

31 December 1981: How the “IMF baby” betrayed its parents

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The 31 December 2018 revolution in Ghana was a political upheaval that promised and had the potential to deliver a Castro/Sankara type social and political revolution, but was wasted on the rubbish heap of personality power grab fuelled by the ambitions of one man, the collective theft of national resources by a cabal of opportunists and nation wreckers who perpetuated their vile corrupt values on the rest of the nation.

When I thought about this article, I had wanted the title to read; “31 December 1981—A revolution betrayed” but that would have attracted the usual pundits of “revolutionary” theory who continue to question what was “betrayed”.

For the sake of argument, let us take the case of Cuba. If Fidel Castro had on the eve of the Cuban revolution back tracked because Cuba had too many problems, that the mighty United States was only 90 miles away, and that right-wing Cuban exiles were planning the Bay of Pigs (the attempted invasion of Cuba by the Central Intelligence Agency and Cuban exiles) what would have been the result? This is what happened in the aftermath of the 31 December 1981 coup, which promised to “herald a revolution which would transform Ghana”.

The events of post 31 December 1981 are subject to various interpretations. Thirty-six years after the “coup” or revolution, the jury is still out there. However, let me state from the beginning that subsequent events following 31 December lead me to only one conclusion. That people’s aspirations, hopes for a better Ghana were betrayed.

Following the “revolution” millions of Ghanaian workers, farmers and indeed to poor moved cautiously to support the need for change. The students who volunteered to cart cocoa from the rural interior, the women whom we mobilised to start the 31st December Women’s Movement, the youth we mobilised into the “Democratic Youth League and Ghana”, as a successor movement to Kwame Nkrumah’s Young Pioneer Movement, and the dispossessed who saw some hopes. Going further, the thousands, indeed millions of workers, famers, soldiers, policemen and women, market women who were mobilised into the Peoples and Workers Defence Committees.

Supporting these efforts were pre-revolution mass movements like the Movement on National Affairs (MONAS), the People’s Revolutionary League of Ghana (PRLG), the New Democratic Movement (NDM), Pan African Youth Movement (PANYMO) and several others. The June Four Movement (JFM) which had, against all better judgement, invited Rawlings into its ranks, suffered the most as Rawlings saw this as an impediment to his neo-liberal, pro-International Monetary Fund (IMF), pro-western, corrupt, “state capture” type regime based on patronage and corruption.

All these movements were trampled under the boots of Rawlings and his cohorts, who having used radical left-wing movements to support and consolidate his rule, pandered to the whims and caprices of western nations under the leadership of the United States, to not only ban, but crush these

emerging mass movements in return for aid from western donor nations.

Could Rawlings have achieved his goal of implementing the structural adjustment programme (SAP) with the left in government? Of course not. The JFM and some sections of the NDM and trade unions had stated their objections to a SAP led economic transformation.

To make the regime attractive to imperialism, Rawlings first had to deal with three main forces: Firstly, the trade unions, secondly, the radical left movements, and thirdly, the two leading elements who represented progressive politics in the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) Sgt Allolga Akata-Pore and Chris Atim, the leading ideologue of the “revolution”. Some have suggested that it was also about consolidating power of the coup regime and realigning class forces for what subsequently happened.

However, the tensions produced as a result of (a) the murder of the high court judges and the retired army officer, (b) fierce debates about economic policy direction and (c) the rising influence of the peoples and workers defence committees –centres of people’s power, led to some resignations from the government.

Notable among these were PNDC members Chris Atim and brigadier Nunoo Mensah, the late Dr. Emmanuel Hansen, secretary to the PNDC, John Agyekum Kufuor (later to become President), and myself then PNDC Secretary for youth and sports resigned from the government. These give way for Rawlings to dismantle all organs of peoples’ power; leading cadres from the district and regional coordinating committees of the Workers and Peoples Defence Committees were arrested, imprisoned and some were tortured without trial for no reason except that they wanted to see a better Ghana.

In 1983, the PNDC regime brutalised Ghanaian workers and people into acquiescing to the SAP led by radicals turned neo-liberal adherents and cheerleaders for neo-colonialism in Ghana. They led the implementation of one of the most retrogressive, hard hitting, anti-people economic policy programmes in Ghana’s post-independence history.

By mid-1983 onwards, any slight sign of dissent either by deed or thought was violently crushed in summary executions. In some cases, during the numerous “search and destroy” missions organised by the regime, many young soldiers, political activists, journalists and chiefs became victims.

No house, no compound, no institution was left untouched as Kojo Tsikata led Bulgaria trained spies and bunch of pro-IMF ideologues roamed round the country in search of enemies. So fearful was the atmosphere that Ghanaians called it the “era of silence”. (Anyone who doubts this should re visit and read the report of the Reconciliation Commission set up by President Kufuor and Nana Akuffo Addo, then Minister for Justice).

This dictatorship, which could only be compared to that of General Pinochet in Chile. In spite of the appalling human rights record, the so-called international community including progressive governments continued to underwrite the regime’s financial corruption, profligacy and excuses for bad behaviour.

By 1986, Ghana had earned the accolade “IMF Baby”, and Rawlings was feted like a hero except that the economy was on the downward slide. As usual, African radicals desperate for good lessons ignored these facts and the reality that Rawlings was no radical transformational leader, and put him on pedestal. They even extolled the non-existent “achievements” of Rawlings.

As a major plank of the SAP, all factories set up by the Kwame Nkrumah government and which even the 1966 coup d’état could not touch were sold off cheaply to friends, family, wives, and all willing

supplicants of the regime.

Ghana's economic fortunes suffered catastrophic down turns as a result, accentuating already existing high levels of inequality and poverty. Rawlings promoted an economic policy which led to high foreign debts, the control of the economy by western "investors" crumbling infrastructure, lack of pro-poor policies, piles of rubbish, high unemployment and runaway corruption. These are the legacies of the 1983 Botchway/Rawlings neo-liberal economic doctrines.

At the risk of being described as a "supporter of the Akuffo-Addo" government by those with tinted lenses, let me add that some of these bad economic anomalies that are being addressed today by the current government result from these disastrous policies. Ghana today is reaping the bitter fruits of the seeds sown in 1983 onwards, and continued by subsequent administrations of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and to a lesser extent, the Agyekum Kufuor administration.

However, let me restate that the intentions the revolutionary process supported by well-meaning Ghanaian youth, workers, market women, soldiers, the security forces and the poor in general, were clear: To rid Ghana of corruption, change Ghana's neo-colonial economic direction that relied too much on cocoa as the only exportable commodity, restructure the economy to benefit the people of Ghana and promote a people doctrine based on popular participation, accountability, transparency, self-reliance, and rule of law.

The balance sheet of the Rawlings / Botchway economic performance was and remains abysmal to say the least. While in 1982, corruption was brought down considerably to the extent that only those close to Rawlings dared to get themselves involved in corrupt practices, this practice was given a new lease of life by the type of political system of patronage, influence peddling and lopsided development which favoured a tiny section of the middle class allied to the Rawlings regime.

Personal aggrandisement, profligate immoral personal habits, corruption, lack of a national spirit of patriotism and worse of all, lack of interest in national agenda became the hallmark of the Rawlings era. None of these were on the original agenda of the 31 December "coup/revolution".

Sadly, the current NDC seems to be an embodiment of all the negative attributes of the Rawlings post 1983 era. It is incapable to weaning itself from some of the weak aspects of the Rawlings era in Ghanaian politics. Some of the leaders of the party repudiated the goals of 31 December 1981.

Current Ghanaian politics thrives on the sad decline of national values, unwavering personality worship, lack of a credible political debate on the future of the country, personal aggrandisement, runaway corruption and abuse of political opponents as a form of political culture. These are the attributes of a dictatorship inherited from Rawlings. He is still chest thumping and able to promote these backward non-Ghanaian values.

Ghana's post-independence development agenda was torn to shreds by those who claimed to be part of a transformational agenda. If the current government has to deal with the right to education, health, and runaway corruption and instil a sense of national purpose and developmental values, it is because of the deliberate actions of those who betrayed the aspirations of ordinary Ghanaians who supported the of 31 December 1981 process.

As Ghana celebrated the 36th year of the 31st December 31 "revolution" some of us could not help but remember a political process that had the support of the poor farmers, students, youth, women, academics, soldiers, policemen and women, and indeed the majority of Ghanaians, even if some were sceptics.

It was a political upheaval that promised and had the potential to deliver a Castro/Sankara type social and political revolution, but was wasted on the rubbish heap of personality power grab fuelled by the ambitions of one man, the collective theft of national resources by a cabal of opportunists and nation wreckers who perpetuated their vile corrupt values on the rest of the nation.

What I hope is not repeated this time is the 4 June 1979 type of narrative in which one man (Rawlings) descends on Ghana like superman to save us from harm. This narrative has dominated Ghana's recent history in which one man, Rawlings is the hero and everyone else an inconsequential villain.

However, many of the key actors of both 4 June 1979 and 31 December 1981 are still alive and can give us a different narrative. Some of it will be about the heroism of ordinary Ghanaians trying to save the nation from total collapse. However, many will also narrate gory stories of torture, murder, assassinations, lies, unemployment, and cover ups told at the National Reconciliation Commission. These remain the enduring legacies and hallmarks of the Rawlings era.

If recent discussions on social media are anything to go by, there are many aspects of the political events surrounding 31 December 1981 that require elucidation and honest clarity by the main actors. Some of us have a duty to admit our faults based perhaps on what someone called "youth exuberance" when it comes to 31 December 1981.

Those who seek to use this day to prop up a failing political experiment should decide which 31 December is being celebrated. The one based on probity, accountability, transparency, self-reliance and a genuine people's revolutionary process, or the subsequent one based on neoliberalism, poverty skewed development, corruption, personality worship and a false national sense of being.

Well-meaning Ghana loving citizens should not fall for historical distortions, hubris, lies, crude political distortions and attempts to use 31 December 1981 as an excuse to perpetuate backward personalised corrupt politics which cannot lead to the elimination of poverty, deprivation and social injustice.

Defending the national interest, promoting patriotism, elimination of poverty and honesty were the main original goals of the 31 December process, and should remain so. Ghana and its interest as a pan African nation should remain the focus. 31 December should not be hijacked by a political party or single individual.

This article is dedicated to the victims of 31 December 1981.

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P.S.

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