



West Africa Civil Society Institute

# Ghana's 2020 Election

IN THE CONTEXT OF CORONA VIRUS DISEASE  
(COVID-19) AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

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# Ghana's 2020 Election in the Context of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and Shrinking Civic Space

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>CDD</b>	Centre for Democratic Development
<b>CODEO</b>	Coalition of Domestic Election Observers
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus Disease-19
<b>CSOs</b>	Civil Society Organisations
<b>EC</b>	Electoral Commission
<b>ECONEC</b>	ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissions
<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West African States
<b>GOG</b>	Government of Ghana
<b>IDEG</b>	Institute for Democratic Governance
<b>IPAC</b>	Inter-Party Advisory Committee
<b>NCCE</b>	National Commission for Civic Education
<b>NDC</b>	National Democratic Congress
<b>NGOs</b>	Non-Governmental Organisations
<b>NPC</b>	National Peace Council
<b>NPP</b>	New Patriotic Party
<b>MfWA</b>	Media Foundation for West Africa
<b>PPE</b>	Personal Protective Equipment
<b>RTI</b>	Right to Information Bill
<b>WAHO</b>	West African Health Organisation
<b>WACSI</b>	West Africa Civil Society Institute

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report analyses the upcoming Ghana's 2020 general elections in the context of COVID-19 pandemic and shrinking civic space. Over the years, some commentators have described Ghana as an example of Africa's 'star democratisers' (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015) and an "oasis of peace and a role model for democratic development" (Bjarnesen, 2020:296). This notwithstanding, the country is faced with waning commitment to promoting democracy especially on the part of political elites, and government's accountability to citizens has increasingly become scarce in recent years (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). Informed by this, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Ghana have played crucial roles in contributing to democratic consolidation. Specifically, CSOs help in fostering individual and community knowledge through education on democracy, monitoring and ensuring the efficiency of the democratic process and act as advocates for the people in demanding accountability from government (Botchway, 2018).

Despite these significant roles played by CSOs, the space within which they operate is increasingly becoming restricted. According to the Civicus Monitor, Ghana's civic space in 2020 was rated as 'narrowed'<sup>1</sup> (CIVICUS, 2020). The situation of shrinking civic space in the country has been compounded by the novel COVID-19 pandemic. Just like other West African countries, the Government of Ghana (GOG) as part of its efforts to contain the transmission of the COVID-19 instituted a number of legislations and policies such as partial lockdowns, ban on social gatherings which have the potential of increasing existing threats to shrinking civic space in the country. For instance, the Imposition of Restriction Acts, 2020 (Act 1012), Imposition of Restrictions (COVID-19) Instrument, 2020 (E.I. 64) and the declaration of Public Health Emergency were introduced as part of measures to control the spread of the coronavirus. In terms of

lockdown measures, three main forms were applied by the government: i) geographical containment; ii) closures and prohibitions; and iii) home confinements (Haider et al., 2020). For geographical containment, the national borders were closed from 21 March 2020 and there were also home confinements and travel restrictions in and out of Accra and Kumasi for three weeks. Gatherings of more than 25 people were prohibited. Schools, religious institutions, and non-essential shops were also closed. The GOG therefore used the derogation clause in the 1992 Constitution to restrict the civil liberties and the exercise of human rights of citizens. In particular, the constitutional provision for state of emergency "contain a derogation clause which allows for actions or steps taken in pursuance of a declaration of state of emergency to derogate from the fundamental human rights obligations under articles 12-30 of the 1992 Constitution" (Addadzi-Koom, 2020:5). However, some commentators have raised concerns about the tendency for the government to use the legislations enacted during the pandemic to overreach and violate the fundamental rights of citizens<sup>2</sup>. The implementation of COVID-19 related legislations therefore has the potential of further shrinking the 'deteriorated' civic space in the country.

Moreover, given that the country has an upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in December 2020<sup>3</sup>, the COVID-19 pandemic again poses threats to the democratic and governance processes in the country. This is particularly the case as COVID-19 inspired measures such as social distancing protocols have the potential to negatively affect the holding of free and fair elections due in part to the inability of international and domestic election observers to effectively undertake electoral support and observation activities. This is because in the midst of the pandemic, traditional method

1 <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/ghana/>

2 See for example, <https://verfassungsblog.de/covid-19-constitutionalism-and-emergencies-under-ghanas-1992-fourth-republican-constitution/>; <https://theconversation.com/ghanas-president-has-invoked-a-tough-new-law-against-coronavirus-why-its-disquieting-135476>

3 <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>

of election observation which involves spending considerable time on the ground where observers are deployed over a long period of time becomes a challenge due to the social distancing protocols put in place. In addition, there have been reported incidences of political activity related infections of COVID-19 where high profile politicians in the governing New Patriotic Party (NPP) have contracted the virus following the holding of the parliamentary primaries. Moreover, the President of Ghana- Nana Addo Dankwa Akuffo Addo was also forced to self-isolate for a 14-day period following the acclamation of his candidature event (Asante, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic therefore poses a threat to pre-election campaigns, rallies and the voter registration which has the potential of negatively affecting the electioneering processes. For instance, the Electoral Commission (EC) postponed the compilation of the new voter registration from April to June 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>4</sup>.

Coupled with the pandemic, the recent years have also seen a surge in political vigilantism in the Ghanaian political landscape (Asamoah, 2020). The use of political vigilantes or 'foot soldiers' by the major political parties during election campaigns aimed at terrorising electoral actors and causing violent riots and insecurity in the country further contributes to shrinking civic space as their activities results in violence, abuse of human rights and the curtailment of freedom of expression (Bjarnesen, 2020; CIVICUS, 2020). Furthermore, electoral violence influences voter behaviour which negatively affects electoral participation—low voter turnout, hence affecting the integrity and credibility of the electoral processes (Ijon, 2020). Therefore, the conduct of the upcoming elections amid unchecked political party vigilantism and the COVID-19 pandemic could therefore have potentially worrying implications for the peace and stability of the country as well as civic space in general.

Against this backdrop, this report analyses Ghana's 2020 election in the context of COVID-19 pandemic and shrinking civic space. The report guided by the following research questions: What is the nature and scope of civic space in Ghana? How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced and shaped the civic space in Ghana? What are the implications of the COVID-19 and shrinking civic space on Ghana's upcoming election? These questions are answered by drawing on a qualitative research methodology and secondary data gathered between July and August 2020. Specifically, the qualitative data were sourced through semi-structured interviews with 10 CSOs representatives and key informants with expertise and experience in the Ghanaian political landscape and civic space issues. The report is also informed by secondary (i.e. grey and academic) literature on the COVID-19 pandemic, civic space, and elections in Ghana. The aim of the secondary literature was to explore the existing base related to the interplay of COVID-19, civic space, and elections in Ghana.

## 2.0 AN OVERVIEW OF CIVIC SPACE IN GHANA

Following the adoption of democracy and multi-party systems in 1993, Ghana is considered a 'beacon of democracy' in Africa<sup>5</sup>. The changes in the political landscape of the country has created an opportunity for CSOs to better engage with stakeholders including the government. The political transition to democracy has also created a relatively 'favourable climate' which has led to the growth in the number of CSOs operating in the country (Debrah and Graham, 2015). For instance, according to USAID (2019), in 2018, 7,950 CSOs were registered with the Department of Social Welfare. However, this is an underestimation of the actual number of CSOs operating in the country as many fail to register or renew their operating license. In 2018, only 10% (i.e. 823) of registered CSOs renewed their annual permit (USAID, 2019).

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4 <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/official-ec-suspends-registration-exercise.html>

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5 <https://www.ghanaiantimes.com.gh/ghana-is-beacon-of-democracy-ibn-chambas/>

Compared to other countries in West Africa, the civic space in Ghana has over the years been rated as 'narrowed' by the CIVICUS Monitor (i.e. a platform that provides real time updates on civic space)<sup>6</sup>. Despite the country's relative performance in relation to civic space, the recent years have witnessed a deterioration in the operating environment of civil society in terms of press freedom, freedom of expression and abuse of fundamental rights of citizens by government, political parties and private sector actors. Specifically, in terms of press freedom, there has been several reported cases of abuse which led the Media Foundation for West Africa (MfWA) to describe the situation as "near alarming proportions". In fact, MfWA reports that attacks on journalists and culture of intolerance for dissenting voices have been on the increase in the country<sup>7</sup>. The perpetrators of shrinking civic space in Ghana have resorted to tactics including the use of threats, impunity, and killings to curtail freedom of expression. Assaults and threats on journalists have also become rampant. For instance, the investigative journalist, Anas Aremeyaw Anas was threatened by a Member of Parliament—Kennedy Agyapong for his exposé on football corruption<sup>8</sup>. Another journalist linked to the exposé—Ahmed Hussein-Suale was also killed by two unknown assailants<sup>9</sup>. The investigative journalist—Manasseh Azure Awuni of JoyFM received several death threats following his documentary "Militia in the heart of the nation" which allegedly highlighted the existence of vigilantes in the ruling party of NPP. The death threats forced the journalist to go into hiding outside the country<sup>10</sup>.

There have also been reported cases of assaults and threats on journalists covering the COVID-19

pandemic<sup>11</sup>. In August 2020, a soldier assaulted a journalist—Stanley Nii Blewu of TV3 when he was reporting on the state of sanitation at the Tema Station in the Greater Accra Region<sup>12</sup>. Similarly, on 5 April 2020, a Kumasi-based journalist—Abdul Ganiyu was attacked by a soldier over his reporting of military brutalities during the lockdown period. Another journalist—Samuel Adobah was also brutalised by a military officer when covering fire outbreak during the lockdown period<sup>13</sup>.

Aside from assaults and threats, the government has also resorted to the closing down of radio stations and online outlets. For instance, in October 2019, the National Communications Authority shut down 57 Frequency Moderation (FM) Stations on the basis that they were operating with expired authorisations<sup>14</sup>. This has raised concerns about the arbitrary and discriminatory nature of the law enforcement which are targeted at pro-opposition media outlets in the country<sup>15</sup>. Press freedom is sometimes limited using regulative frameworks aimed at silencing dissenting voices on politically sensitive issues. This directly demonstrates how the GOG is using administrative restrictions to further shrink civic space in the country.

Shrinking civic space in Ghana also takes the form of censorship on media coverage on critical development issues. For example, the Speaker of Ghana's Parliament—Professor Mike Oquaye in February 2020 threatened to ban journalists from covering parliamentary proceedings because some journalists were reported to have provided coverage of a briefing by an opposition member

6 <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

7 <https://www.mfwa.org/critical-times-for-press-freedom-in-ghana-as-violations-near-alarming-proportions/>

8 <https://www.mfwa.org/threats-the-creeping-danger-to-press-freedom-freedom-of-opinion-in-ghana/>

9 <https://www.mfwa.org/issues-in-focus/ahmed-suales-murder-and-3-critical-issues-about-safety-of-journalists-in-ghana/>

10 <https://citinewsroom.com/2019/05/mfwa-finds-safe-haven-for-manasseh-azure-after-death-threats/>

11 <https://cpj.org/2020/04/in-ghana-soldiers-enforcing-covid-19-restrictions/>; <https://www.mfwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Ghana-April-May-June-final.pdf>

12 [https://www.ghanaiantimes.com.gh/gja-demands-swift-investigation-into-assault-of-tv3-journalist-by-soldier/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=gja-demands-swift-investigation-into-assault-of-tv3-journalist-by-soldier](https://www.ghanaiantimes.com.gh/gja-demands-swift-investigation-into-assault-of-tv3-journalist-by-soldier/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=gja-demands-swift-investigation-into-assault-of-tv3-journalist-by-soldier)

13 <https://www.mfwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Ghana-April-May-June-final.pdf>

14 <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/nca-shuts-down-57-fm-stations.html>

15 <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/ghana/>

of parliament<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, there have also been censorship on the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic by some government officials. According to the MFWA, a journalist—Richard Kwadwo Nyarko was called and reprimanded by two government officials over a report the journalist did in relation to demonstrations over the siting of COVID-19 isolation centres in some communities in the Central Region<sup>17</sup>. The dominant mechanism used by perpetrators of shrinking civic space in Ghana is the curtailment of freedom of expression. It is therefore not surprising that the country dropped three places from its World Press Freedom Index in 2019 position and was ranked 30 in the 2020<sup>18</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that other tactics used in shrinking civic space in Ghana revolve around stigmatisation and negative labelling where civil society actors are tagged as ‘saboteurs’ who are motivated by their own selfish interests rather than working to promote the interests of the country. For example, recently, civil society actors including NGOs and think tanks seeking accountability and transparency from government on the Agyapa Royalties deal<sup>19</sup> are giving negative name-calling such as ‘all-knowing neutrals’<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, some CSOs are often accused of co-option by certain political parties and governments. The rationale for negative labelling and stigmatisation is to tarnish the reputation of these actors by discrediting their activities. For this reason, the constant labelling of civil society actors as ‘untrustworthy’ is negatively affecting the civic space in Ghana.

In addition, shrinking civic space in Ghana occurs

in relation to restrictions on rights to peaceful assembly and demonstration. For instance, in July 2019, three members of the Economic Fighters League protesting the building of a new chamber in Parliament (i.e. #DropThatChamber protest) were arrested by the police<sup>21</sup>. In March 2020, the GOG also banned the gathering of LGBT+ activists in the country<sup>22</sup>. Same-sex acts are also criminalised in the country which also provides opportunities for harassment and the impunity of violence such as verbal and physical assault by individuals and security agencies<sup>23</sup>. In terms of protests, in May 2020, members of the Coalition of National Zongo Political Groupings protesting the implementation of the paperless port and electronic clearance systems (i.e. UNIPASS) were arrested for not having authorisation. Similarly, in June 2020, the Ghana Police also denied the ‘Black Lives Matter’ protesters the right to demonstrate by violently dispersing them. The leader of the protest-Ernesto Yeboah was subsequently arrested by the police.

Despite the above reported cases of curtailment of freedom of expression, harassment and intimidation of journalist and limitations on rights of assembly, the Ghanaian civic space has also seen some improvements especially in right to information. In May 2019, the GOG passed the Right to Information Bill (RTI) into law which grants citizens the right to seek and receive information from public and some private institutions. Although the RTI Act, 2019 (Act 989) has been established, challenges to accessing information which is a vital element of right to expression still exist: the road map and indicators to ensure the smooth implementation of the Act have been lacking<sup>24</sup>. Notwithstanding, civil liberties such as religious and academic freedoms are upheld in the country. Moreover, individuals

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16 <https://www.ghanaiantimes.com.gh/speaker-threatens-to-revoke-media-accreditation-for-not-carrying-out-core-duties/>; <https://www.mfwa.org/ghanas-speaker-of-parliaments-threat-to-bar-media-from-covering-ghanas-parliament-worrying/>

17 <https://www.mfwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Ghana-April-May-June-final.pdf>

18 <https://rsf.org/en/ghana>

19 For details on Agyapa Royalties, see <https://www.mofep.gov.gh/news-and-events/2020-08-29/agyapa-royalties-best-deal-for-ghana%E2%80%99s-gold-ken-ofori-atta>

20 <https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/elizabeth-ohene-writes-all-knowing-neutrals.html>

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21 <https://www.gbcghanaonline.com/news/politics/three-protesters-arrested-for-chanting-droptthatchamber-in-parliament/2019/>

22 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ghana-lgbt-religion/ghana-bans-lgbt-conference-after-christian-groups-protest-idUSKBN20Z31L>

23 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ghana/freedom-world/2019#CL>

24 <https://www.mfwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Press-Statement-1-year-after-assent-of-RTI-Act-final1.pdf>

have the right to participate in protests, are free to express their views on politically sensitive issues and also criticise government policies without fear of retribution or surveillance, while CSOs also operate freely by ensuring government accountability and transparency. However, it is important to mention that although citizens have the right to assemble and participate in protests and demonstrations, they must serve a five-day notice to the Ghana Police Service in line with the directives of the Public Order Act 1994(Act 491)<sup>25</sup>. However, there have been several instances where the Ghana Police Service has denied the right of citizens to protest even after serving them notices<sup>26</sup>

As mentioned earlier, despite the gains made in opening civic space in Ghana, the COVID-19 pandemic and its related legislations pose significant threats to these gains. Although restrictions on COVID-19 protocols have been eased recently, concerns have also been raised about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on electoral processes in the country. In the next section, a situational analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana is briefly discussed.

### 3.0 BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND RELATED LEGISLATIONS IN GHANA

Ghana recorded its first two cases of COVID-19 on 12 March 2020. By 7 September 2020, the country had recorded 44,869 cases with 43,801 recoveries or discharges and 283 deaths<sup>27</sup>. As mentioned earlier, following the first reported cases, a health emergency was declared in accordance to section 169 of the Public Health Act, 2012 (Act 851). The Imposition of Restriction Acts, 2020 (Act 1012)

and the Imposition of Restrictions (COVID-10) Instrument, 2020 (E.I. 64) were subsequently adopted by the government. The government instituted geographic containment, closures and prohibitions and home confinements measures by adopting partial lockdowns in Accra, Tema, Ksoa and Greater Kumasi Metropolis for a three-week period. Ban on public gatherings of more than 25 people, closure of places of worship, schools, and non-essential shops as well as Ghana's borders to international flights were also enforced. However, some businesses such as markets were allowed to open with strict adherence to social distancing and hygiene protocols such as the wearing of face masks. In addition, the government disinfected market centres across the country<sup>28</sup>.

The covid-19 inspired legislations restricted fundamental rights such as freedom of movement and expression of Ghanaians. In particular, in the enforcement of lockdowns, security agencies such as the police and the military abused the rights of citizens through the disproportionate use of force. For instance, citizens who violated lockdown directives were beaten and harassed and, in some instances, killed<sup>29</sup>. The enforcement of COVID-19 inspired legislations also led to several instances of assaults on journalists which in turn affected freedom of expression<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, the COVID-19 Tracker App introduced by the GOG to trace individuals who have encounter potential COVID-19 patients raises questions about the potential of the app to violate the right to privacy of citizens.

Of particular concern to the discussion is how the COVID-19 pandemic influences and shapes the upcoming election in Ghana given that pre-election activities such as voter registration, campaigns and rallies have to be conducted under strict COVID-19

25 <https://policehumanrightsresources.org/content/uploads/2016/07/Public-Order-Act-1994.pdf?x72802>

26 See for example, <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/ghana-news-court-order-against-agyapa-demo-police-acting-in-bad-faith-asepa.html>; <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/education/police-account-of-demonstration-full-of-lies-law-students/>

27 <https://ghanahealthservice.org/covid19/>

28 <https://www.graphic.com.gh/ghana-news-videos/video/mass-disinfection-ongoing-at-various-markets-across-ghana.html>

29 See for example, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/ashaiman-traders-outraged-by-alleged-shooting-of-man-by-soldier-on-lockdown-operation/>; <https://www.dw.com/en/is-the-coronavirus-killing-press-freedom-in-africa/a-53061431>

30 <https://cpj.org/2020/04/in-ghana-soldiers-enforcing-covid-19-restrictions/>

protocols. This has the potential of affecting the electoral processes in the country. In the next section, this report analyses Ghana's upcoming election in the context of COVID-19 and shrinking civic space focusing specifically on the challenges posed by the pandemic for the election.

## 4.0 ELECTIONS AMID COVID-19 AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE IN GHANA

### 4.1 Voter Registration, Political Violence and Civic Space

A majority of interviewees expressed the view that although COVID-19 pandemic poses significant threats to the 2020 Presidential and Parliamentary elections in Ghana, they maintained that Ghana's Electoral Commission (EC) has made provisions to ensure the smooth administration of elections in the midst of the pandemic. According to a section of interviewees, the 'successful' conduct of the recent voter registration exercise is a demonstration of commitment on the part of the EC to ensure that the country undertakes its election to prevent any constitutional challenges. However, interviewees expressed mixed reactions in relation to the voter registration exercise. First, a small number of interviewees felt that the voter registration was 'needless' given that it rather exposed people to the pandemic, as one interviewee put it: "because of elections, we're pushing people to register [...] Political parties in Ghana are always thinking more about power and would do everything to ensure that the registration takes place"<sup>31</sup>. Another interviewee added that: "when we had fewer cases of the COVID-19, the EC, and the National Identification Authority (NIA) had to suspend. But now we have over 20,000 cases but the registration process for the new register is ongoing [...] While some centres are practising social distancing, for others it's not the case and this exposes people to the virus"<sup>32</sup>.

Apart from the concern of exposure of people to the virus, concerns were also raised about the whole registration process as some interviewees felt that some citizens were disenfranchised because of the closure of the borders which limited their freedom of movement and participation in the voter registration. According to these interviewees, the inability of some citizens to register because of the closure of Ghana's international borders at the time of registration is an infringement on their political rights. Although the EC conducted a two-day mop-up registration exercise for eligible applicants who were unable to register to do so, some citizens could still not register because the country's borders were still closed during the period of the exercise.

On the other hand, a section of interviewees also maintained that the voter registration was necessary because Ghana's constitution does not make provisions for the extension of the term of office of the President. Given this challenge, it was necessary that pre-election activities such as the voter registration be conducted in the middle of the pandemic. Interestingly, some interviewees explained COVID-19 inspired legislations such as ban on social gatherings have unduly delayed the electoral processes. An interviewee therefore argued that "given the way things are going, if you have an election activity that is cancelled, for how long can you suspend the activity because of COVID-19?"<sup>33</sup>. For this reason, the conduct of the voter registration was necessary to avoid any constitutional challenge that is likely to arise from the inability of the EC to conduct the elections. Speaking about the implications of the inability to conduct Ghana's election, an interviewee questioned that: "practically what are the implications of not having a president and parliament? If the election is suspended, there are constitutional implications and as a country, are we willing to take the risks?"

Despite the mixed reactions on the voter registration exercise, what appears unquestionably clear from

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31 Interview, 12 July 2020.

32 Interview, 17 July 2020.

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33 Interview, 16 July 2020

the interviews was that there were pockets of electoral violence which in turn affects efforts aimed at opening civic space in Ghana. In particular, the case of the Minister for Special Initiatives—Hawa Koomson who fired a gun at a voter registration centre in Kasoa in the Central Region<sup>34</sup>. As some commentators have argued, the actions of the Minister amounts to political vigilantism and is of course a worrying situation for the smooth conduct of elections amid the COVID-19 because of its potential to increase insecurity and violent riots in the country. There were also pockets of violence and intimidation during the registration exercise especially when security agencies were deployed on Ghana's borders with the perceived aim of preventing foreigners from registering. However, this resulted in allegations of intimidations and the prevention of particular ethnic groups from participating in the elections<sup>35</sup>. For instance, the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) party has argued that the 2020 voter registration exercise was "the most violent" in Ghana's fourth Republic given that two citizens were killed in the Bono region and some opposition Members of Parliaments (e.g. Collins Dauda and Bawa Braimah Muhammad) were assaulted during the voter registration exercise<sup>36</sup>. These incidences of violence and intimidation negatively impact the civic space within which civil society operate.

However, it is worth mentioning that, the phenomenon of political violence is not new in Ghana's democratic landscape<sup>37</sup>. For example, the shootings at the Ayawaso West Wuogon by-election in January 2019 is a clear indication of the increasing trend of political violence and vigilantism

(see for example, Asamoah, 2020; Bjarnesen, 2020)<sup>38</sup>. For this reason, there was consensus among interviewees that the increasing trend of political violence is worrying for the security of the country in the run-up to the 2020 elections. According to interviewees, the increasing involvement of party youth activists and groups popularly known as 'party-foot soldiers' by politicians and political parties in Ghana's electoral processes often fuel political violence during elections. They explained that given the high levels of youth unemployment in the country, politicians and political parties "are capitalising on the vulnerabilities of the youth"<sup>39</sup> to mobilise their political supporters as one interviewee stated. However, a concern raised was that many of the 'foot soldiers' or young party activists often engage in illicit activities such as disrupting voter registration exercise, snatching of ballot boxes to serve the violent interest of politician which fuel political violence during elections. Interestingly, interviewees emphasised that although the Vigilantism and Related Offences Act, Act 999 (2019) has been passed, in practice, its implementation has been a challenge due to the lack of political will by the major political parties<sup>40</sup>. Given the level of political violence together with the COVID-19 pandemic, it creates a challenge for having an inclusive political dialogue with stakeholders involved in Ghana's electoral processes.

Consequently, the situation of political violence during election is a deeply concerning issue because it does not promote an open civic space where citizens can freely express themselves without fear of retribution. Given the level of election-related violence in the country, concerns were raised by interviewees about how this could result in democratic backsliding which affects the extent of political liberation and the ability of citizens to enjoy

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34 <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/hawa-koomson-firing-gun-at-voters-registration-centre-is-political-vigilantism-festus-aboagye/>

35 <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/politics/no-specific-ethnic-group-was-prevented-from-partaking-in-voters-registration-at-banda-armed-forces/>

36 <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/politics/2020-voters-registration-exercise-is-most-violent-ndc/>

37 There are currently about 25 vigilante groups belonging to the NDC and the NPP political parties (see Asamoah, 2020: 465)

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38 See <http://citifmonline.com/2017/10/18-incidents-of-vigilante-violence-recorded-since-npps-victory/>

39 Interview, 18 July 2020.

40 Interview, 20 July 2020.

a wider range of rights and liberties. Interviewees explained that this could further negatively impact the ability of CSOs to hold government to account on behalf of citizens. This in general could have serious repercussions for the security and governance processes in the country.

#### 4.2 Political Campaign and Ethnocentrism

Data from this research suggests that COVID-19 restrictions have unduly delayed the political activities such as voter registration, campaigns and rallies. For example, the parliamentary primaries of the New Patriotic Party were postponed from 25 April to 20 June 2020. Also, the NDC claimed the party did not have its running mate because of COVID-19<sup>41</sup>. An analysis of media review of stories relating to COVID-19 restrictions and political activities revealed some level of politicking and distrust especially by the opposition NDC party in relation to the rationale for the imposition of lockdown and the subsequent lifting of the restrictions. For instance, a leading member of the NDC—Ama Benyiwa Doe argued that COVID-19 restrictions were imposed by the President to prevent the NDC candidate—John Dramani Mahama from campaigning<sup>42</sup>. The general secretary of the party—Johnson Asiedu Nketia also said the ban on public gathering was a plot for the NPP to rig the 2020 elections. Again, the NDC criticised the President for the lifting of lockdown<sup>43</sup> and some leaders (e.g. Huruna Iddrisu) of the party called the lifting of lockdown as a ‘gamble’<sup>44</sup>. Interestingly, the criticism of the President for lifting the lockdown is part of the ‘political gimmick’ and the politicisation of COVID-19 responses by political

parties in Ghana<sup>45</sup>.

This notwithstanding, with the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, political activities such as campaigns and rallies have started. Analysis of interview data and secondary literature revealed that while political parties and their actors are required to strictly adhere to COVID-19 protocols, many have failed to do. A typical example is during the parliamentary primaries of the NPP where politicians and their supporters violated COVID-19 protocols<sup>46</sup>. Even more worrying is the fact that despite the assurances given by the EC of ensuring strict adherence to COVID-19 protocols during registration, the COVID-19 protocols were violated in some registration centres across the country<sup>47</sup>. Recently, there have been several incidences where COVID-19 protocols were not observed by the two main political parties in Ghana during their campaigns. While the campaigns are taking place in an environment characterised by increasing number of COVID-19 infections, adherence to protocols has become a challenge. This has the potential of increasing the spread of the virus during the election period and raises questions about the preparedness of the EC to conduct and guarantee genuine, transparent, and safe elections. It also has the potential of negatively affecting the number of people who attend campaigns and rallies, which has implications for efforts to promote inclusive participatory democracy in the country.

Another important theme that emerged from the interview data and secondary literature relates to the use of hostile language and vilification campaigns aimed at promoting ethnocentrism. An analysis of the research data suggests that a surge

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41 <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/politics/ndc-postpones-launch-of-2020-manifesto/>; <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/We-don-t-have-running-mate-due-to-coronavirus-Asiedu-Nketia-938575>

42 <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Coronavirus-restrictions-meant-to-stop-Mahama-s-2020-campaign-Ama-Benyiwa-Doe-946804>

43 <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/ndc-criticizes-premature-decision-to-lift-lockdown/>

44 <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/politics/opposition-criticising-covid-19-measures-for-political-survival-akufo-addo/>

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45 See for example, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Calling-for-de-politicization-of-COVID-19-only-when-govt-responds-hypocritical-Oppong-Nkrumah-943402>; <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/investigate-partisan-food-distribution-in-lockdown-zanetor-rawlings-to-akufo-addo/>

46 <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/npp-primaries-gma-calls-for-arrest-of-persons-who-flouted-covid-19-protocols.html>

47 <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/ec-not-observing-covid-19-protocols-at-registration-centres-ndc.html>

in the use of ethnocentric comments by some leaders of the NDC and the NPP. According to the MFWA, in July 2020, 66 indecent expressions such as insulting and offensive comments, gender specific insults, bigotry and the promotion of divisiveness were made by influential political party officials such as the general secretaries of NDC and NPP—Johnson Asiedu Nketiah and John Boadu respectively on radio programmes<sup>48</sup>. A recent case also involves the description by an NDC Member of Parliament— Isaac Adongo who argued that the Agyapa Royalties deal was fraudulent by stating that “Agyapa Royalties fraud is the Last Straw: The Akyem Sakawa boys and grandpas must go”<sup>49</sup>. This statement was made about the President who was accused of forming ‘family and friends’ government’ to exploit the mineral resources of the country. The statement has been allegedly endorsed by the former President Mahama in his bid to canvas for votes. However, some CSOs including the MFWA have condemned his endorsement of the statement because of its ability to “provoke and incite reprisal attacks which can fuel political tensions”<sup>50</sup>. Similarly, leading members of the NPP have also been culprits of the use of vile languages on media. The Ashanti Regional Chairman of the NPP—Bernard Antwi Boasiako, for example, has also propagated hate speech against the running mate of the NDC party<sup>51</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that these ethnocentric sentiments in the Ghanaian political landscape is not new (see Arthur, 2009; Sefa-Nyarko, 2020; Agomor et al., 2020), however, they have the potential of inciting violence and disturbing the peaceful conduct of elections if political parties mobilise their supporters along ethnic lines. This could in turn affect the operating space of civil

society organisations.

### 4.3 COVID-19 and Reduced Funding for CSOs’ Election Activities

CSOs are key stakeholders in Ghana’s electoral processes and play key roles such as public education and advocacy to hold government accountable for its actions and inactions. Most interviewees explained that the ability of CSOs to perform their election related activities has been hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Speaking about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected Ghanaian CSOs’ ability to undertake their election activities, an interviewee explained that majority of CSOs are highly dependent on external donor funding for their survival but with COVID-19, funding from external donors remains uncertain. This is how the interviewee puts it: “most CSOs’ survival is uncertain because of their donor dependency [...] Now funding from donors has reduced and some of them can’t continue their advocacy programmes related to the upcoming elections”<sup>52</sup>. Another interviewee added that:

***“When you look at CSOs that deal with issues of governance, advocacy, election, and human rights related issues, you will realise that there are impeding challenges [...] Many of them had planned their budget from 2019. But there are several additional running costs that COVID has introduced. So, it raises questions on how they are able to sustain their election related activities against the backdrop of reduced funding or unavailability of funding and the lack of prospects as to when they can receive funds***

48 <https://www.mfwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Language-Monitoring-Report-July-1-31-Revised-Final-NEWWWW.pdf>

49 <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Akyem-Sakawa-Boys-Anthony-Sackey-scolds-Mahama-for-stooping-so-low-1052929>

50 <https://www.mfwa.org/ghana-mfwa-condemns-john-mahamas-endorsement-of-ethnocentric-comments/>

51 <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/npp-must-reprimand-wontumi-for-comments-against-naana-opoku-agyemang-kweku-baako/>

52 Interview, 10 July 2020.

***from their donors”<sup>53</sup>.***

The above statement is a clear demonstration of the challenge faced by CSOs in undertaking their election related activities because of the lack of funding. Interviewees further argued that given Ghana’s middle-income status and the recent calls by the President for ‘Ghana beyond aid’, it has implications of limiting external donor support for election related activities. Moreover, interviewees explained that the COVID-19 pandemic has also shifted the funding priorities of many donors towards short-term humanitarian and economic recovery programmes rather than long-term development problems such as good governance including elections. Interviewees argued that funding challenges is not only limited to traditional CSOs like NGOs but also media houses who have been hard hit by the pandemic in terms of their access to funding as explained by an interviewee:

***“media houses have also been greatly impacted in terms of their ability to access funding to be able to do their work in relation to elections. COVID has significantly affected the capacity of the media to deploy journalists to report from the field. In several media houses, journalists have been retrenched because of COVID-19”<sup>54</sup>.***

The challenge of resourcing CSOs to effectively undertake election related activities has the potential of negatively affecting their ability to serve as watchdogs and advocates in raising citizens’ awareness on electoral processes. This could also affect participation and inclusiveness which undermines the integrity and credibility of the upcoming elections.

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53 Interview, 17 August 2020.

54 Interview, 16 July 2020.

#### **4.4 COVID-19, Digital Media Campaign and Civic Space**

There was consensus among interviewees that the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for political parties in Ghana to use digital media platforms such as radio and TV stations for mass political campaign messaging in the upcoming elections. Thus, political parties are relying on social media to put out their message and also energise their supporters which increases the extent of political engagement during the pandemic. However, a concern raised by a section of interviewees was that in Ghana, many media outlets were owned by people with political affiliations, therefore their connections with the political elites affect the objectivity of their analysis in relation to the elections as explained by one interviewee who stated that:

***“What the COVID-19 pandemic has brought up is that in Ghana, campaigning is going to happen via media platforms and political parties are going to rely so much on media platforms such as, radio and television to campaign to their people. The media therefore has a critical role to play but a lot of the media is owned by people with political and for that matter partisan interests. Therefore, the extent to which the media organisations will be able to interrogate campaign promises and ideas may be quiet challenging”<sup>55</sup>.***

The above statement suggests that the objectivity of the media in relation to discussions on the elections may be undermined in part because of their ownership. In fact, the content of media houses

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55 Interview, 19 July 2020.

influences and shapes their objectivity and for this reason, it will be highly impossible that the owners of these media houses will allow their opponents to use their platforms to campaign against them. The challenge with media ownership in Ghana in relation to civic space and election is that it gives undue advantage to some political parties and therefore raises questions about the fairness of the electoral processes. Again, it influences the extent of freedom of expression which is a key tenet of civic space. A typical case is the recent order issued by the Kwahu Traditional Council to shut down two-pro NDC radio stations- Okwahu FM and Afram FM<sup>56</sup>. This empirical finding is consistent with the existing literature that highlights that in Ghana, “every third media outlet has an owner with political affiliations”<sup>57</sup>.

Directly related to this, interviewees explained that given the restrictions associated with COVID-19 protocols such as social distancing, many political parties in Ghana have resorted to engaging their constituents on social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram to promote their political messages. Interviewees explained that digital technology platforms including social media create opportunities for especially the youth to be active in politics by getting actively involved in campaigns. In doing so, the voices of the technologically-savvy youth who were once marginalised in politics are now being heard as they become engaged in the developing campaign and communication strategies for political parties<sup>58</sup>. Moreover, it was reported by interviewees that reliance on social media by political parties helps them to communicate their policies and positions on national socio-economic and political issues to a wider audience. However, the increasing use of social media platforms for political campaigns during the pandemic has led to the increasing

spread of fake news, propaganda messages, hate speeches, propagation of falsehood and promotion of political violence which could create electoral chaos especially through illegal declaration of election results. This in turn could destabilise the peace and security of the country as people use their platforms to create fear and panic (Dzisah, 2020). In addition, the increasing reliance on social media and its associated rise in the spread of fake news also has the potential of impacting campaign messaging. In particular, the use of social media in the dissemination of rumours, lies and conjectures can have negative implications of undermining democratic processes (Cheeseman et al., 2020).

Notwithstanding the above challenges highlighted in relation to the 2020 elections in the context of COVID-19 and shrinking civic space, interviewees averred that given the ‘strong democratic foundations of Ghana’ and the role played by stakeholders including some CSOs (e.g. Centre for Democratic Development (CDD), Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG), and media houses), the National Peace Council (NPC), electoral management body (e.g. EC and the Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC)) and regional institutions like ECOWAS and West African Health Organisation (WAHO), the existing threat of COVID-19 to the upcoming election can be minimised. For instance, regional bodies like ECOWAS and WAHO have been providing technical assistance and guidance to the Ministry of Health and the EC on ways of containing the spread of the pandemic. The ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissions (ECONEC) has also supported Ghana’s EC with some Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) and sanitisers as part of efforts to ensure the smooth conduct of Ghana’s elections<sup>59</sup>. Other stakeholders like the NPC have also formed monitoring teams and advocated for the disbandment of political vigilante groups

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56 <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/kwahu-traditional-council-orders-two-pro-ndc-radio-stations-shut-down/>

57 <http://ghana.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/political-affiliations/>

58 Interview, 24 July 2020.

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59 <http://aceproject.org/ero-en/report-videoconference-covid-19-impacts-apr-2020.pdf>

to promote peace and stability during the 2020 election<sup>60</sup>. Informed by the active roles played by these institutions in promoting peace and security in the country, it is expected that despite the challenges of COVID-19 and shrinking civic space, the 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections would be conducted successfully. This particularly requires the collaboration of all stakeholders in mitigating the potentially negative effects of the COVID-19 on Ghana's upcoming election.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study analysed Ghana's upcoming elections by situating it within the context of COVID-19 and shrinking civic space. The study highlights that over the past decades, civil society have played active roles in consolidating Ghana's democratic depensation. However, in recent years, the operating environment of CSOs is increasingly becoming restricted due to a number of factors including intolerance for dissenting political views by state and non-state actors. It also highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic and its related legislations have reinforced existing threats to shrinking civic space within the country.

This notwithstanding, Ghana, relative to other West African countries has developed its democratic foundations over the past two-three decades and has successfully conducted elections and seen three peaceful transitions of power. However, the country is faced with the problem of declining democratic commitments especially by the political elites and rising distrust of citizens in the electoral processes which has led to increasing levels of political violence and voter apathy. This negatively affects the peace and stability of the country. The dire situation has been further heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic which presents unique challenges for the country in its quest to promote democratic development.

Against this backdrop, the country is faced with a public health crisis which negatively affects the timely implementation of election related activities and the electoral cycle in general.

As the findings from this study highlights, the pandemic has the potential of causing disruptions in the electoral cycle and discourage voter turnout which is a key determinant of election credibility and legitimacy. Directly related to this, the findings show that the pandemic has implications for the monitoring of elections by both domestic and international observers. In particular, it highlights that COVID-19 and its associated social distancing protocols have the potential of affecting traditional election observation given the limited time at the disposal of especially international election observers. Existing studies have suggested that the presence of election observers (domestic and international) helps in reducing electoral fraud such as overvoting and suspicious turnout during elections (see for example, Kelly, 2012; Asunka et al., 2013; Golden et al., 2015). However, if the pandemic creates challenging circumstances for observers to monitor the upcoming election, it might raise questions about the integrity and credibility of the electoral processes given that previous elections have been marred by allegations of electoral fraud and irregularities which for example, led to the 2012 presidential election petition at the Supreme Court<sup>61</sup>. The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for electoral monitoring is that it calls for a stronger collaboration between international missions and domestic election observers like Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO). This also requires the strong support of regional institutions like ECOWAS with regards to the deployment observer missions.

In relation to civic space, this study found that the increasing levels of political violence, ethnocentrism,

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60 <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/ghana-news-disband-vigilante-groups-peace-council-urges-political-parties.html>

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61 <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/election-petition-supreme-court-affirms-mahama-s-victory.html>

and reduced funding for CSOs negatively affect civic space in Ghana. In particular, the findings indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has directly affected funding for CSOs which also impacts their ability to undertake their election related activities successfully. What emerges strongly from this study is that the pandemic and its related restrictions have compelled political actors (e.g. political parties) to resort to campaigning on digital platforms but there are challenges relating to the use of for example, social media in propagating fake news, hate speech and inciting political violence which negatively affects the civic space. Despite these challenges caused by the pandemic on the upcoming election, the findings also highlighted the roles played by some key stakeholders in addressing these challenges. For this reason, it is argued that while the pandemic poses major challenges for the country, the upcoming elections can be safely held in the midst of the pandemic but this requires efforts by all stakeholders involved in the electoral processes.

## **Recommendations for Electoral Stakeholders**

### **Promote inclusive public participation**

First, the EC should promote an inclusive stakeholder consultation by engaging with non-state actors including citizens, CSOs, traditional authorities, religious institutions and the private sector. The involvement of the public in electoral administration has significant benefits for the successful conduct of elections as it has the potential of promoting efficiency and effectiveness in electoral administration. Among the potential mechanisms for promoting public participation include organising town hall meetings, online surveys, and consultations to seek people's perspectives and concerns about electoral practices. Also, regional bodies such as ECOWAS and ECONEC should leverage on their technical and diplomatic expertise in forging stakeholder consultations by bringing together electoral stakeholders such as the EC, political parties, CSOs religious and traditional

leaders and the NPC to address challenges and disagreements associated with the electoral processes in Ghana.

### **Promote accountability and transparency mechanisms for electoral practices**

Second, the active participation of citizens in election related issues also requires the EC to be transparent in providing the needed information to citizens. It is therefore important for the EC to ensure their own organisational accountability. In this regard, CSOs could play a vital role by acting as watchdogs in demanding accountability and transparency from the EC. This also requires the EC to put in place mechanisms that allow citizens and stakeholders involved in elections to report their problems and seek redress. In addition, there is the need for the EC to increase its own organisational visibility especially through public education and maintain high presence on social media platforms

### **Enhanced coordination of educational campaigns with electoral stakeholders**

Third, given the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial that the EC coordinates effectively its activities in consultation with institutions such as the Ghana Health Service, the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), CSOs and political parties to educate the public on the need to adhere to the COVID-19 protocols during elections. There is the need for the government to resource institutions like the NCCE and the Information Services Department adequately for them to play their educational and information dissemination roles effectively during the 2020 elections. Other stakeholders including celebrities should be involved in public health educational campaigns mainly because of their influence and popularity especially with the youth. The endorsement of public health messages by the celebrities has the potential of reaching out wider audience because their social capital helps them to be well-liked and admired in the Ghanaian society.

### **Promotion of Peace and Stability**

Fourth, there is the need for the NPC to leverage

on its diplomatic mechanisms in engaging political parties and other stakeholders such as the National Security Council, the Ghana Police and the Ghana Armed Forces in promoting peace and security during and after the elections. More significantly, the NPC should work together with political parties to find lasting solutions to political violence that characterises Ghana's electioneering processes. However, for the NPC to play its role effectively, it requires its leaders to be 'objective' and 'neutral' in their analysis of national issues because there have been allegations of the NPC being partisan and hypocritical in nature<sup>62</sup>. This will help in building public trust in the institution given the crucial role it plays in national peace and security.

### **Collaboration between and among Civil Society Organisations**

Lastly, there is the need for CSOs (e.g. NGOs, CBOs, media, trade unions and faith-based and professional organisations) to collaborate and merge resources to help in promoting civic education on the upcoming elections. In particular, CSOs should work together with media houses to engage and educate citizens on their political rights. They should also work together in holding political parties to account in ensuring that threats of violence during elections are minimised. The media also should play a key role in serving as a watchdog in combating hate speeches, propagation of falsehood and the promotion of political violence on media platforms. However, for CSOs to play meaningful roles in addressing the threats of COVID-19 on Ghana's upcoming election, it also requires development partners, government and local philanthropic institutions to provide the needed financial and non-financial resources to support their activities because the lack of especially financial resources hinders the ability of CSOs to play their advocacy and educational roles in elections and promoting an opened civic space effectively.

### **Support Domestic Election Monitoring Groups with financial resources**

Intergovernmental and international organisations (e.g. African Union, The Commonwealth Foundations, IDEA, The European Union, Carter Foundation, Westminster Foundation for Democracy) and regional institutions like ECOWAS should provide financial and technical resources to support especially domestic election monitoring groups such as CODEO who are able to cover a large proportion of polling stations during elections. In many instances, limited financial resources restricts the ability of domestic observers to monitor elections. For this reason, given that domestic election observers including CSOs are active players in election monitoring, there is the need for stakeholders to properly resource them to effectively undertake their election related activities.

### **Collaboration between international and domestic election observers**

In addition, intergovernmental and international organisations should help in strengthening the voices of domestic observers through stronger partnerships and collaborations. One practical means for ensuring this is that, for international observers, it will be useful for them to recruit in-country observers and coordinate their activities by relying on 'digital technologies' for monitoring election activities such as campaign spending, hate speech among many others because the traditional methods of election monitoring are most likely to be challenging in the context of the pandemic. By working together with in-country observers and also relying on technology, it will help in reducing or minimising their own health risk to the pandemic. Thus, working in partnership with local election observers and relying on virtual monitoring will be particularly useful. However, for this to happen, it also requires both local and international observers to become adaptive and innovative in their approach to monitoring elections.

### **Ensuring government's accountability in post-electoral periods**

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62 See for example, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/national-peace-council-must-be-dissolved-sam-george/>

Given the possibility of the government using the COVID-19 inspired legislations to curtail civic freedom after the elections, there is the need for stakeholders including CSOs, electoral observers and electoral assistance providers to work with the government to ensure that rights to freedom of association and expression are guaranteed by the government during and after the elections. In particular, there is the need to ensure that COVID-19 legislations do not stifle protests and demonstration in relation to disputed election results. This also requires the electoral stakeholders to properly run the elections given that poorly-run elections have the potential of triggering violence after the elections.

### **Ensuring electoral security planning in post-electoral periods**

Directly related to the above, there is the need for ensuring the provision of adequate and careful electoral security planning during and after the elections. This will help in curtailing the threats of potential violence likely to arise due in part to the increasing activities of political vigilantes during and after the elections. This also calls for the need to strengthen the capacity of the security agencies to ensure their effectiveness in maintaining law and order in the country during and after the elections.

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