defence committees and 'People's Shops' functioned.[73] The Catholic Bishops of Ghana lamented that 'atrocities of all sorts have been committed against innocent civilians' by those 'purporting to support the revolution … without the Government showing any willingness or ability to do anything about them'.[74]

In addition to being used to mediate crisis and legitimise the PNDC, the PDCs/WDCs also became mechanisms to perpetuate rights abuses and commit political repression.[75] According to the petitions collected by the NRC, 67.6% of all human rights violations reported occurred under Rawlings' government.[76] These abuses were 'remarkably high' during the early years of the PNDC, from 1979 to 1982 (Figure 1).[77] There were also statistically significant
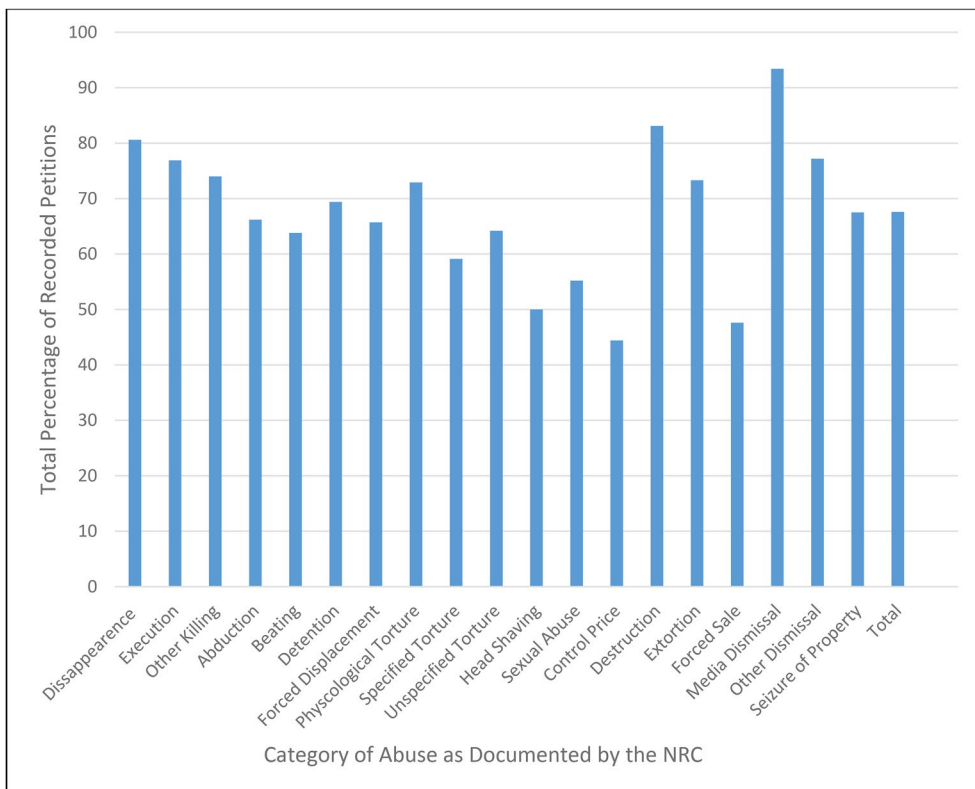

Figure 1. Percentage of total received petitions attributed to the PNDC 1957–2003.
Data from the Ghana Report of the National Reconciliation Commission.

peaks in the total number of reported abductions, beatings (varying in degree), and private property seizure violations compared to any other time period.[78] The majority of these abuses took place in the Greater Accra and Ashanti regions. Most of the extra-judicial executions took place in Accra near military facilities.[79]

The PDCs/WDCs did not carry out these acts directly; that was the responsibility of the security forces. What these statistics reveal, however, is that the defence committees functioned in collaboration with the military and the perpetuation of state-led violence. The participatory spaces created by these initiatives were used to legitimise state violence against critics, contributing to the consolidation of power by Rawlings' PNDC. Soldiers who conducted price control checks subjected market women to flogging and other acts of humiliation.[80] Soldiers harassed and seized goods from civilians, setting up arbitrary road barriers at the airport, harbours, and other points of entry.[81] Individuals who resisted seizure of private cars were shot dead, and others were injured – acts that could be 'carried out in the name of the revolution'.[82]

Defence committees as unexpected vehicles for dissent and claim-making

Just as Rawlings desired, the defence committees functioned as indirect extensions of state power with the overt political goal of solidifying the revolution and offloading responsibilities of the state onto uncoordinated local committees. In this sense, they served more to foster the PNDC's political and economic agenda than to enhance grassroots democratic participation. The initial citizen participation in the PDCs/WDCs reflected significant capacity building and mobilisation around Rawlings' political message of democracy; there was, however, a significant lack of resources and coordination. They were burdened with supervising the fair and equitable distribution of goods and services to the people, organising community self-help projects, explaining and discussing national issues at the grass roots, and implementing national and local policy decisions.[83] However, this is not to say that the defence committees did not function unexpectedly outside of PNDC control.

Within the context of economic and political crisis management from 1981 to 1984, from the perspective of Rawlings' PNDC, there were few resources to produce codified guidelines and coordinate support mechanisms for the day-to-day operations of the PDCs/WDCs.[84] This vacuum of state over-reach in the handling of service delivery, public works projects, funding and local issues meant that the majority of the committees, especially in rural areas, had to make up their own rules.[85] Furthermore, the PDCs/WDCs specifically became an arena in which to play out pre-existing disputes and preferential policies at local levels in urban and rural communities and workplaces. The processes by which defence committees were organized, and who retained what positions, were conducted with little oversight, allowing for nepotism. Despite this lack of oversight, many local committees functioned as service delivery intermediaries between the state and the people, providing a mechanism for the government to control and distribute scarce consumer goods. Participants had to deal with a variety of local problems and disputes – from public sanitation to establishing farms and mobilising participation. While the defence committees reflected a capacity to deal with local problems, as some commentators have noted, given the uncoordinated nature of support, they also became saddled with responsibilities that would otherwise be those of state-directed regional coordinators.

Furthermore, despite the PDCs/WDCs being implemented and instrumentalised by the state with supporting tribunal and police–military repression, their political agency could not always be mediated. The defence committees sometimes challenged government agendas, especially those that had adverse economic impact on people's lives. After the release of the controversial national budget in 1983, PDCs/WDCs were at the front lines of protesting and criticising the government's acceptance of the IMF neoliberal structural adjustment recommendations, framing it as a 'betrayal' of revolutionary principles.[86] Not only were the PDCs/WDCs not consulted, but the budget removed all government subsidies on essential goods and services, allowing prices to rise uncontrollably – by over 700% for the average consumer. As Konings identifies, many defence committees used their grievances with the budget to criticise the Rawlings government. WDC members in Tema, for example, openly criticised the PNDC budget:

> The budget was announced at a time when the working people were beginning to doubt the PNDC's commitment to destroying the social power of the exploiters and aid the liberation of the oppressed … militants organized in the defence committees have not been offered any consistent political support, protection or encouragement by the national leadership …. For us, the workers of Tema, therefore, the only basis on which we can accept the PNDC's budget … [is] if we see immediate measures which aim at dealing with some of the likely consequences of the budget, restore the political confidence of the people and attack the social power of the exploiters who are responsible for the crisis.[87]

The participatory space created by the defence committees, despite the intentions of the state, was sometimes uncontrollable and did not always function on behalf of statist objectives.

The Rawlings government established defence committees in the belief that local committees were authentic expressions of the populist revolution that would legitimate the government's political agenda and mediate the economic crisis. But as we have seen, the operations of the PDCs/WDCs were characterised by tensions within many of the committees, contributing to their ineffectiveness as institutions for civic mobilisation and popular engagement in politics. Without the adequate coordination of the central government, they were left on their own, acting out an overgeneralised mandate in tandem with the PNDC, police and military. They were also guided by the narrow political interests of influential committee members, and often nepotistic traders, chiefs and other elites seeking political and economic power. In some cases, defence committees instituted practices of harassment, population surveillance, corruption and extortion, and confrontations between rival defence committees over parochial issues.[88]

By 1983, however, the disorder of the defence committees had become manifest and contributed to the transformation of economic crisis into chaos. A declining economy, increased social unrest, and direct government coercion led to a rapprochement between the PNDC and IMF.[89] Furthermore, in the face of growing public criticism over their corruption, coerciveness and lack of accountability, the PDCs/WDCs were effectively dissolved in 1984 before subsequently being transformed into the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs). The *Daily Graphic* published an editorial blaming the failures of the PDCs/WDCs on a perversion of revolutionary ideology by students at the University of Ghana. These students had 'corrupted good cadres by poisoning their minds', which led members astray and required disciplining.[90] The new CDRs were more closely supervised by the central

government in Accra, and as one commentator later described, the CDRs were "Rawlings loyalists" tasked with advancing and defending PNDC populism.[91] The change from the defence committees to CDRs was a tacit attempt to re-legitimise a participatory governance strategy, more tightly controlled, to manufacture legitimacy for the PNDC.

Conclusion: the tensions of the defence committees and manufacturing legitimacy

The defence committees in Ghana were established by Rawlings' government with the stated aim of promoting grassroots political and civic participation as a means of achieving social and economic development. The language of democratic participation and innovation was deployed to both create spaces for increased civic engagement and to mediate political-economic crisis. The PNDC promoted the innovations as the highest form of democracy. In practice, the PDCs/WDCs functioned primarily to reinforce and manufacture legitimacy to support statist political-economic agendas. As part of a broader strategy to affirm regime legitimacy and to deflect criticisms of economic crisis and autocratic rule, the initiatives became instruments of state governmentality that provided constrained spaces for civic and political participation that the government could control. Such control, however incomplete, was aimed at ensuring the participation of individuals and groups whose interests aligned with the government's, while excluding those who were critical. These findings reinforce the importance of looking at the relationship between participation and state–civil processes in the secondary source literature to understand how autocracies manufacture legitimacy to produce longevity. After all, Rawlings and the PNDC maintained political power in Ghana for nearly 12 consecutive years, from 1981 to 1993, before transitioning to a multiparty democracy while retaining power from 1993 until 2001.

However, to argue that participatory governance strategies – the defence committees – served primarily to manufacture legitimacy is not to suggest that these processes did not also facilitate grassroots participation to some extent. In Ghana, PDCs/WDCs in practice acted in tension with the state. They served to embolden radical intellectuals, populists, young military officers and various interest groups by providing a mechanism to persecute and fine those deemed counter-revolutionary. Their membership also provided opportunities for economic enrichment and nepotism, which would sometimes cause conflict with the PNDC security forces. Furthermore, while the defence committees functioned to help mediate political-economic crisis and offload service responsibilities of the state onto unco-ordinated committees, the PDCs/WDCs also sometimes made effective demands upon state authority, through direct protests. This is most evident when looking at the protests and criticisms against the PNDC's controversial economic reforms introduced in the 1983 budget. These are preliminary findings; further research is needed into the operations of defence committees in rural contexts, where there was a greater separation with the PNDC, and into how committee members conceptualised democracy in the workplace and community.

We conclude, therefore, that participatory governance programmes initiated by autocratic regimes to manufacture legitimacy or respond to crisis also have the simultaneous potential to expand civic and political engagements in uncontrollable ways. The inference is that scholarly assessments of participatory governance need not only be confined to their inherent transformative democratic value and the conceptual-political labour that it performs. Rather, we should also pay attention to the tensions of manufacturing legitimacy through

democratic tropes, the ways in which state-controlled participatory governance processes provide openings for civic and political engagement while overall serving to legitimise political and economic interests. It is in this distinct regard that our knowledge of participatory governance processes can benefit from an understanding of the tensions of instrumentalised civic engagement in authoritarian non-democratic settings.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1.   Hayward and Dumbuya, "Political Legitimacy," 648.
2.   Wamba dia Wamba, "Discourse of the National Question," 57–69.
3.   Jenson and Kposowa, "African Military Coups" and Hippler, *Nation-Building*.
4.   Nyong'o, *Struggles for Democracy*.
5.   Ibid., 650.
6.   Englebert, *State Legitimacy*, 173.
7.   Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition* and Atiku-Abubakar and Shaw-Taylor, "Weak States in Sub-Saharan Africa."
8.   Crook, "Power in Ghana."
9.   Ibid.
10.   Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power* and Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Genealogies of Coloniality."
11.   Bagayoko et al., "Legitimate Public Authority."
12.   Scheye, "Pragmatic Realism in Justice and Security Development," 5.

13. Owusu, "Culture and Democracy in West Africa"; see also Owusu, *Uses and Abuses of Political Power*.
14. Owusu, "Democracy and Africa," 373.
15. Owusu, "Rebellion, Revolution, and Tradition," 376.
16. Oquaye, *Politics in Ghana, 1982–1992*.
17. Nugent, *Big Men, Small Boys*, 15.
18. Ibid., 264.
19. Haynes, "Democracy in Ghana," 408.
20. Ibid., 424.
21. Jeffries, "Democratization in Ghana," 10.
22. Adam, "Fanon as a Democratic Theorist," 515.
23. Bohrer, Pacek, and Radcliff, "Electoral Participation, Ideology, and Party Politics"; Agarin, "Introduction to the Special Issue."
24. Schulz and Adams, *Political Participation in Communist Systems*.
25. Gaynor, "Between Citizenship and Clientship."
26. Saha, "Reducing Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa."
27. Gordon, *Transformation and Trouble*; Lamenski, "Unequal Citizenship in Unequal Cities."
28. Bell and O'Rourke, "The People's Peace?"; Picard and Mogale, *Limits of Democratic Governance in South Africa*.
29. Hasselskog, "Rwandan 'Home Grown Initiatives.'"
30. Brooks, "Mass Movement and Public Policy," 105–8.
31. Ibid., 120–5.
32. McBride, "Democratic Ownership and Deliberative Participation," 113.
33. Froissart, "Ambiguities between Contention and Political Participation"; Hooghe and Quintelier, "Political Participation in European Countries"; Burt, *Political Violence and the Authoritarian State*.
34. Lapegna, "The Problem with Cooptation," 9.
35. Cooke and Kothari, *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, 7.
36. Ibid., 13.
37. Mosse, "People's Knowledge, Participation, and Patronage," 17, 29–32.
38. Report of the NRC, "Statistics," 157.
39. Report of the NRC, "Media and Human Rights," 178.
40. For a discussion about the political context of the NRC see Asare, *Truth without Reconciliation*.
41. Rawlings, "New Year's Address."
42. Ibid.
43. Pinkney, *Democracy and Dictatorship in Ghana and Tanzania*, 45.
44. Ayee, "Local Government, Decentralization and State Capacity," 47.
45. June 4th Movement, *Workers Banner*.
46. Ibid, Emphasis added.
47. Ibid.
48. Yeebo, "Ghana: Defence Committees and Class Struggle."
49. Agyeman-Duah, "Ghana, 1982–6," 641.
50. Yeebo, "Ghana: Defence Committees and Class Struggle," 66–8.
51. Ibid., 66.
52. PNDC, "Initial Proclamation."
53. PNDC, "Guidelines for PDCs and WDCs," 1983.
54. Agyeman-Duah, "Ghana, 1982–6," 641.
55. Kraus, "Political Party Failures and Political Responses," 487.
56. Amnesty International, *Amnesty International's Concerns in the Republic of Ghana*.
57. Yeebo, "Ghana: Defence Committees and Class Struggle."
58. Amnesty International, *Amnesty International's Concerns in the Republic of Ghana*.
59. Kraus, "Political Party Failures and Political Responses"; Hutchful, *Ghana's Adjustment Experience*.
60. Hutchful, *Ghana's Adjustment Experience*.
61. Owoo and Page, "Industrial Policy in Ghana," 178.

62. Gupte, "In Ghana, Little Zeal for New Regime" and Gupte, "Rawlings Tightens His Grip on Ghana after Coup."
63. CIA Records Collection, "Ghana: Rawlings Takes Charge Again."
64. Boafo-Arthur, "Ghana: Structural Adjustment."
65. Atibil, "Democratic Governance and Actors' Conceptualization."
66. Gyimah-Boadi and Rothchild, "Rawlings, Populism, and the Civil Liberties Tradition," 64.
67. New African, "Ghana: Confessions of a Tribunal Chairman," 297.
68. Amnesty International, *Amnesty International's Concerns in the Republic of Ghana*.
69. Report of the NRC, "Security Services," 65.
70. Ibid., 57.
71. File No. 0004, Ms. Juliana Dogbey, Accra Petition to the NRC.
72. Ibid.
73. Asare, *Truth without Reconciliation*.
74. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Ghana, 2.
75. Report of the NRC, "Professional Bodies," 276.
76. Data collected from the Report of the NRC.
77. Report of the NRC, "Statistics," 157.
78. Ibid., 159–64.
79. Ibid., 157.
80. Report of the NRC, "State Institutions and Civil Society," 73.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid., 73–4.
83. PNDC, "Guidelines for PDCs and WDCs," 1983.
84. Brenya et al., "Rawlings Factor in Ghana's Politics."
85. Yeebo, "Ghana: Defence Committees and Class Struggle"; Adedeji, "Legacy of J. J. Rawlings in Ghanaian Politics."
86. Konings, "The State and the Defence Committees," 282–3.
87. Ibid., 16.
88. Hutchful, "New Elements in Militarism," 819; Sandbrook, *Politics of Africa's Economic Recovery*, 128.
89. Sandbrook, *Politics of Africa's Economic Recovery*, 128.
90. Report of the NRC, "The Student Movements," 358.
91. Crook, "Rawlings' Ghana," 117.

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