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Rawlings and the 1979 revolt in Ghana

4 June 1979 shook the ruling classes of Ghana with a revolt by the lower ranks in the armed forces – a revolt undertaken in the name of ‘revolutionary justice’. It stirred up the masses in a way that had not been seen before, unless one goes back to Nkrumah and his ‘veranda boys’ in the days of the struggle for independence. 4 June has the potential of becoming a rallying point, and a myth. A critical assessment of its strengths and failings is due, as the future is not served by a ceremonious treatment of the past.

The background to 4 June

Since independence in 1957, Ghana has seen several military coups. The first occurred in 1966, when the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah brought the country under the leadership of Lieutenant-General Afrifa, as chairman of the National Liberation Council. Elections held in 1969 then brought the Oxford anthropologist to power. In 1972 he was overthrown in a coup by General Acheampong, who ruled the country as chairman of the National Redemption Council (later, after a barracks coup, reorganised as the Supreme Military Council (SMC)). It was under this regime, locally known as ‘kleptocracy’ (i.e. government by kleptomaniacs), that Ghana’s economy, already near bankruptcy under previous governments, collapsed completely. The

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revenues of the nation, the 'cocoa money', were pocketed by the SMC and associated profiteers, and ended up in foreign bank accounts, as farms in Ghana and as real estate in Britain, while the affairs of the country were being financed by printing new banknotes. The working people of Ghana were being paid for their labour in money that was rapidly losing value. Inputs for farming, spare parts and raw materials for industry became as scarce as basic consumer items. Ghana was 'liberated' and 'redeemed' so thoroughly that it was reduced to a level of destitution that is exceptional even in poverty stricken black Africa.

In 1978 Acheampong tried to prolong and institutionalise his rule by a referendum, the kind of referendum that turns a 'General' into a 'President'. In spite of repression, opposition was mounting over a broad front and tension in the country was building up. Rumours circulated that workers in sensitive sectors of industry were about to launch a strike. Lawyers, professionals and university teachers were on strike already, and students were engaged in a boycott. All this tension was defused when Acheampong was overthrown, on 5 July 1978, in a barracks coup. His fellow members of the SMC – all senior commanding officers – accused him of running the country as a 'one-man show', thereby exonerating themselves.

Lieutenant-General Fred Akuffo took Acheampong's place as chairman of SMC II. He promised that elections would be held and that the country would return to civilian rule by 30 July 1979. Voices were heard, even inside the army, that *all* members of the SMC were guilty of corruption and mismanagement and should be brought to trial. Many probes and inquiries into state enterprises were initiated, but no prosecutions followed. Even Acheampong, who had been put under 'village arrest', was not brought to trial; he merely lost his army retirement benefits. The people in his hometown, on which he had benevolently bestowed his favours during his regime, were happy to have him in their midst; his birthday was celebrated lavishly and a Kumasi business woman presented him with a Mercedes Benz as a gift. Thus the SMC, by promising a return to civilian rule, had bought off the anger of the people. Under the new constitution SMC members would be guaranteed indemnity – immunity, that is, to any legal proceedings connected with their dealings and finances. This meant that they could plunder the nation and get away with it, ending up as 'VIPs' in their hometowns, while everybody knew them to be scoundrels on a national scale.

4 June

On 15 May 1979 Flight-Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings and a small group of air force men attempted a coup. The attempt was given up the same day. Rawlings and his men appeared before a court martial,

where he explained that his intentions were not to take power in order to stay in power, but to undertake a house-cleaning of the armed forces whose higher ranks had exploited the civilians and also the junior ranks for too long. He was concerned about 'the tarnished image of the armed forces' and wanted to deal with the situation 'by going the Ethiopian way' (this was understood to mean, by executions). He also expressed concern about the extent of foreign (especially Lebanese) domination of the economy. Newspaper reports of the proceedings gained Rawlings widespread popularity. The court martial was due to reconvene on 4 June, but early that morning Rawlings was sprung from jail – the opening move of a rebellion that was broadly based in the armed forces. During the fighting in Accra that followed an unknown number of people were killed, and after a day the rebellious troops gained the upper hand.

Early on 5 June a radio broadcast said:

We, the junior officers and other ranks, wish to assure the nation that we are firmly in control of the situation and, in the meantime, an Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, comprising junior officers and other ranks, has been set up ... We have felt that the SMC would do a house-cleaning exercise and put the reputation of the Armed Forces on an even keel before handing over. All attempts to help the SMC to do this have failed. In these circumstances, we have no alternative but to take over the administration of the country. In the period at our disposal, therefore, we have plans for a house-cleaning exercise and we are going to act on it immediately ... We wish to assure the nation that we do not intend to cling to power. The Armed Forces Revolutionary Council will ensure a smooth transition to constitutional rule as planned ... Long live the revolution! Long live Ghana!

That evening, broadcasts on radio and television announced the membership of the AFRC. It did consist of 'junior officers and other ranks': among its fourteen members, with Rawlings as chairman, the highest rank was that of Captain, and nine members were from the lower ranks, from Private up to Staff-Sergeant. In these broadcasts, which were to bring discipline to a tense situation, Rawlings said: 'Soldiers who think that this revolution is about driving around in fancy cars are making a serious mistake. Anyone trying to abuse the situation will face the consequences, before the firing squad.' It was announced that the AFRC sought 'total justice' and would use 'revolutionary methods' to pursue it.

The months that followed were probably the most dynamic in Ghana's history as a nation. The armed forces were turned upside down as senior officers were imprisoned by their men and shaved bald. Throughout the country people's courts were set up to mete out

revolutionary justice. Eight persons, including three former heads of state (Afrifa, Acheampong, Akuffo) and those members of the SMC who were widely known to be most guilty of corruption, were executed. This act, unheard of in the 'gentle' tradition of Ghana, sent a shockwave through the nation: 'These people mean business.' Ministers, regional commissioners, top civil servants and managers of state enterprises were told to declare their assets, and if these were found to be acquired illegally, confiscation and prison sentences followed, sometimes involving penal labour and sentences of over a hundred years. The soldiers went into the streets and the markets to see to it that goods were sold for 'control prices'. Ghana was officially under a regime of prices fixed and controlled by the government, but with shortages and inflation this system had broken down; now shopkeepers scurried to the municipal offices to find out the control prices of their goods, which had been out of use for so long that they had been forgotten. Excited queues of people formed to obtain at last some tins of milk and mackerel, some toilet soap and washing powder, and a piece of cloth – as they watched the traders who had hoarded and overpriced their goods being beaten up by the soldiers, and sent into the streets with a sign around their neck saying 'I am a Chief of *Kalabule*' ('*kalabule*' – probably from the Hausa expression '*kere kabure*', keep it quiet – had become the common term for corruption in Ghana).

It was not long before international pressures made themselves felt. Togo and Benin sent diplomatic missions to try to save the life of Akuffo. Nigeria and Britain protested against the executions. The British press and the BBC World Service reported less than favourably on the 4 June events. Nigeria, supplier of most of Ghana's oil, reduced Ghana's ninety-day credit to thirty, and then broke off oil supplies (because of 'technical problems') altogether. The ensuing petrol rationing led to serious transportation problems, which were eventually alleviated when a new agreement on oil supplies was made with Algeria and Libya. Food supplies from abroad, ordered and in some cases paid for – tinned mackerel from Japan, rice, cooking oil and maize from West African countries – were inexplicably delayed or failed to arrive at all. Suppliers' credit was suspended and foreign aid monies withheld. It would only have been a matter of time before these pressures grouped themselves into an economic destabilisation campaign. Inside the country these international reactions were widely felt to be hypocritical. Had Britain protested when, under Acheampong, people were dying because of the lack of drugs in the hospitals? On the contrary, it sent parliamentary missions praising the government. The military government in Nigeria was understood to be scared because at the time it was preparing a similar transition from military to civilian rule and deep down many of the tensions were the same. Students took

to the streets of Accra carrying signs: 'Nigeria shut up', 'Britain doesn't care about justice in Ghana', 'Togo is angry only because smuggling stops' and 'Let the blood flow'. Meanwhile, elections took place as scheduled, on 18 June, without any interference from the military.

The outburst of anger that was 4 June did not make for an easy ride for the AFRC. 'Ninety per cent of our energy was dissipated in dealing with problems of discipline', according to Rawlings. Divisions inside the AFRC also emerged, as could be expected in a politically heterogeneous assembly that had come together in a virtually unplanned happening. There was a radical faction which was, maybe, anti-capitalist and against handing over power, but this was compromised by personal, sectional and tribal (Ashanti vs. Ewe) differences. The divisions never really manifested themselves, outside Burma Camp, during the AFRC period.

'No more *kalabule*', 'Control', 'Insist on your rights' and 'Power rests with the masses' were the slogans in the air. 'No compromise this time', said a placard in a demonstration. For four months the nation was electrified, galvanised, dynamised, every day bringing new decrees, directives, initiatives. An ultimatum to tax defaulters to pay at once 'or face revolutionary action' resulted in a tax collection of over 40m cedis in just two weeks. Contractors and firms that owed money or services to the state reacted with the same rapidity.

In September the AFRC retired all senior principal secretaries and supervising principal secretaries. Also a directive was issued making it illegal for any public servant to belong to a secret association – in Ghana, as everywhere in West Africa, secret brotherhoods, especially the various Lodges of the Freemasons, are crucial in linking together the ruling groups in the judiciary, civil service, banking, private enterprise and universities in undercover networks, that operate along the same lines as the 'old boy' networks. At times it seemed that the bulwarks of the old society were being blown to bits and a new one was in sight. Then came the hand-over on September 24.

Four military coups

4 June was part of a series of four military interventions in twenty-two years of independence, and to understand it, it helps to be aware of the relationship between these coups. What they all have in common is that they took place under conditions of economic crisis, government unpopularity and dissatisfaction inside the armed forces. They also all shared the same stated purpose of wanting to correct corruption and mismanagement. But between the four coups there were considerable differences in emphasis, and hence differences in political direction.

The 1966 and 1972 coups were preceded by falling cocoa prices on

the world market. This, combined with the increasing cost of imports (in 1966) and services on foreign debts that were incurred to make up for the balance of payments problems (by 1972), led to economic crisis. Inasmuch as the crisis was a matter of structural underdevelopment, it was a chronic crisis that has come to characterise the Ghanaian economy since the 1960s as a more or less permanent feature, but which assumed its most acute form in the days of Acheampong. With restrictions on imports, and local production (which also depends on foreign inputs of raw materials and machinery) operating far below capacity, what the crisis meant in everyday life was shortages, high prices and inflation. In 1978 it was found that Ghana, after Argentina, was the country with the highest rate of inflation in the world.²

Dissatisfaction inside the armed forces is another feature shared by all the coups, and is directly related to the economic crisis. Austerity budgets, before the 1966 and 1972 coups, affected the armed forces directly. As Colonel Afrifa wrote: 'By Christmas 1965 a number of our troops were without equipment and clothing, things essential for the pride, morale and efficiency of the soldier.'³ In 1972 economic dissatisfaction in the armed forces played a predominant role. Busia's austerity budget meant cuts in the allowances for the civil service, military and police. The budget voted for the Ministry of Defence showed a decline from N¢49.1m in 1969, to N¢45m in 1970, to N¢40.4m in 1971. But most resented by the officers were the personal losses suffered, such as the abolition of car maintenance allowance, of free water and electricity, the increase in rents and, finally, the devaluation of the cedi by 48 per cent, which meant a loss in purchasing power of as much as 25 per cent to an elite living in quasi-European style. So that when Acheampong addressed the nation on the day of the coup, he unashamedly accused Busia of 'taking from us the few amenities and facilities which we in the armed forces and the police enjoyed even under the Nkrumah regime' – subsequently this allowed Busia to explain the intervention as 'an officers' amenities coup arising from their grievances at my efforts to save money'.⁴

Dissatisfaction in the armed forces of a *political* nature, in the form of resentment over the way the government interfered in the armed forces in pursuit of its political aims, also played a role. This was particularly important in the 1966 coup. Many of the Sandhurst-trained officers, formed by the British tradition and loyal to the Commonwealth, were upset by Nkrumah's leftist leanings, away from Britain, towards the Soviet Union and later China, and by his attempt to use the armed forces in support of the cause of liberation in black Africa, in support of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, and in Rhodesia. They did not like it when Nkrumah interpreted 'non-alignment' to mean that the same number of officers that went to Britain for training should go to the Soviet Union, and they resented the

influence of Soviet security personnel in the President's Own Guard Regiment.

We were also aware that members of the President's Own Guard Regiment were receiving kingly treatment. Their pay was higher and it was an open fact that they possessed better equipment ... Nkrumah was beginning to manipulate certain officers for the purpose of undermining the authority of the Military Command.⁵

This discontent came to a head when, in August 1965, Major-General Otu, then Chief of Defence Staff, and Major-General Ankrah were retired. This 'arbitrary dismissal' was directly related, through the ensuing shuffle in command posts, to the 1966 coup. Similar shifts in senior military appointments by the Busia government, ironically designed to forestall the danger that the pecuniary grievances of the officer corps would lead them to undertake a coup, precipitated Acheampong's putsch in 1972.

Dissatisfaction in the armed forces also motivated the 1978 and 1979 coups. Indiscipline in the armed forces, as a consequence of bad economic conditions and arbitrariness and favouritism on the part of Acheampong, caused concern in the Military Command. Members of the SMC tried to stem the tide of dissatisfaction by ousting Acheampong, but because their palace coup was merely cosmetic, it precipitated a revolt based in the junior ranks on 4 June 1979.

To appreciate the differences between these military coups, it is necessary to have an understanding of the history of Ghana's political economy. After independence Ghana remained dependent upon its exports of agricultural (cocoa, rubber) and mineral (gold, manganese, diamonds) products. Nkrumah tried to break out of this mould through a programme of rapid industrialisation. He saw the building of a domestic industrial base as the only way in which Ghana, in the long run, would be able to escape poverty and attain economic independence. This programme, executed along socialist-oriented lines with a large state sector, included large-scale infrastructural works and an expansion of education (which stands to Ghana's credit to this day). The undertaking ran into trouble for a number of reasons. It was beset by the usual weaknesses of an industrialisation strategy based on import substitution, notably too great a dependence on foreign inputs, in machinery and raw materials. Other contributing factors were faulty planning, bad management by supervisors chosen for political reasons, the retention of pre-independence institutions and practices, and cooperation with the Eastern bloc at a time when it was inexperienced in Third World ventures, which led to misconceived projects and the introduction of inappropriate machinery. At the same time that Nkrumah was undertaking what his enemies called his 'breakneck industrialisation', the imports bill of the newly independent nation was

shooting up as the new elite came to feel entitled to the same living standards as the colonial masters. This contributed greatly to the erosion of Ghana's foreign reserves, for which Nkrumah and his industrialisation drive were being blamed.

Given time, many of these problems could, perhaps, have been overcome. But Nkrumah was not given time by the right-wing opposition in and outside Ghana. Inside Ghana, Nkrumah faced the opposition of the educated bourgeoisie of civil servants, lawyers, doctors and merchants who, before independence, had been assembled in the United Gold Coast Convention and who were now following leaders such as Busia and Gbedemah, hungry for state power. Inside his own Convention People's Party right-wing elements were gaining the upper hand and at the time of the coup, they were about to oust him from the party leadership. Outside Ghana, international forces were not happy with the radical trend of his regime, with his training of freedom fighters on Ghana's soil and, in particular, with his support of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo. A credit squeeze, as part of an economic destabilisation programme, combined with a fall in the world market price of cocoa, led to a weakening of his regime. By then Nkrumah had become politically more and more isolated; attempts on his life had made him rely increasingly on a narrow circle of advisers and Soviet security assistance. The Preventive Detention Act, justifying the arbitrary arrest of opponents, and disregard for the independence of the judiciary made him lose whatever popular affection he had left. And his government came to be seen as an 'anti-worker', 'anti-people' regime.

It was against this background that the 1966 coup was effected, with a little help from the CIA. The coup was a type familiar in neo-colonies:

A political elite, faced with the prospect of a serious political and economic crisis, is pushed aside by the military, which can act as a shield for the nascent bourgeoisie and foreign interests until the former grows strong enough to impose its political and cultural hegemony.⁶

Ghana was now set on a strongly pro-western, pro-capitalist course. The economic policy followed by the military government was one of denationalisation: numerous state enterprises were sold to foreign firms, at bargain terms, and many projects initiated under Nkrumah were callously abandoned. This policy was continued under the next civilian government. Under the slogan 'Ghana to Ghanaians', the Aliens Compliance Order drove out the foreign trading minorities, mainly Lebanese, Indians and Hausa, while a Business Promotion Act was designed to assist Ghanaian businessmen to set up firms. But at the same time as petty foreign traders were hounded out of the country in a

demonstration of perverted nationalism, big foreign capital was being welcomed. It fell to Busia to renegotiate Ghana's foreign debt which had originated in the days of Nkrumah and had accumulated under the military government. The debt rescheduling settlement that was finally agreed on, with the IMF playing a leading role in the negotiations, consisted of the usual elements of devaluation, budgetary restraint and trade liberalisation. The policy of restraint did not serve to endear Busia to the mass of the people, who saw their living standards deteriorate, while party leaders flaunted their affluence. Such was the state of affairs when, in January 1972, Acheampong took over power.

Although it originated in the same ranks of the army, the senior officers, this coup was quite different from that of 1966; it was a solo venture rather than a team operation. While the 1966 coup was planned in cooperation with the police, Acheampong only involved three Majors in his plan. Foreign assistance had no part in it. Its motivation was more strictly financial, although frustrated ambition also had a part to play. It is in this light that the 1972 coup appears as a sequel to the 1966 intervention:

Acheampong belonged to a class of officers whose careers had suffered because they were not affiliated with the group that brought off the 1966 coup against Nkrumah. As he plaintively explained, Afrifa had been a Company Commander under him, and was now a retired Lieutenant-General.⁷

It was also striking that the senior officers arrested in the first days after the coup were all Sandhurst men: 'they were loyal supporters of the Busia government and, for that loyalty, had been rewarded with promotion'.⁸ So the 1972 coup was very much a 'changing of the guard'. The 1966 intervention was directed against a leftist government, undertaken by right-wing officers; the 1972 intervention was directed against a right-wing government – but it was not undertaken by leftists.

'No more comrades', the demonstration in 1966 had announced; in 1972 the placards read 'Busia is a great thief' and 'Only socialism can save Ghana'. One of Acheampong's first steps was to reduce the devaluation of the cedi from Busia's 48 per cent to 20 per cent, and he took a '*Yentua*' ('we shall not pay') position vis-à-vis foreign debt. The honeymoon days were accompanied by anti-imperialist slogans and a populist, trivialised kind of socialism that consisted mainly of phraseology. Taxi-drivers, students and market-women carried him shoulder high, as they had done with Afrifa in 1966. 'Self-reliance' and 'Operation feed yourself' were adopted as domestic policies. But after an energetic start, Acheampong's programme came to nothing. The military commanders lacked the ability to run the nation and the economic situation went from bad to worse. Acheampong knocked for

credit on every door, West and East, and found them closed – in contrast to the situation in 1966 when western support, in the form of aid and credit, was immediate, from Britain, USA, West Germany, Belgium, Israel, Ivory Coast, Senegal and Tunisia. His no-devaluation stance, the platform on which he had come to power, also kept the IMF away, the regime developed into a dictatorship and a gangster comedy, with members of the Supreme Military Council as accomplices, kept in line through blackmail. This was an opportunist coup that, if anything, brought ‘power to the pirates’ and collective pauperisation to the nation.

It has been argued that what matters more than whether a government is civilian or military is the overall project of the state and the process of accumulation, and that as far as this is concerned civilian or military governments are often not essentially different. This does not hold in the case of Ghana. The 1966 coup signified a definite rupture in the course of accumulation when Nkrumah’s would-be socialist programme of state-led industrialisation was abandoned for an avowedly pro-capitalist policy based on expansion of the private sector. Links with the East were broken off in favour of links with the West. This trend was continued during the Second Republic. Then the 1972 coup again brought a shift in the pattern of accumulation. The accommodation with foreign capital was partially abrogated; controls on trade, lifted since 1966-9, were reimposed and the policy of promotion of small business fizzled out as credits went to officers instead. Agricultural production tumbled and factories had to close down or operate at 25 per cent of capacity for lack of inputs. There was an overall breakdown of the accumulation process. The 1978 coup reopened the way for negotiations with the IMF by introducing a 54 per cent devaluation. The 1979 coup took place when these negotiations had only just recommenced. An IMF mission that found itself, in Accra’s Ambassador Hotel, at the gunpoint of revolting soldiers was reportedly not amused.

There is one crucial difference that sets 4 June apart from all these coups: all the other coups were the result of struggles for the control of state power *within* the ruling groups. They were all the works of senior officers. By contrast, 4 June was a revolt of the lower ranks and junior officers.

Military revolts from the ranks

The outstanding feature of the 4 June event was that it was an uprising by the rank and file who defeated the top brass. The junior officers, as one declared later on, just had to go along with the rank and file, otherwise they would have been swept away by the tide. The AFRC that took the place of the SMC, although it was led by a Flight-Lieutenant

(equivalent to the rank of Captain), consisted mainly of lower ranks. The lower ranks retained decisive influence throughout the AFRC period. For instance, according to many reports, it was due to their insistence to 'let the blood flow' that the executions took place. It was this element that was emphasised in the media coverage of the event: 'Coup against the top brass' (*New African*, July 1979). 'A Juniors' government' (*Africa*, July 1979). In Africa, with its preoccupation with seniority, that is a significant deviation.

What led the rank and file in Ghana's armed forces to their uprising is not hard to guess. Military rule meant that only a small section of the armed forces' senior officers was called to public office, and for years the lower ranks were the errand boys for their corrupt dealings. While the officers sat enthroned behind their desks and signed chits, the privates did the dirty work, such as the smuggling of cocoa and other items across the border in army vehicles. Within the armed forces the distribution of privilege was as grossly unequal as in society at large. In the barracks, officers' wives sold 'essential commodities' to privates at black market prices. The ranks suffered the hardships caused by the regime of pillage, just like the masses; although they had their share of the increasing hatred of the military among the people, they did not get their share of the spoils. They were aware, as was no other group of the population, of the extent of the corruption and the evils of military rule – without seeing any of the benefits. Besides, Acheampong's arbitrariness and favouritism had undermined the discipline in the army. Thus the uprising was the result of long-standing dissatisfaction in the armed forces. Rawlings gave voice to it at a crucial moment in time, and emerged as the leader of the revolt.

Military regimes usually come to power in order to end corruption; but usually, after a period of military rule, corruption is worse than before. This is the case with officers' coups, it is the familiar pattern of the juntas, for example, in Latin America, Indonesia, Thailand and Zaire. Coups undertaken by middle-level officers sometimes show progressive, 'modernising' elements, as with the Nasserites in Egypt, but they are incapable of bringing about a lasting transformation in society, as the developments in 1979 in Peru (where a progressive military regime has given way to a middle-of-the-road civilian government) show. But what happens in the case of military revolts from the ranks, what happens when the rank and file in the army take power?

In a few instances military revolts from the ranks have been associated with revolutionary developments. 'The turning point in the Russian Revolution of 1917 was when the ordinary soldiers refused to turn their guns on the striking workers and joined them.'⁹ The same thing happened in Iran in 1978. The Armed Forces Movement in Portugal in 1974 was radicalised by pressure from the rank and file, although it was the Captain's Movement that gave the impetus to the

25 April revolution. Pressure from the rank and file, when soldiers put their officers under guard, also radicalised the Ethiopian military revolution initiated by the Dergue in 1974. What these cases also show is that military revolts from the ranks give rise to revolutionary developments *only* when they are associated with wider mass struggle.

Revolts from the ranks are frequently followed by a counter-coup by the officers. Thus the Sergeants' revolt and naval mutiny in Brazil in 1964 precipitated the assumption of power by the senior officers. The East African mutinies in 1964 contributed directly, in Uganda, to the rise to power of Amin. The April revolution in Portugal in 1974 was followed by the counter-revolution of the army officers in 1975. The common justification for this reaction given by the hierarchy is fear of growing indiscipline among the ranks, which would threaten the continued existence of the armed forces themselves.

Occasionally, after a military revolt from the ranks power is handed over to civilians. This occurred in Sierra Leone in 1971, when ordinary soldiers revolted, locked up their entire officer corps and handed power back to civilians. This is what happened in Ghana, where the revolt was a reaction against corrupt military rule and an agreement to return to constitutional government already existed.

Military interventions carried out by senior officers, junior officers and the rank and file each have their different characteristics. In the last instance, the decisive factor determining the nature of the intervention is the association with external class alliances (which may also be international). This also manifests itself, of course, on the level of ideology.

Ideology

If we had been bold enough to tell our administrators the right thing to do, we would not have been in hunger and poverty after many years of independence.

Jerry Rawlings on 23 September 1979 in Accra

'4 June is not a coup, it's an uprising', as Rawlings insisted. The format of 4 June was prefigured in Rawlings' statements, as they were read by the public prosecutor before the military tribunal; a take-over not in order to keep power, a house-cleaning exercise, executions – it was all there in Rawlings' early statements. The objective of 4 June was house-cleaning, it was to straighten the record of the past, to restore the image of the armed forces; it was *not* to build a new society, to fashion the future. And since 4 June was looking at the past and not at the future, it did not have a future.

Rawlings' diagnosis of what was amiss with Ghanaian society was basically that of the ordinary Ghanaian. It was all a problem of 'dishonesty' – dishonesty in high places, transmitted down through

society like a contaminative disease, like 'fish starts rotting from the head', as they say in Liberia. Rawlings: 'To retain your sanity, you become a very lonely man because you are not a part of that crowd.' Weary of the dispute over capitalism or socialism, weary of the claims of the two rival factions in Ghanaian politics, Rawlings refused to talk 'ideology': 'No matter the quantity of money that's going to be pumped into this country or systems devised, the success or failure of this system depends on one thing: integrity, accountability, a certain degree of honesty.'¹⁰ Asked for his political direction, Rawlings said, again: 'It's a question basically of accountability. A certain degree of dedication, selflessness, truth.'¹¹

Accordingly, what was needed, as the real point and programme behind the house-cleaning exercise, was a moral revolution: a moral regeneration, reminding the people of Ghana of their God-given potentialities, thus enabling the nation to proceed upon the narrow path of virtue. Rawlings carried this programme with an extraordinary degree of conviction, touring the nation by helicopter, speaking like a preacher with a gun, like a popular leader in the full sense of the word. Wherever he went, often unannounced, people flocked in their thousands to listen to him in fascination as he exhorted them – 'Insist on your rights!' There would be no security, no protocol. For local transport, even if the regional commission or the police would make a vehicle available, Rawlings would go by taxi, unaccompanied by soldiers. If there was a stage, Rawlings would rather speak from the floor, deliberately avoiding identification with the local establishment. 'I will stand in the sun with the people.' With every one of his actions Rawlings was teaching Ghanaians a psychological lesson: Ghanaians had been 'hitting their heads on the ground like lizards' because they were 'cowards', closing their eyes against the evils perpetrated against them. Through his personal example, Rawlings wanted to break this attitude of sheepish acceptance of authority, calling on Ghanaians to 'be ready to stand up for the truth at all times'. In this way, if he would be killed, 'there would be a thousand Rawlingses to take my place'.

To the Muslims, Rawlings charged that it was wrong to pray several times a day to Allah and yet continue to cheat, sell above the controlled price and hoard. The message to the Press was that they should be prepared to live and die for their conscience if they should be worthy of their call. On tribalism, Rawlings urged Ghanaians: 'Nation first before tribe. It is futile to speak of tribe in this era of internationalism.'¹²

The analysis of what is amiss with society in moral terms was, and is, the most prevalent view in Ghana. It is this diagnosis that is heard every Sunday from the pulpit in every church. It is this diagnosis that is the conclusion of every streetcorner conversation ('Black man no go

straight'). 'Honesty and hard work' is the gospel of the current PNP administration. When Acheampong was head of state, when everybody knew that the SMC itself was involved in large-scale corruption, he also had the cheerful habit of denouncing the dishonesty and corruption of Ghanaians on a virtually daily basis through the mass media. His diagnosis was not different: 'What is needed is honesty.' In the case of Acheampong it was a matter of hypocrisy; with Rawlings it stemmed from the way non-politicians look at politics, in moral terms (like church people), and from the military inclination to adopt 'the politics of wanting to be above politics'. His personal faith in individual action also played a part in shaping his credo; it was this that led him to cruise over Accra on 15 May – a Savanarola in a jetfighter.

This naive moralistic approach, this ideology of 'no ideology', affected all the AFRC's attempts to confront Ghana's problems. Rawlings went to city squares, stadiums and factory grounds to proclaim that people should insist on their rights. When waiting in queues they should insist on being treated according to the first come, first served principle. They should insist on paying the control price for goods and services. But what is the use, in the long run, of insisting on equal rights, without addressing the fundamental causes of inequality? What is the use of enforcing standard lorry fares, without improving the supply of spare parts? 'Workers' rights' was a matter of special concern for the AFRC. Workers have the right to sack their managers when they are corrupt or inefficient, according to Rawlings. But as the AFRC did nothing to strengthen the position of the trade unions, nor could affect the employment situation in the country in the limited time at its disposal, the balance of power between workers and employers was not changed in any way, and thus 'workers' rights' was doomed to remain mere talk. The AFRC acted from a purely populist ideology, completely ignoring class divisions – as if accountability is in everyone's interest, as if 'honesty and hard work' would be of equal benefit to everybody, regardless of their place in society.

To be precise, to avoid misunderstanding, the point being made here is not that it was wrong on the part of the AFRC to act from moral concerns; on the contrary, moral concerns are the ultimate inspiration of anyone who tries to transform society. What was wrong – in terms of its sometimes revolutionary pretensions – was that it never made serious business about its moral concerns by means of an analysis of the social situation, which could then have led to certain practical conclusions.

What was not fully understood, for instance, was the role played by corruption in Ghana's political situation. Neocolonialism gives rise to a political economy in which the ruling elite has political power but no economic basis. The economic power belongs largely to international capital, to the multinational corporations (such as VALCO, Firestone

and Lohnro in Ghana), the multinational banks and the IMF. The elite has to content itself with the crumbs that fall from the table of international capital. It is a dependent elite that pays an intermediary role, as the local middlemen of international capital. In the careers of the educated elite of civil servants, lawyers, doctors, managers and teachers the main goal is to acquire property, thereby consolidating its privileged position acquired through education (the value of which is being eroded by its progressive expansion). As the more profitable avenues of economic enterprise are occupied by international capital, the shortest and surest way to acquire property, apart from trade, is through politics. Under neocolonialism, state power is the key by which a petty-bourgeoisie can transform itself into a property-owning bourgeoisie. This is achieved through manipulating its position as an administrative bourgeoisie – inflated salaries, tax evasion, awarding contracts, shady deals, in a word, through corruption. Under colonialism, corruption may serve as a mode of transition from a traditional economy (based on exchange of gifts) to a modern one (based on the cash nexus); under neocolonialism, corruption plays a different role, as a mode of capital accumulation of an economically powerless elite that tries to gain clout in the small margin left to it by international capital. Incapable of attacking the powerful foreign monopolies, it instead directs its ‘nationalist indignation’ to foreign trading minorities, to petty traders and contractors, such as the Lebanese and Indians in Ghana.

There was corruption under Nkrumah, under the NLC, under Busia and under Acheampong. If corruption were simply a matter of ‘dishonesty’, then why is dishonesty so pervasively present? Because it is a systematic, structural feature of capitalism in a peripheral country. Faced with the discrepancy between its high status and its marginal economic position, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie is, in a sense, driven to corruption as a way to surmount its dilemma. What does it feel like to be a chief accountant and not be able to support one’s family? The fruits of corruption, as they are not acquired through productive enterprise, are rarely productively invested; instead, they find their way into conspicuous consumption, cars, black market speculation, houses, foreign bank accounts and, occasionally, farming. This corruption, then, is not overcome by any amount or intensity of preaching. It is a function of the constraints and contradictions of life in a neo-colony; to eliminate it would require a fundamental restructuring of the political economy and its place in the world.

The people are angered by the domestic exploiters – they see daily their blatant corruption, their fat bellies, smiling cars and big mansions – but the external exploiter remains hidden. The revenues that leave the country through profit repatriation, transfer pricing, licensing contracts, debt services and unequal exchange are not seen. The multi-

national firms, the international banks, the terms of their contracts and their credit are not seen, as it is in the interest of those who live off this national swindle to keep this from the public view. There are those who do not feel the pinch because they are the pinch. 'Ordinary people do not understand banks and multinational corporations. What they know is places like Makola and how hard it is.'¹³

4 June was a desperate protest against imperialist domination, that took the form of an uprising against a corrupt local elite. To some extent this may have played into the hands of international capital, which cannot operate where the rate of corruption is too high.

Class alliances

... any man can assassinate a leader but only the people can make a revolution.

Walter Rodney

There was never any doubt as to whose side the AFRC was on. For four months the rich trembled (some fled the country) and the poor rejoiced. Overnight the soldiers who had been the pawns of the mighty, whom the students had abused as 'zombies' in the dark days of Acheampong, became the friends of the masses. Rawlings:

Real power rests with the masses. The common people are not slaves to the privileged few but are rather people who wield immense power and must be encouraged to utilise such power for the total development of the country ... If the common man does not matter then our streets will be littered with rubbish, there will be nobody to remove the night-soil and nobody to cart the foodstuffs from the rural areas to us in the city.¹⁴

Nor was this a matter of slogans only. There was a series of concrete actions that undercut the position of the ruling classes: probes of enterprises and officials, the people's courts, the executions, prison sentences, confiscation of property, the tax collection drive, the directive against secret associations – the whole house-cleaning exercise was directed against the ruling class. And there were a number of concrete measures that, at least temporarily, improved the lot of the masses. Like a twentieth-century Robin Hood, Rawlings and the AFRC raided the larders of the rich and distributed their contents amongst the poor. The action for price control and against hoarding brought a mass of consumer goods, for the first time in many years, within reach of the common people. Soldiers conducting forced sales of hoarded goods were for a while a familiar spectacle in the towns. Yet all of this was not all that unique; similar scenes, including public beatings of traders and hoarders, had been witnessed, on a smaller scale, in the early days of the 1966 coup and during the honeymoon period of Acheampong's

coup.

Soon after the AFRC assumed power, the house-cleaning operation came to extend itself to industries and businesses, and workers were called upon to participate in the clean-up campaign by ridding their enterprises of corrupt and inefficient management. But after a short period the AFRC changed its position: workers were not to 'take justice into their own hands', instead they were asked to gather evidence of misconduct on the part of management and present it to the AFRC, who would then process it and pass it on to the people's courts. Rather a far cry from telling workers that they could sack their own bosses. This, to be sure, was to prevent chaos and arbitrariness; but by introducing this more cumbersome procedure the AFRC in effect stepped in to protect management. An alternative could have been to set up workers' committees, leaving the responsibility for discipline to the workers themselves. That measures were taken to prevent chaos and arbitrariness is correct; but the way in which these measures were taken had the effect of containing a workers' movement that was being fanned on the level of slogans. It is in matters such as this that the populist character of the AFRC betrayed itself.

The action to control prices showed its limitations when the existing stocks ran out. The traders who saw their profits dwindle no longer found it worth their while to travel to the rural areas to buy up food crops. Bulwarks of conservatism, such as the Association of Makola Market Women, also spread rumours among farmers that they would not get a fair price for their produce in the market and that they would be assaulted by the soldiers. There was suspicion of the soldiers among the rural population as some of them, patrolling the countryside, demonstrated an excess of 'revolutionary enthusiasm'. Many farmers, reverting to their age-old tactics in times of turmoil, withdrew to subsistence farming. Foodstuffs for the city were left rotting in the fields. The traders' mafia resisted, the distribution system broke down, food became scarce in the market and, by mid-July, the situation looked very bleak. It was only gradually, after the pressure on prices for perishables in the market-place was somewhat relaxed, and with the deployment of army vehicles to carry foodstuffs from the rural areas, that the worst of the crisis was overcome.

The trend of these events could lead to the conclusion that the AFRC had no basis of support in the rural areas, that it was an urban-based movement that did not have the support of Africa's silent majority, the peasantry. This is how conventional wisdom, at the time, interpreted the food crisis. But in fact the food crisis was brought about, not by the peasantry, but by the traders who, in tightly organised networks, controlled most of the purchase, transport and marketing of foodstuffs. The traders, who had been contentedly running their own welfare system at the expense of both consumers and producers, resisted the

price control efforts of the military and retaliated with a boycott. They had stood up against governments before, and again they bragged: 'This is a seven-day wonder, we have seen it all before.' But this time, on 18 August the Makola No. 1 Market in Accra, the nerve centre of commercial activity for over half a century and of the price dictatorship of the 'market queens', was flattened to the ground with dynamite. The national symbol of *kalabule* blown up – it seemed the end of an era.

As for the rural population, its basic reaction to shifts in power tends to be one of indifference, as they are viewed as just another city affair. The reason for this indifference is not so-called peasant apathy but the simple lesson of experience that, from the point of view of the rural areas, city news is rarely good news. Basically it is a matter of mutual indifference, since from the point of view of the city, the rural folk only count as producers and not as consumers. Peasant indifference is the counterpart of urban parasitism. Policies of urban parasitism, followed by many black African governments, mean to take the maximum from and give the minimum to the peasantry, thus to be in a better position to cater to the needs of the city-dwellers who, in the short run, are the only ones who practically constitute a potential threat to the government's stability. Farmer indifference, in the Acheampong era, was demonstrated by the decline in cocoa production from its level of 450,000 tons annually in the 1960s to 250,000 tons in 1978-9 – a considerable loss for a country where cocoa constitutes 70 per cent of export earnings. Contributing to the drop in production were ageing plants, but directly responsible were inflation and neglect of the rural areas resulting in lack of inputs (tools, fertiliser, pesticides, seeds) and unavailability of the few items, such as matches, kerosene, soap, fish and cloth, that villagers need from the towns. Seeking hard currency that could buy goods, a lot of cocoa was smuggled to the Ivory Coast and Togo. Food production had also gone down. To produce or not to produce is the farmers' true vote.

The AFRC did take some measures that benefited the rural population. Essential commodities were dispatched to a number of villages and the producer price for cocoa was increased by 50 per cent, the latter mainly benefiting the richer farmers in the cocoa-growing areas. No doubt they were also pleased to see the corrupt Cocoa Marketing Board being taken to task in a major probe. There are reports of mass enthusiasm among the rural people, in the north because it was only during the era of Rawlings that their cattle could not be stolen with impunity, and elsewhere because it was only during the 4 June regime that essential commodities reached the villages. Popular reaction in the countryside to the AFRC, although differing according to region and section of the rural population, and after an initial reservation was overcome, seems to have been positive on the whole. When Rawlings

came to speak, as in Tamale, people flocked in their thousands, walking for miles to hear him. The northern regions had been a major centre of opposition against Acheampong and had suffered in the process. The AFRC, of mixed ethnic composition, avoided playing on tribal sentiments: Rawlings, born of an Ewe mother (near Keta) and a Scottish father, tended to avoid the Ewe region.

The National House of Chiefs declared its support for the AFRC and welcomed the house-cleaning campaign. But any new government in Ghana, no matter how it has come to power, is bound to receive a declaration of support from the Chiefs in a matter of days, since they applaud power as a matter of reflex, and exist in comfortable connivance with the local notables of any administration, engrossed in endless litigation in pursuit of increasing their own influence.

The AFRC's clean-up project dealt with the armed forces, the administrative bourgeoisie, small businesses of contractors and traders and some of the industries. An area that remained completely out of the picture was foreign investors, the multinational corporations. An area that, on account of its public visibility, received a relatively inordinate amount of attention was that of small trade. The AFRC concentrated on the sphere of distribution, disregarding the sphere of production. Most of the active support for its project, outside the armed forces, came from students, urban workers and the unemployed, and part of the intelligentsia. Although it was clear that the AFRC sided with the working masses by virtually every one of its pronouncements, no substantial alliance between the AFRC and workers and peasants came into being. They did receive a one-time bonus, of essential commodities at control price, but their basic needs and grievances were not met, and no institutional arrangements were developed that could deal with them. So while the AFRC's house-cleaning met with what the media called 'broad mass support', it was a spontaneous support, not given shape by any ideological commitment, not concretised in any organisational form. This is the paradox of 4 June: the nation was electrified with mass excitement from north to south, but nothing really changed.

That the 4 June take-over was not planned, not premeditated as such, plus the fact that the AFRC was a politically heterogeneous grouping, goes a long way to explain its lack of ideological and organisational preparedness. The pledge to return to constitutional rule, the political parties waiting in the wings and the international constraints that were narrowing as the impact of the AFRC was widening, tell the rest of the story.

So much is clear; the context in which the AFRC operated, with regard to the working class and the left, also needs clarification. The history of the trade union movement in Ghana is much like that of other new nations – militant at the time of the struggle for

independence, demonstrating that workers are far from passive or apathetic, but becoming tame and domesticated in later years. The TUC was co-opted by Nkrumah, regimented by the NLC, dissolved by Busia and again co-opted by Acheampong. Instead of representing the interests of workers, it became an instrument of government – the number one employer. All of this has occurred in the context of massive structural unemployment, low levels of skill and a large number of migrant workers who retained their ties with the village from which they continued to receive part of their sustenance; all of which helps to keep wages low, even as they are eroded by inflation. In 1979 the minimum wage, the actual wage for unskilled labour, was £4 per day, while the price of a breakfast came to £6 and a loaf of bread cost £5. As it is clearly impossible to subsist under these conditions, Ghanaians come to be known as ‘magicians’; but most of their magic went just into hiding their misery. In spite of this, there is a slumbering activism among workers. Workers are keenly aware of their interests and, in certain sectors (docks, railroads, utilities), of their power. This activism gives rise to occasional strikes and labour riots. Workers are also aware that many of their union leaders are party puppets and government spies, so their control is less than total. Inside the unions there is a left wing vying for leadership. The political parties represent factions of the urban and, to a lesser extent, rural bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie; there is no genuine workers’ party.

One of the weaknesses of this workers’ movement is that it has not realised its solidarity with the poor in the rural areas; a worker-peasant alliance is non-existent in Ghana. It is not realised, for instance, how improvement of living conditions in the rural areas and wage increases for agricultural workers would benefit urban workers; it could relieve the pressure on the labour market resulting from the influx of unemployed from the countryside. Conditions in the rural areas are marked by bad roads, deficient health care, no electricity and often no pipe-borne water either, and in several places there is the impact of devastating ‘development projects’ (Akosombo dam, Tono irrigation project). The penetration of capitalist relations of production in the countryside is noticeable in the gradual commercialisation of land-holding. But inflation and low producer prices and/or high transportation costs do not make for much of an incentive to produce for the market, and over the years agricultural production in general has stagnated, or rather declined. The tribal forms of organisation that prevail in the countryside have gradually changed in nature – chieftancy is in a process of transformation from a traditional kinship to an increasingly economic role – but have largely remained the same institutionally and hence become more exploitative. The organisational networks that encompass the peasantry all serve to manipulate rather than to mobilise them. Although the Ghana Agricultural Workers’ Union

is, with 180,000 members, the strongest union in the Trade Union Congress (followed by the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union with 150,000 members), nothing of any significance is ever heard from them. The National Council of Farmers is another official paper organisation that does not represent any farmer.

Conclusion

Ghana's military coups can be seen to stem from quite different causes in each case, yet they are related to each other sequentially. The 1966 coup represented, as it were, the revenge of colonialism, when Nkrumah attempted to take the nation in a radically different direction. The 1972 coup was brought into being by the 1966 intervention – a 'follow-up' by opportunist officers who had been left in the cold in 1966. The 1978 coup was just a face-lift. The 1979 coup was of an entirely different calibre: it was, in one sense, a military coup to end all military coups. Whereas Acheampong, in 1972, had acted on the premise that the 1966 intervention was justified, this uprising lashed out not just against Acheampong but all the way back to 1966. It was a military uprising against military coups. It was a highminded uprising carried by the lower ranks. As such, it holds an important lesson: when the armed forces become involved in politics then the armed forces will become politicised. It serves as a reminder to adventurous commanders – that guns can point either way – and to greedy politicians – that the nation is not just for grabs.

Ghana's military coups are also a part of the history of neo-imperialism. Although foreign connections were not much in evidence during Acheampong's rule, yet outside interference had contributed to the downfall of Nkrumah and the 1966 coup, and thereby set Ghana upon the path that led to Acheampong's take-over and, subsequently, to 4 June. It calls to mind the situation in so many other countries in the periphery of the world system, such as Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954, when CIA intervention set the nation upon a course that determined its future developments. In the case of Ghana, the outside intervention involved Britain and the US, in alliance with the Ghanaian bourgeoisie and military. The metropolitan powers were not primarily interested in Ghana in itself, but rather in containing Nkrumah's 'Pan-Africanist' tendencies (in connection with Guinea, Mali and the Congo). Hence it was not followed, as in other countries, by the usual influx of foreign investments; it merely contributed to the making of what was to be Ghana's history of chronic independence. This is not to say that Ghana's history since independence could be reduced to its international dimensions, only that these must not be lost sight of. In another significant way, Ghana has been the hostage of its foreign debts since the mid-1960s, a sort of 'debt peonage' to the IMF. Devaluation,

demanding by the IMF, triggered the 1972 coup. The imperatives of the capitalist world system formed, and continue to form, the boundaries of Ghana's political economy. 4 June collided with international constraints in a very immediate and concrete way, showing the price to be paid for international nonconformity.

If so much is clear, the further significance of 4 June is a matter of debate, with positions varying among classes and groups. To the ruling or would-be ruling classes, 4 June is something in the order of a bad dream, the less said about it the better. Jerry Rawlings is done away with as just a 'small boy' – as opposed to their being 'big men', as is confirmed by the size of their bellies. For Paa Willie Ofori-Atta, Chairman of the Council of State, 4 June, as he told me, represents nothing but the serious 'problem of indiscipline' in the Ghana armed forces. For businessmen, the 'era of Rawlings' was, to use the phrase of Professor Folson, pro Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana, 'an economic disaster'. On the other hand, a liberal intellectual such as Mike Oquaye concludes:

When we add the pluses and subtract the minuses, only the devil can say that these sons of Ghana did not do a good job for their motherland and save the image of the military, considering all the circumstances, the extent of the rot and the time available to them.¹⁵

But the meaning of 4 June cannot be extricated when it is viewed as a set of events in itself. It must be seen as part of a process. 4 June took place at the time of Ghana's deepest crisis, a time when for Ghanaians who had a choice, the only choice was emigration or rebellion. 4 June came out of the depth of despair. It is also part of a learning process for those who were involved in the uprising. For instance, in his hand-over speech Rawlings emphasised a point that was left alone during the 4 June period: he pressed the new government to watch closely, above all, the operations of the multinational corporations in Ghana. What happened *after* the hand-over is also part of this learning process.

We note that the ease with which the propertied classes and their representatives in government and the press attack June 4th today, without any significant resistance from any quarter, lies in the way the June 4th revolution was organised and executed. Secondly, the resurgence of 'kalabule' and other social problems is a pointer to the limitations of the 'revolution' and the ideology that guided it, the fact that the AFRC did not tackle the root causes of our problems and, indeed, was not in a position to do so.¹⁶

Accountability, the central ideal of 4 June, has not survived the new administration. Corruption, below the ministerial level, is spreading and in the process of being institutionalised as the PNP seeks to strengthen its hegemony by channelling all resources along the lines of

its party network. 'Winner takes all.' But there's writing on the wall:

I can sense waves of a Revolution worse than what is currently taking place in the country should the in-coming civilian government underestimate the revolutionary intelligence of the ordinary Ghanaian and take him for a ride ...

*Jerry Rawlings*¹⁷

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