

[Browse Africana](#)

Search:

Welcome Guest

[Home](#) > [Heritage](#) > Ghana's Peaceful Transition Affirms Africa's Democratic Hopes

## heritage



### Ghana's Peaceful Transition Affirms Africa's Democratic Hopes

[Email](#)   [Letter to the Editor](#)

On January 7, 2001, a crowd of 300,000 people gathered in Accra, Ghana, to mark their country's democratic transition from long-time leader Jerry John Rawlings to new President John Kufuor. "From today, we must learn to smile again, we must learn to appreciate the good in each other and we must feel pride in being Ghanaians," President-elect Kufuor told an uproarious Independence Square crowd, as he promised positive change for "all Ghanaians, not only of my party," referring to his victorious New Patriotic Party.

Around the world, many saw the inauguration as a victory celebration not only for Kufuor but for Ghana itself – and the African continent as a whole.

"The Ghanaian transition comes on the heels of Senegal's successful elections," notes Oliver Smith, a former Peace Corps Volunteer now working on issues of democratization and refugee resettlement in West Africa at Columbia University's African Institute. "This is yet another example of Africans' ability to manage political change peacefully."

The election, initially held December 7, was generally seen by Africans and the international community as free and fair – a significant achievement for a country in which power has never before been transferred through democratic means. Rawlings, in power nearly two decades, stepped down in deference to Ghana's two-term constitutional limit on presidential tenure. In the December 29 run-off election Kufuor, the opposition candidate,

handily defeated former Vice President and Rawlings protégé Jon Atta Mills.

According to the country's National Electoral Commission, Kufuor – an Oxford-educated lawyer and businessman – won 56.73 percent of the vote, while Mills got 43.27 percent. Kufuor's National People's Party also defeated Rawlings' ruling National Democratic Party (NDC) in the parliamentary elections. But the real story, many suggest, is not in who won or lost, but in how the game was played: the peaceful transfer of power following a democratic election, observers point out, says a great deal about the maturity of Ghana's political process.

"I can't say more about how good this is for Ghana and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa," says Edward Kutsoati, a Ghanaian national who teaches economics at Tufts University in Massachusetts. "Rawlings must be commended for embracing democracy and stepping down, even if it was under pressure. It could easily have been worse!"

Kufuor's inauguration came almost exactly 19 years after Jerry Rawlings, a former fighter pilot, and his cohorts mounted a coup that overthrew Ghana's elected government on New Year's Eve in 1981. It was not until 1992, however, that Rawlings was democratically elected to the position he'd held informally for a decade (he was re-elected in 1996, in an election in which Kufuor finished second).

In the early months of his rule, Rawling's Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) executed eight generals and established the People's Defense National Council (PDNC), the first branch of what was to be a strongly socialist government that Rawlings promised would "give power to the people." A popular populist, Rawlings became known as a brilliant orator who could speak to the man on the street, who welcomed him, one account at the time said, as "Hero, Lord, Savior, Junior Jesus." He was said to smoke half a cigarette and stick the remaining part behind his ear, just as ordinary Ghanaians do.

Rawlings has always been seen as a pragmatist, averse to ideology. "Don't ask me what my ideology or economic program is," he once snapped at a group of journalists. "I don't know any law and I don't understand economics, but I know it when my stomach is empty." Despite his government's initial stance, Rawlings eventually embraced free market capitalism and reoriented his country towards the West. Along the way, he purged his government of suspected coup plotters, murdering or exiling perceived enemies. A number of dissidents "disappeared." In 1982, three judges and a retired army official were killed – the BBC described their deaths as having occurred in "circumstances that have led to accusations of complicity being leveled at Rawlings and his wife."

"The PNDC days were a period of sheer terror and repression," says Kewky Baako, publisher of the *Crusading Guide* newspaper, who spent two years in jail for opposing Rawlings' military junta.

Kufuor's inaugural address implicitly referred to the past regime's abuses: "We have gone through turbulent times and we should not downplay or brush aside the wrongs that have been suffered.... I do not ask that we forget – indeed we dare not forget – but I do plead that we try to forgive."

But over the years Rawlings, who will retain leadership of the National Democratic Congress party, has won respect of Western leaders as an example of the new enlightened African leadership. He successfully wooed

the IMF and the World Bank, agreeing to implement a structural adjustment plan and receiving a \$5 billion aid package. His economic restructuring and his sidelining of the military attracted foreign investment and promoted trade. Rawlings earned plaudits in the West for bringing stability and economic peace to a troubled country in an unstable region: he masterfully maintained a pro-Western stance while preserving cordial relations with Nigeria (under the notorious dictator Sani Abacha) and Libya's Gaddafi – often backing the latter's pan-Africanist (and sometimes anti-Western) ideas.

Inside Ghana, supporters point to the stability Rawlings' rule has brought, and credit the outgoing president's policies with creating a healthy economy: the country now spends five times as much on health and education as it does on the military.

Comparisons between Rawlings and Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's founding father, abound – and are resented by critics of the outgoing administration. Yao Graham, editor of the *Public Agenda*, was involved with Rawlings during the early revolutionary days in the early 1980s, and is unswayed by all the celebratory talk about Rawling's legacy. "He turned Ghana into a colony," Graham told the BBC. "He is like a comet which we all looked up to for extra light, only to be engulfed in darkness."

This sense of unfulfilled promise, mixed with great personal appeal, leads some to compare Rawlings with the United States' recently departed president, Bill Clinton. Barbara Holecek, an independent filmmaker who spent hours interviewing Rawlings, understands the comparison, but points out that while Clinton spent his life preparing for the presidency, Rawlings was a "somewhat young and inexperienced," even reluctant leader.

"In my many conversations with him over many years he expressed reluctance – mixed feelings – about being the leader of Ghana," says Holecek. "Many times he expressed the feeling that there had to be a appropriate way to reach a democracy."

Of Rawlings' legacy now that Ghana has seen its first peaceful, democratic transition of power, Holecek says, "it's a controversial subject because some people felt he kept democracy from taking place in Ghana while others felt he was Ghana's best hope for developing a stronger populist base for a more stable democratic system, but I would tend to think he's very pleased that this has happened."

Continuing the Ghana/US comparison, Oliver Smith adds that, "unlike the US, in Ghana there was a more amicable transition than we had here – the Ghanaian leadership demonstrated more statesmanship than the Bushes and Gores. This should be strong evidence to the Bush administration that Africa is not a continent of malfeasance."

"The question now is, will this [political transition] translate into growth and economic well-being?" says Edward Kutsoati. "Everyone hopes so, but this will not be easy, and not in the short-term, as there are no quick fixes to Ghana's problems," which, he points out, include rampant corruption and falling prices for cocoa and gold, the country's top exports.

"The task now," Kutsoati continues, "is to make the government as transparent as possible, reinstate people's confidence in government, so they can work together. For example, the government must come out and be clear to the people about any policy undertaken and why the result will not be seen in the short term."

In his inaugural speech Kufuor indicated that Ghana's economy would remain on the same private sector-based development path initiated by Rawlings. "We have work to do and that starts today," said Kufuor. "Our greatest enemy is poverty and the battle against poverty starts with *reconciling our people.*"

Kufuor's address seemed crafted to appeal both to the international community ("Ghana is open for business – come in and let's do business") and to the millions of Ghanaians abroad ("We need your newly-acquired skills and contacts, we need your perspective and we need your capital. Come back home where you belong and let's join in building a new Ghana").

"People in Ghana are fast becoming informed about the benefits of democratic institutions. The press and radio stations tend to stimulate political and social debates in most local languages," says Edward Kutsoati. "It was about time."

[Email](#)   [Letter to the Editor](#)

[About Us](#) | [Your Privacy](#) | [Careers](#) | [Newsletter](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#)

Africana.com web site © Copyright 1999-2003 Africana.com Inc.

Microsoft® Encarta® Africana content © Copyright 1999-2003 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved to media owners