

J.J. Rawlings: A Man For All Seasons?

Jerry John Rawlings, born 22 June 1947, has been a heavyweight in Ghanaian politics since the late 1970s. Following a short stint in power following a military coup in 1979, Rawlings was Ghana's head of state from 1981-2000, first as military leader then, following the 1992 elections, as President. But who Jerry John Rawlings really was depends on who you are talking to and when you were talking to them. At times he has been the hero of the Ghanaian left, a young and radical soldier spearheading revolutionary economic and democratic reforms. At others, he's been the "star pupil" of the IMF and World Bank, implementing liberalisation and privatising state infrastructure. To those who opposed Rawlings' leadership, the violence and authoritarianism that accompanied particular periods of his time in power cannot be forgotten. But to his current supporters, Rawlings represented, and still represents, a paragon of probity, honesty, and principled commitment to the well-being of the Ghanaian people. In a way all of these perspectives, and the multitude more held regarding the former head of state, are correct, although none tell the entire story. Following his passing on 12 November 2020, it's important to dwell on the complicated legacy of J.J. Rawlings.

The AFRC and Rawlings' Emergence in Ghanaian Politics

J.J. Rawlings first emerged in Ghana's political sphere during the tumultuous events of 1979. The ruling Supreme Military Council (SMC), despite early successes, had engaged in rampant *kalabule* (a term referring to black marketeering and corruption) and presided over a crumbling economy. The lower ranks of the Ghanaian military was, as one Military Intelligence Officer said, "pregnant with dissent".¹ Flight-Lieutenant Rawlings engaged with various groups planning an overthrow of the SMC, culminating in a failed coup attempt on 15 May 1979. Rawlings was given a public trial, a process used by the SMC to promote an image of state transparency. But this backfired. Using his trial as a platform to decry the corruption of the SMC, Rawlings won the sympathy of both civilians and the rank-and-file. When he suggested that if the military were not cleaned up the ranks would "go the Ethiopian way", alluding to Mengistu's Red Terror, he received great cheers from the lower ranked soldiers in attendance.² On 4 June 1979 Rawlings was sprung from his cell, taking power and establishing the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC).

Rawlings' coup, termed a 'revolution' by its supporters, was significantly different from those that preceded it. While still committing to the upcoming elections and turnover to a civilian administration, the AFRC set about a 'house cleaning' exercise to deal firmly with those most involved in *kalabule*. Eight military officials, including three former heads of state, were executed. This is in a state that had rarely seen such direct violence against political opponents. The first two executions on 16 June 1979 – those of former head of state General I.K. Acheampong and head of border guards Utuka, were met with support from most the Ghanaian public and silence from Ghana's main civil rights organisations, reflecting the deep unpopularity of the two men. The second set of executions were more controversial. Kevin Shillington describes how, after being bought out to Teshie Firing Range, there was over three hours of heated discussion amongst the soldiers over whether the execution should go ahead. Shots only rang out when an anonymous rank-and-file soldier in the crowd shouted 'fire', a reflection of the times.³ Civil rights organisations

1 Eboe Hutchful, 'Institutional Decomposition and Junior Ranks' Political Action in Ghana', in E. Hutchful and A. Bathily (eds.), *The Military and Militarism in Africa* (Dakar, 1998), p.223.

2 Kevin Shillington, *Ghana and the Rawlings Factor* (London, 1992), p.43.

3 *Ibid.*, p.55.

decried the lack of a fair trial, while Rawlings defended such actions as preventing a wider blood-letting.

Rawlings and the AFRC were ideologically distinct from their predecessors. Previous military governments had stressed the importance of vesting power in the military. Rawlings, however, emphasised the power of the Ghanaian people themselves. Following the elections, won by Hilla Limann, Rawlings told the President to:

Never lose sight of the new consciousness of the Ghanaian people. Never before have the eyes of so many been focused on so few, Mr President. The few are you, the illustrious members of our new civilian administration. The many are those in the factories and on the farms, in the dormitories and junior quarters who will be watching you, with eagles' eyes to see whether the change they are hoping for will actually materialise in their lifetime.⁴

Rawlings, through the authoritarian and often violent actions of the AFRC, believed he had helped focus the eyes of the Ghanaian people onto politics. He believed he had empowered the many - soldiers, workers and farmers - to uphold their rights against the few. And with that, he and his compatriots returned to the barracks.

Radical 1982

Achimota Forest, on the outskirts of Accra, is a dark place. Meaning "speak no name" in Ga, slaves would hide amongst its thick trees after escaping their masters. As former-President John Dramani Mahama explained, 'This forest was a place of silences, but it was also a place of salvation.'⁵ And that's what it became for the small groups of soldiers and civilians who, following the return to civilian rule in September 1979, would sneak from their barracks and rooms late at night to take part in discussions about radical politics.⁶ And their ranks included J.J. Rawlings. It soon became clear to them that the Limann administration was unable to reverse Ghana's economic decline. With Rawlings' continuing popularity, another coup seemed almost inevitable. On 31 December 1981 Rawlings and his compatriots seized power again, forming the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC).

Echoing his sentiments from 1979, Rawlings restated his desire for the entire country, not just soldiers, to be involved in politics: "we want the people, the farmers, the police, the soldiers, the workers, so long as you are a Ghanaian, rich or poor, to be part of the decision-making process of this country".⁷ Rawlings set out a platform to transform Ghana, invoking the need for democratisation.

A cornerstone of this policy was the establishment of People's Defence Committees (PDCs), grassroots institutions to organise local governance and labour projects, mobilising vast swathes of the population. Similarly, Rawlings stated that 'the dispensation of justice itself will be democratised' through the Public Tribunals, a parallel system of courts which gave the public a

4 *Ibid.*, p.61.

5 John Dramani Mahama, *My First Coup D'Etat* (London, 2012), p.42.

6 Zaya Yeebo, *Ghana: The Struggle for Popular Power: Rawlings, Saviour or Demagogue* (London, 1991), p.37.

7 *A Revolutionary Journey, Selected Speeches of Flt.-Lt. Jerry John Rawlings, Chairman of the PNDC, Dec. 31st 1981 – Dec. 31st 1982, Volume One* (Accra, 1983), p.2.

greater role in prosecutions.⁸ To their critics, such as lawyers organisations and international human rights groups, Public Tribunals represented a ‘mockery of justice’ which the government used to detain political opposition.⁹ But for many Ghanaians the Public Tribunals offered a more direct and comprehensible form of justice compared to the formal court system, which was still marked by complex colonial legacies.

To call the PDCs and Public Tribunals genuinely democratic would be a stretch. It was democracy on Rawlings’ terms. However, what these structures *did* allow for was an unprecedented level of engagement and communication with the Ghanaian state. For the first time Ghanaians had the opportunity to truly take part in local level governance. And Rawlings, though authoritarian, embodied a level of probity and openness that had been absent in previous governments, giving average Ghanaians many more opportunities to communicate their concerns up the government hierarchy. Few would not be taken by the many images of Rawlings labouring on public works or giving rousing speeches. While practise did not perhaps match the government’s revolutionary theory and rhetoric, in 1982 Rawlings and the PNDC did enable genuine transformation.

Reform and Democratisation

Though radical, Rawlings was a pragmatist. As he stated during his trial in 1979, “I am not an expert in economics and I am not an expert in law, but I am an expert in working on an empty stomach while wondering when and where the next meal will come from.”¹⁰ And it wouldn’t take an expert to see the economic decline of 1982. GDP collapsed by 7.2%¹¹ and ‘Rawlings Necklaces’, the name Ghanaians gave to their visible collarbones due to malnutrition, became commonplace. Change was necessary. And with aid failing to emerge from socialist nations, Rawlings instead turned West. In seeking loans from the IMF and World Bank in return for committing to economic liberalisation, Rawlings came into conflict with his left-wing allies, who viewed such deals as a capitulation to neocolonialism. But to Rawlings, such an agreement was superior to the “empty stomach” the alternatives seemed to offer.

The end of 1982, then, marked a significant departure from the PNDC’s left-wing roots. On the one hand, embracing economic liberalism in return for loans saw significant macro-economic gains, with government revenue as a share of GDP rising from 5.3% in 1983 to 14.4% in 1986.¹² On the other hand, such a major departure from the PNDC’s base saw the need to implement more authoritarian policies, with the state cracking down on criticism. Workers, students, lawyers and activists from both the left and right became victims of what Rawlings himself termed a “culture of silence”. The abduction and murder of three High Court judges and a retired Major in June 1982 was particular distressing, especially following the soldiers sentenced for the crime claiming they

8 *Ibid.*, p.12.

9 ‘Ghana: Revolutionary Injustice, Abuse of the Legal System under the PNDC Government’, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/report/1992/01/31/ghana-revolutionary-injustice/abuse-legal-system-under-pndc-government> (1 August 2018).

10 Akwasi Sarpong, ‘Jerry Rawlings; Remembering Ghana’s “Man of the People”’, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-54929779> (26 November 2020).

11 Jeff Haynes, ‘One-party state, no-party state, multi-party state?: 35 years of democracy, authoritarianism and development in Ghana’, *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 8 (1992), p.51.

12 Eboe Hutchful, *Ghana’s Adjustment Experience: The Paradox of Reform* (Accra, 2002), p.57.

were acting upon state orders.¹³ This contributed to an atmosphere where critics of the state were unwilling to speak up. But through all this, Rawlings' image remained favourable with the broader Ghanaian public. As Richard Jeffries' 1992 surveys found, even when Ghanaians disagreed with his actions, many believed Rawlings was not acting out of self-interest, but out of interest for the country as a whole.¹⁴ Despite government authoritarianism Rawlings' personality and the sense of probity he exhibited kept him popular with the Ghanaian public, helping him oversee the country's challenging economic reforms.

This programme of liberalisation helped pave the way for the 1992 multi-party elections. Representing the newly formed National Democratic Congress (NDC), Rawlings won the Presidency with a strong 58.4% mandate. The results of the election, however, were contested. Rawlings' opponents pointed to the various advantages he carried, including control of the state and accusations of vote stuffing and political intimidation.¹⁵ This led to the main opposition parties boycotting the following Parliamentary elections. While these various advantages certainly did help Rawlings, Paul Nugent argues that while he may not have won on the first ballot in a totally free and fair election, his personal popularity would almost certainly have got him through on the second ballot.¹⁶

Of more importance to Ghana's political institutions, however, were the 1996 and 2000 elections. In 1996 Rawlings won a second term, important as it represented the first time a Ghanaian government had served two democratically elected terms. The significance of the 2000 election is even more profound. Reaching his term limit Rawlings stood down as NDC candidate, replaced by John Atta Mills. When John Atta Mills lost the election to NPP candidate John Kufuor, the election was accepted by opposition groups. This marked the first time in Ghana's history where power democratically passed from one elected political party to another, and made Rawlings only the second head of state to be relieved of power without a coup.

Since 2000 Ghana has had four elections, with power handed to three different heads of state and between the two major parties. Despite questions over the "winner takes all" nature of these elections and the dominance of the main two parties, power has transferred peacefully with no major questions over the validity of the election results.¹⁷ While various national and international factors have certainly contributed to the development of this stable democratic system, it seems no exaggeration to suggest that the actions and personality of J.J. Rawlings, First President of the Fourth Republic, played a major role in developing and cementing this system.

13 'Judge's murder: Rawlings was not properly investigated – Acquitted soldier', MyJoyOnline, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/judges-murder-rawlings-was-not-properly-investigated-acquitted-soldier/> (28 November 2020)

14 Richard Jeffries, 'Urban Popular Attitudes towards the Economic Recovery Programme and the PNDC Government in Ghana', *African Affairs*, 91 (1992), p.217.

15 David Abdulai, 'Rawlings "Wins" Ghana's Presidential Elections: Establishing a New Constitutional Order', *Africa Today*, 39 (1992), p.66.

16 Paul Nugent, *Big Men, Small Boys and Politics in Ghana: Power, Ideology and the Burden of History, 1982-1994* (London, 1995), p.247.

17 Cadman Atta Mills, 'Politics, policy, and implementation: The "Ghanaian Paradox"', Brookings, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2018/07/18/politics-policy-and-implementation-the-ghanaian-paradox/> (26 November 2020).

Rawlings in the future

When Kwame Nkrumah passed away in April 1972, Ghana went through a period of national reflection. Nkrumah, much like Rawlings, had a mixed and controversial political career. His supporters praised him for putting Ghana on the map, leading the national liberation effort to free Africa from colonialism and develop a strong post-colonial international order. His opponents attacked his authoritarianism and poor state management. But despite lingering animosities, following his death national consensus coalesced around the positive rather than the negative, with Ghanaians focussing on Nkrumah as Osagyefo, not the Nkrumah of the mid-1960s.

With an election in sight and political tensions understandably higher, it seems as if it will be a little while before the same level of national reflection takes place regarding Rawlings. But the question still remains: which Rawlings will be remembered? Will it be Rawlings the soldier, the man who seized power twice and implemented violent, authoritarian governments? Will it be Rawlings the revolutionary, the man who attempted to democratise Ghana from the bottom-up and break the barriers between soldiers and civilians? Will it be Rawlings the liberal, who for good or ill brought Ghana into the fold of the IMF and World Bank? Or will it be Rawlings the democrat, who represented an embodiment of the honesty and integrity necessary for the leader of a healthy democracy? In truth, all of these Rawlings will live on. Certainly animosities regarding the killings of the three judges still linger on, and many of those influenced by the “culture of silence” may now be willing to speak openly for the first time. But once the tensions of the upcoming election simmer down then, as with Nkrumah almost 50 years ago, the positive will likely outweigh the negative in the minds of many Ghanaian people, and J.J. Rawlings will be remembered for his vital contributions to Ghana’s healthy democracy.

Ryan Colton is a PhD candidate researching Ghanaian history at the University of Birmingham.

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