



Contentious Biometric Voters Registration and Democratic Politics under COVID-19: The Myth of ‘Social Distance’ in an African State?

Christopher Appiah-Thompson¹

¹ University of Newcastle

Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Abstract

According to scholars of electoral governance, the compilation of an accurate, reliable, and transparent voters' register constitutes a fundamental task for the conduct of peaceful, fair, and fair democratic elections. However, the generation of the final voter roll for the Ghanaian presidential election on December 7, 2020, was clouded with many controversies under the uncertain and restrictive health environment. Especially, considering the existing restrictive health regulations and requirements of the wearing of protective facemasks and the observation of social distance as dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic due to the absence of protective vaccines at that time. Based on the available primary and secondary evidence, this paper contends that the outright disregard for the observation (1 metre) social distance and the practice of other health precautions at the polling stations during this biometric voter registration exercise affected health security in terms of the containment of this global health pandemic in Ghana and the West African sub-region.

Christopher Appiah-Thompson

The University of Newcastle, Australia

ORCID: 0000-0003-3637-7232

chrsappiah@gmail.com

Keywords: COVID-19, Biometric Voter Registration, Party Politics, Social Distance, Democratic Politics.

Introduction and Objectives of the Study

This paper seeks to explore the challenges faced by an emerging African democratic state in managing the deadly COVID-19 pandemic in a highly uncertain and competitive election year. It focuses on the major contentious electoral reform measure (the compilation of a biometric voters register) undertaken by the Ghanaian electoral commission as part of its preparations towards the 2020 civic elections. This turned out to be the most vexing challenge and controversial issue for the Electoral Commission (EC) in managing the voters' roll as it has been plagued with the perception of being a bloated, inaccurate and manipulative tool for any incumbent ruling party. Nonetheless, this registration exercise was carried out in absolute disregard for numerous health security warnings by the local and international health authorities due to the incurable and deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

This triggered sharp criticisms and warnings from some leading civil society organisations (such as the Centre for Democratic Development-CDD) as well as the local health authorities questioning the underlying democratic logic, timing, financial burden, and the implications on the health security of the country. For instance, the CDD and the local health authorities raised concerns about the capacity of their weak health institutions, and the lifting of the ban on free movements, at the same time during their efforts to effectively manage the pandemic. And, particularly, the attitudes of the populace to adhere to the health precautions, restrictions (including the 1m social distance) and the exercise of their political right to be registered and to vote under the current health crises. The discussions of these controversies will be taken up in due course.

The leading opposition party (NDC) vehemently protested this (mis) calculated electoral administrative task reasoning that the existing biometric voters' register is credible and constituted the basis for the election of the incumbent NPP government during the recent 2016 election. The NDC opposition leaders questioned the democratic logic behind the registration exercise as inappropriate, unjustified, and unnecessary. They argued strongly that it represents a clear manifestation of the desperate intentions of the incumbent ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) to rig the forthcoming elections with the collusion of the electoral commission and Judiciary. They reasoned that the existing 2012 biometric register, which had been used for the election of the incumbent government during the 2016 elections, was still accurate and reliable and needed only to be reviewed considering the serious financial and health security challenges posed by the current COVID-19 pandemic. They argued that the timing for the registration was inappropriate and unjustified. Moreover, they pointed out that the refusal of the electoral commission to accept the existing birth certificates and biometric voters' identification cards was part of the basis for the new registration exercise, and that this demonstrated the electoral

commission's bad faith and determination to disenfranchise most of their supporters in their strongholds. With the support of the ruling NPP government, the electoral commission responded that the decision to compile a new biometric voters' register was motivated by the defects and inefficiencies in the existing biometric voters' register machines and identity cards. They insisted that the discovery that the existing voters' register has some flaws in the aftermath of the 2012 electoral dispute adjudication at the Supreme Court rendered the existing voters' identification cards and birth certificates invalid for the current biometric registration exercise. Ironically, this position rejects "the EC's own officially issued voter card used in the most recent elections, including the December 2019 District Assembly Elections, is almost certain to be challenged," according to an independent observer at Ghana's Centre for Democratic Development (CDD) (Kojo Pumpuni Asante, *Myjoyonline*, 8 July).

On June 25, 2020, the Supreme Court intervened to resolve these disputes over the mode of the registration procedures, and the injunction filed by the leading opposition party (NDC) to restrain the EC from compiling a new voters' register. The Court ruled in favour of the electoral commission that both the birth certificates and the existing voters' identification cards are invalid documents for the current registration exercise.¹ The Judges reasoned liberally that, "if the law provides for alternative ways of performing the task, the discretion is vested in the actor in deciding within the limits imposed by article 296 of the Constitution as to which one of them would best suit the task at hand" (The Republic of Ghana, 2020). The political implications of this ruling are that it granted legal support to the proposed biometric voter registration exercise, irrespective of the precarious health situation rendered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the opposition continued to spread the allegation that the Judiciary and the electoral commission are in bed with the incumbent government to rig the pending 2020 elections in its favour. As a sign of their disagreement, disappointment and protest action to the justifications provided by the Constitutional Court on the registration procedures.

These electoral controversies were partly attributed to the timing and the low level of consultancy, participation and transparency in the decision-making and implementation of the modalities concerning the biometric voter registration exercise by the electoral commission. Especially, in a highly competitive election year under a precarious health environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper contends that the outright disregard for the observation (1.5 metres) social distance and the practice of other health precautions at the polling stations during this contentious voter registration exercise have affected the effective management and containment of the global health pandemic in the country. This led to the recording of some new (COVID-19) cases with some senior government ministers and the President implicated in these electoral processes as reported in the various traditional and social media platforms. In sum, the paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of how the current health pandemic is being managed and its implications for health security and the management of democratic elections in other African states.

To achieve the objectives of this enquiry, the study proceeds as follows. After this introductory section, the next section focuses on the arguments for and against the voter registration exercise by the electoral commission. This is followed by tracing the politico-historical trajectory of the biometric voters' register in Ghanaian electoral politics in the second section. The third section focuses on assessing challenges pertaining to the voter registration exercise in terms of examining the behaviour of both the electoral officials and the registrants in adhering to the basic health precautions (particularly to the restrictive 1.5m social distance rule) during the process. Its implications on the ability to contain and mitigate widespread

of the contagious COVID-19 pandemic is the focus of the fourth section. The final section draws some lessons from the Ghanaian experience for other emerging democratic African states grappling with the effective containment and management of this global COVID-19 pandemic.

The Politics of the New Biometric Voter Registration Exercise: Mapping the Democratic Right to Vote versus the Protection of Life

Some scholars of comparative politics have long noted that the continuous and periodic administrative task of the compilation of accurate and reliable voters' register constitute a major technical challenge for the consolidation of democratic elections, especially in poor African countries with weak electoral institutions, lack of adequate technical-know-how and the requisite technologies (Pastor 1999). Specifically, the basic electoral administrative task such as the registration of voters became highly politicised resulting in intense pre-electoral conflict in Ghana. The judicial review powers of the Supreme Court were invoked to defuse the tensions and legal controversies surrounding the voter registration exercise in order to pave the way for the electoral commission to undertake its constitutionally mandated functions. This section focuses on politics surrounding the electoral commission's decision to compile the new biometric voters register in terms of ensuring the people's sovereign right to be registered and vote in the pending 2020 civic elections against the primary right to health security and the protection of human life. It is important to note also that the major cause of these contentions was partly due to the unilateral decision taken with respect to the voters' roll by the newly appointed electoral commissioners by the incumbent NPP government (See also Ellena 2020).

According to an International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) COVID-19 Briefing report, the normal "response of 57 countries and five territories to the pandemic has been to postpone the elections, some indefinitely" (Ellena, 2020: 3). As of April 3 2020, some African states such as Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia and South Africa have, in fact, postponed or cancelled their democratic elections indefinitely (IFES cited in Kojo Pumpuni Asante, *Myjoyonline*, 8 July). While other African states such as Mali and Ghana are considering minor modifications to the organisation of their elections as adaptive strategies to the circumstances presented by the pandemic (See also Ellena, 2020: 13). In the case of Ghana, to proceed with the preparations towards the pending 2020 civic elections had been preceded by the major administrative task of compiling a new voters' registration roll with some legal and health modifications in the mode of the procedures. This is due to the need to find preventive measures of mitigating the transmission rate of the COVID-19 pandemic and to ensure the protection of the health and life of the prospective voters. Nonetheless, this administrative decision and its effective implementation were greatly challenged by the ability to contain the COVID-19 pandemic in the midst of other legal challenges concerning the mode of the registration procedures. As a result, it triggered numerous criticism and warnings from the local health authorities, some leading civil society organisations, university lecturers and the opposition political parties questioning its appropriateness, timing, and its financial and health implications on the ability of the health institutions and the populace to contain and mitigate the widespread of a deadly pandemic.

From the outset, there was great public concern about the government's response, particularly the ability of the electoral

commission to undertake an entirely new biometric voters' register before the December 2020 civic elections. After the discovery of the initial two cases of COVID-19 in March 2020, the Ghanaian government responded swiftly by first, closing all the country's borders to both regional and international travel (See also Ebenezer Emmanuel, *Africa blogging*, April 3). Second, the President imposed a strict ban on all public gatherings including the attendance of church services, conferences, political rallies, private parties, traditional festivals, and funerals. Further, basic schools, high schools and universities were temporarily closed as well as the observance of "strict" social distancing, wearing of facemasks and other health precautions during any essential transactions at the marketplaces (ibid). Specifically, the government paid more attention to the urban centres, "with a two-week partial lockdown imposed on residents in Accra, Tema, Kasoa, Kumasi and communities in their immediate vicinity" from March 30, 2020 (Kojo Pumpuni Asante, *Myjoyonline*, 8 July).

All these preventive health measures resulted in the temporary restriction of political rights and the enjoyment of civil liberties in an uncertain and contentious election year. Particularly, its effects on the electoral process were the announcement of an indefinite suspension of the proposed compilation of a new voters' register by the EC, as the fear of increasing infections was highly perceived as a serious threat to the health security of the country at that time (ibid). Perhaps due to the realisation that also both electoral officials and prospective voters will be exposed to great risks during a comprehensive national voter registration process. Prior to this electoral decision, the EC had planned to roll out a compilation of a new biometric voters' register, on 16 March 2020 (*Ghanaweb*, March 16).

At this point, the public opinion was stacked at the postponement of the December 2020 elections to an appropriate future date. Civil society organisations such as the Centre for Ethical Governance and Administration (CEGA) sounded the alarm bells by calling on the EC to postpone the pending elections (ibid). Some university lecturers also issued position papers exploring how the key democratic institutions such as the Constitution, Parliament, and Judiciary as well as the political parties can help to find solutions to better address these unforeseen political and constitutional crises (*Ghana law hub*, 18 April). Nonetheless, it was reported that the Deputy Attorney General has advised the electoral commission, "in spite of a surge in the number of COVID-19 infections in the country, it is constitutionally mandated to hold the December elections at the scheduled time" ("Coronavirus: EC Can't Postpone 2020 Polls-Dep. AG," *Ghanaweb*, 15 May 2020). After a cabinet meeting, President Akufo Addo, through his information minister informed the nation that, there was no "justifiable reason" to seek to "extend its first term using the virus as an excuse – without a safe, free and fair election." In effect, the incumbent government's position was that "instead of contemplating measures that are not envisaged in the Constitution, our best energies, our innovation and creativity should be invested in exploring how a country like ours can have safe and free elections" (ibid).

In short, these political pressures strengthened the initial decision of the electoral commission to compile a new voters' register under the current health crises. In fact, it was reported that "despite the rising number of COVID-19 cases," the electoral commission issued a statement that "its intention to compile a new register of voters ahead of the elections remains unchanged." The commission contended, "it has not indicated anywhere that it has no capacity, or it is incapable of carrying out its mandate by virtue of COVID-19" ("Coronavirus: EC Can't Postpone 2020 Polls-Dep. AG," *Ghanaweb*, 15 May 2020). In response, a group of about (100) university academics ("Concerned University Lecturers") also issued an open letter to the electoral commission challenging the democratic logic, timing and health implications of the decision to

compile new voters register under a deadly pandemic against all odds. They questioned the underlying democratic logic contending, “the decision was puzzling because the existing register has been used by the EC to conduct the 2012 elections. It was also used for the 2016 elections as well as a referendum to create six new administrative regions in 2018. In addition, the same register was used for a by-election at the Ayawaso West Wuogon constituency in Accra, and for district assembly elections last year” (*University World News*, 11 June 2020). Concerning the timing for the registration schedule, they reasoned that “the decision to compile a new voters’ register given that the country’s constitutionally scheduled elections are about six months away,” seems very worrying (*ibid*).

Finally, university lecturers warned that the negative health implications of a comprehensive voter registration exercise were very great. They explained further that there was a high chance that any process of “voter registration will defeat the principles of social distancing and compromise the health of many citizens” (*ibid*). In their opinion, “nothing should take precedence over healthy human lives, and so it is our considered view that the existing voters register is updated as was done prior to both the recent referendum and District Assembly elections to pave the way for first-time voters to exercise their rights to participate in the electoral process” (*ibid*). They concluded, “the current unilateral departure from the previous approach to decision-making by the commission has poisoned the electoral environment and has the potential to undermine the credibility of the 2020 elections” (*ibid*). The contention of this study is not the ability to hold elections; it is rather about the capacity to undertake a “safer” new voter registration under the current pandemic, considering the low level of public education and consultation that has been done by the electoral commission (See also Kojo Pumpuni Asante, *Myjoyonline*, 8 July).

On the Politico-Historical Trajectory of the Biometric Voters Register

The history of the existing biometric voters’ register can be traced to the legacy of Ghana’s longest-serving electoral commissioner, Dr Kwadwo Afari-Gyan who first introduced the usage of biometric devices as part of the voters’ registration and voting procedures during the 2012 civic elections under the previous NDC administration. The biometric voters’ register was introduced with the view of resolving the perennial problem of the perception of a bloated voters’ register as means of rigging elections by the sitting incumbent governments, which was hailed by all the stakeholders, particularly the political parties in the electoral game. Newly appointed electoral commissioner, Mrs Charlotte Kesson-Smith Osei by John Mahama and his NDC administration, on June 30, 2015, also adopted the 2012 Biometric Voters Register.

Nevertheless, with just about fourteen months to the 2016 civic elections the presidential candidate of the major opposition party NPP, Nana Addo was reported as explaining to audiences in the United States that Ghana’s biometric voters’ register was “bloated with 76, 000 names of Togolese nationals and therefore not fit for the purpose” (“Danger Ahead Can the NPP Save Itself?” *Africawatch*, October/November 2015, p. 14). Thus, the opposition requested an entirely new biometric voters’ register by June 2016 before the elections (“In the Eye of the Storm,” *Africawatch* October/November 2015, p. 16-22). At the height of the political agitations surrounding the voters’ register, a political pressure “Let My Vote Count Alliance,” with the strong support of the leading opposition party NPP was clamped down by

the police in the course of protesting for a new voter roll (ibid: 18).

After a series of claims and counterclaims between the leaders of the ruling NDC party and the opposition NPP party as well as issuing of position statements by virtually all the civil society groupings, lecturers, opinion leaders and religious bodies, the new electoral commissioner decided to simply review the existing biometric voters' register instead of compiling a new one. The EC reasoned that the current biometric voters' register "is neither bloated nor over-bloated; it is statistically very credible and reliable for the conduct of any national and local election" (ibid: 22). Further, the EC officials insisted, "no solid evidence has been presented by the NPP to prove otherwise" (ibid: 22). Ironically, the discredited voters register engineered the election of Nana Akufo Addo and his NPP administration to power by defeating the incumbent NDC ruling party in the December 2016 elections.

On June 28, 2018, two years into his first presidential term of office it was announced by the information minister that "President Nana Akufo-Addo had fired the head of the country's Electoral Commission for "misbehaviour and incompetence" ("Ghana's President Fires Electoral Commission Head, Two Deputies," *CGTN*, 29 June 2018). The government explained further that, "the removal of Charlotte Osei and her two deputies were based on a recommendation by a special committee set up by the Chief Justice to investigate complaints against them" (ibid). The President subsequently nominated and appointed Mrs Jean Adukwei Mensa a Lawyer as Chairman of the EC on July 23, 2018 (*Graphic Online*, 23 July 2018). This time around, the newly appointed electoral commissioner resurrected the ghosts of the voters' register controversies as it announced that it would compile an entirely new biometric voters' register as part of the preparations towards the 2020 national elections under an infectious health pandemic. Of course, this decision was challenged by the major opposition party NDC, which sought an injunction at Supreme Court to prevent the EC from compiling a new voters' register, on March 19, 2020.

In a press statement delivered on 29 June 2020, the newly appointed electoral commissioner reiterated her intention to commence the compilation of an entirely new Biometric Voters' Register from June 30, 2020, to August 6 2020. This event occurred, after the favourable Supreme Court ruling on the need for a new voters' roll as directed by the EC, on 25 June 2020 ("EC Chair's Speech on Voters Registration Exercise," *Myjoyonline*, 29 June 2020). Therefore, the electoral commissioner appealed to all Ghanaians to participate in the Voters Registration Exercise as "it is the foundation upon which the sovereign right of the people to choose their national leaders is hinged" (ibid).

Nonetheless, the EC also recognised the fact the implementation of its fundamental administrative task would take place; at the same time as the country continue to battle the global COVID-19 pandemic. In her own words, the Voters' Registration Exercise "begins at a time when we, as a nation, have not yet beaten the COVID-19 virus nor completely curtailed its spread" (ibid). Hence, the following preventive measures were incorporated into the normal registration procedures for the observance of both the prospective voters and the electoral officials:

- a. All people entering the registration centre or queuing to enter the registration centre will be required to wear a nose mask.
- b. Upon arrival at a registration centre, each person's temperature will be taken using a thermometer gun. Persons with

temperatures above 37.8 degrees Celsius will be directed to health personnel at the registration centres or the nearest public health facility. Special arrangements will be made for them to register.

- c. The Commission will provide liquid soap and water with veronica buckets for mandatory washing of hands before joining the queue or entering the registration centre.
- d. **There** will be **strict** observance of physical (*or social*) distance of at least 1 meter in queues at the centres.
- e. Fingerprint scanners will be cleaned prior to the capturing of fingerprints of applicants, using alcohol wipes, and
- f. Hand sanitizers will be provided for mandatory sanitizing of hands when leaving the centres (“EC Chair’s Speech on Voters Registration Exercise,” *Myjoyonline*, 29 June 2020)

In sum, the EC indicated that about 7000 Health Assistants would be stationed at the registration centres to ensure that the safety protocols are strictly adhered to by both the electoral officials and the prospective voters (*ibid*). It was estimated that about 16 million would be registered under a cluster system of 33,367 polling stations nationwide (*Ghanaweb*, 7 July). The question here is whether will these health precautions be strictly adhered to considering the great attention the EC paid to the political and legal controversies in the public and Courts rather than investing enough time and resources in the education of the public on the nuances of the voter registration exercises (See Li and Corsini, 2020).

The Myth of Social Distance in the Biometric Voters Registration Exercise

The strong commitment to the electoral process by the government was demonstrated by the lifting of the ban on free movement and public gatherings to pave the way for partial political activities. On the other hand, faced with the herculean task of conducting non-violent, safe, free, and fair national elections, the electoral commission instituted minor modifications in the voter registration procedures (including the adherence to a 1.5m social distancing rule, the wearing of protective masks, the frequent use of hand sanitizers, etc.) to contain the health pandemic. Nonetheless, these political and administrative responses from the government and the EC have the tender to bring large numbers of people to gather and queue at centres across the length and breadth of the country in effect placing the citizenry in a dilemma of “choosing between their health and life and the right to vote” (Kojo Pumpuni Asante, *Myjoyonline*, 8 July 2020).

After about several days into the voter registration processes, there were numerous reports indicating that the enforcement of “strict” social/physical distancing emerged as a major challenge at the centres across the country. In the “Odorkor suburb of the Tweneboa electoral area” and the Tema Metropolis in the capital city of Accra, the EC’s queue management system turned out to be ineffective in the face of registration pressures from the prospective voters. As intimated by an EC registration official, “for the social distancing and other COVID-19 safety protocols, it’s not been observed as it should because many of the applicants just want to get registered fast and leave so they always want to get close to us.” Further, he narrated that “though we caution them about the current era we are in, most of them wouldn’t understand because everybody wants to cut across so we make sure that they all wash their hands with soap, check their temperatures, sanitize their hands and then progress with the process” (“Voter Registration: Applicants in Odorkor Disregard EC’s Queue Management System,” *Ghanaweb*, 7 July 2020). Figure 1.1 below clearly depicts the lack of observance of the social distancing protocols and the absence of health assistants to help enforce the rule as promised by

the electoral commission.

Similar scenarios of queue mismanagement and violations of the “strict” adherence to the social distancing protocols were reported concerning the registration exercise at most of the centres across the country. Particularly, it was reported that some prospective voters who thronged the various centres in the Tema Metropolis (in the Greater Accra region) barely observed the social distancing protocols (*Ghanaweb*, 1 July 2020). It is important to note here that the country recorded the highest numbers of confirmed cases in the Greater Accra, Western and Ashanti regions (UNICEF Ghana, 16 July 2020). Prior to that, the major cities in these regions such as Kumasi, Tema port city, and Accra were under partial lockdown due to the government’s determination to contain the COVID-19 virus at its early stages of discovery. For instance, by the end of the lockdown about 1042 cases of confirmed COVID-19 were reported, however, after one week into the registration exercise latter skyrocketed to 23, 464 as recorded on July 6 2020 (*Conversation*, 26 July 2020).



Figure 1.1. The Violation of the 1.5 Metres Social Distance Protocol

Source: *Ghanaweb* website (2020, July 7)

In the course of the registration exercise, some senior government officials (including the President) were also implicated in the violations of the health protocols, particularly the “strict” observance of the one-meter social/physical distance rule. This follows the resignation of the Deputy Minister for Trade and Industry who admitted to visiting registration centres in the Tema Community 5 constituency (in the Greater Accra Region) after testing positive for the COVID-19 virus. Subsequently, it was reported that one member of the Minister’s parliamentary campaign team passed away with two others with critical health conditions due to infections from COVID-19 (“Carlos Ahenkorah’ Campaign Team Member Dies, 2 Others Receiving COVID-19 Treatment,” *Myjoyonline*, 4 July 2020). In reaction, a Member of Parliament (MP) of the opposition party NDC “lamented the effects of the former Deputy Trade Minister’s action on the nation’s fight against coronavirus” (*Myjoyonline*, 4 July 2020). He implicated the President by arguing, “the President must firmly decide to set an example with this case,” by taking more stringent actions against the former Minister, according to him “some people are in jail as a result of having infringed that law.” He reasoned further that, “Government is leading this whole process and in terms of the examples that ought to be given and the people who should give these examples are people in positions of responsibility” (*ibid*).

It is worth noting here that initially some leading politicians from the ruling party NPP and some electoral officials were

engaging in a sort of blame game and directing the responsibilities for the ineffective enforcement of the “strict” social distance preventive measures on the behaviour of the prospective voters. For instance, the National Organiser of the ruling party (NPP) was reported advising Ghanaians that: “it’s either you keep a six-feet distance that is observing social distancing or go six feet below that is when you are buried” (*Myjoyonline*, 6 July). Further, he appealed to the electoral authorities for more public sensitization on the dangers of failing to adhere to the social distancing protocols at the registration centres (*ibid*). Likewise, the Director of Electoral Services at the EC also issued a press statement, blaming Ghanaians for their disregard for the social distancing protocols. He lamented that: “you have to live before you can vote. Observe the social distancing protocol because COVID-19 is real. Know that if you contract the sickness, you will pose a danger to yourself and others so you need to observe the social distancing.” Nonetheless, he emphasised that “no matter what the security persons do, it depends on the individual” (*Ghanaweb*, 3 July 2020).

The Vice-President of the Ghana Medical Association (GMA), Dr Frank Serebour rebutted the statements from the electoral commission and the ruling party NPP in their attempt to shift the blame for lack of adherence to the health and safety protocols on the citizens. He explained that it is the job of the electoral commission to ensure that electoral officials observe the health protocols to keep Ghanaians safe. He appealed to the head of the electoral commission to put in place the right security and logistics at all the centres to ensure that the right things are done. According to Dr Serebour, the electoral commissioner (Mrs Jean Mensah):

requested for health personnel, and it was provided; we have trained them and given them health personnel to help them, so, we think that every single activity that’s being done is being done under her auspices and she has to make sure that the right people are at the right places ... I believe that she knows that and that is the reason she held the press conference and she told Ghanaians exactly what was going to happen at the registration centres, so, we think that any breaches that occur at these centres, she should be solely held responsible for those breaches” (*Ghanaweb*, 2 July 2020).

These revelations triggered numerous public pressures from local civil society organisations (including health practitioners) began to demand the immediate termination of the registration processes due to blatant violations of the registration health protocols. For instance, it was reported that a group of concerned medical practitioners (including 200 health workers and 110 medical doctors) petitioned the electoral commission “to stop the ongoing voters’ registration exercise over some breaches of COVID-19 preventive protocols” and “figure out safety ways of carrying it out” (Kenneth Awotwe Darko, *Myjoyonline*, 6 July 2020). The petition letter explained further that:

A significant reduction in the number of effective health workers available to render preventive, curative, and rehabilitative care for patients. This will occur because the already high number of infected health workers is likely to remain on that trajectory, with a concomitant increase in the number of deaths from COVID-19 if care is not taken. In addition, a higher number of specialist staff would be required to take care of the ever-increasing number of “sick people” with COVID-19 leading to even fewer health workers available to treat non-COVID-19 conditions

(Kenneth Awotwe Darko, *Myjoyonline*, 6 July 2020).

The health petitioners concluded that it is worrying to observe the increasing numbers of infections coupled with the challenges in testing for early identification of cases. At the same time, it is also “disquieting to observe the huge numbers of people at and around registration centres,” who are blatantly violating the precautionary protocols, thus, worsening the country’s efforts to contain the pandemic (ibid).

In response, the electoral commission promised to upgrade its queue management system by making sure that the first 150 applicants who arrived at the registration centres are provided with numbered chits in order to effectively control the “overcrowding and the breach of anti-COVID-19 social distancing rules by anxious applicants” (“Social Distancing Challenges: EC Institutes Queue Management System,” *Ghanaweb*, 7 July). However, even though the registration process progressed smoothly, the major challenge was the effective queue management and the observance of the “strict” physical/social distancing protocols by the assigned health assistants and electoral officials at the registration centres due to the low level of public education about the dangers of the process prior to the exercise. The next briefly examines its effects on the ability to mitigate the widespread of the infectious COVID virus on the health security of the country.

Gauging the Implications of the Voters Registration on the Containment of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The management and containment of the COVID-19 pandemic conceded with the commencement of the compilation of the new register of voters on June 30, 2020. According to the UNICEF COVID situation from 1-15 July, the country recorded an increasing number of cases of COVID-19 during that period (UNICEF Ghana, 16 July 2020). For instance, by July 3, 2020, Ghana recorded 4, 878 confirmed COVID-19 cases (with the death toll at 129). At the same time, 992 new cases were recorded on July 3, 2020, after laboratory investigations from samples collected taken from suspected patients from June 18 to July 1, 2020, based on information from the Ghana Health Service (GHS) Website (Kenneth Awotwe Darko, *Myjoyonline*, 6 July 2020). After just about two weeks into the voters’ registration exercise by the electoral commission, the number of COVID-19 confirmed cases escalated to 24, 988 with a death toll of 139 as of July 15, 2020 (UNICEF Ghana Situation Report, 1-15 July 2020).

As a result, Ghana was described as the “second most impacted country in the West and Central African region following South Africa, Egypt and Nigeria, Nigeria” (UNICEF Ghana Situation Report, 1-15 July 2020). It is significant to note here that South Africa and Nigeria postponed all electoral preparations or the conduct of their pending 2020 national elections due to serious health implications associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. During the final phases of the voter registration exercise from 16 July – 10 August 2020, Ghana continued to record a rapid increase in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases. As of 31 July, there were 35, 501 confirmed cases and 182 deaths due to the skyrocketed infections of the COVID-19 virus (UNICEF Ghana Situation Report, 16-31, July 2020). In the end, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases had increased from 35, 501 to 43, 717 with the reported death toll at 270, thus positioning the

country as the greatly affected state in the West African sub-region (as of August 26 2020) (UNICEF Ghana Situation Report, 29 August 2020; See also *Conversation*, 26 July 2020).

Conclusion

This paper examined the contentious biometric voters' registration exercise during a deadly pandemic and in a competitive election year. The findings confirmed the arguments of the study that the expected health precautions, particularly the "strict" observance of the social distancing protocols during the registration procedures remained a "delusion" or a "myth." This was partly due to the lack of consultation and consensus building with the major political parties and civil society organisations (including the local health authorities) in the design and implementation of the registration exercise to ensure the mitigation of the spread of COVID-19 infections in the country. Further, the gaps in the public education exercise and the government's inconsistent restrictions on free movements and public gatherings also contributed to the lack of risk aversion of the populace. Finally, the failure to enforce the health protocols as planned by the electoral commission at the registration centres contributed largely to the lack of adherence to the social distancing protocols. Since the electoral commission had to pay great attention to the excessive public agitations and legal controversies surrounding the registration exercise because of its unilateral decision and lack of coordination with other important stakeholders in the process. In short, Ghana's decision to prepare and conduct the pending 2020 civic elections turned out to be a great threat to health security as well as positioning the country as the most unsafety and dangerous state in the West African sub-region due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Footnotes

¹ It worthy to note here that the initial 2012 voter registration exercise permitted the following documents as prove of the eligibility for registration purposes: Birth Certificate, National Health Insurance Certificate, Passport, Driver's License, Baptismal Certificate, National Identification Card and the Current Voters ID Card (Electoral Commission of Ghana, *The Biometric Voter Registration Manual*, 2012:16). However, the "National Health Insurance Certificate" was excluded from the voter eligibility documents, during the 2016 review of the biometric voters register (See "Ghana Electoral Commission Steps Up Preparation for Elections," *VOANEWS*, 17 July 2016). <https://www.voanews.com/africa/ghana-electoral-commission-steps-preparation-elections> (Accessed 27/08/20).

References

- *Africawatch*. (2015, October/November, p. 14). Danger Ahead Can the NPP Save Itself.
- *Africawatch*. (2015, October/November, p. 16-22). In the Eye of the Storm.
- Asante, K.P. (2020, July 8). The COVID-19 Pandemic and its Implications for the Conduct of the 2020 Elections in Ghana. *Myjoyonline*. <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/the-covid-19-pandemic-and-its-implications-for-the-conduct-of->

[the-2020-elections-in-ghana-2/](#) (Accessed 28/08/20).

- CGTN. (2018 June 29). Ghana's President Fires Electoral Commission Head, Two Deputies. <https://africa.cgtn.com/2018/06/29/ghanas-president-fires-electoral-commission-head-two-deputies/> (Accessed 27/08/20).
- Birch, S. et al (2020). *How to Hold Elections Safely and Democratically during the COVID-19 Pandemic* The British Academy: COVID-19: Shape of the Future. thebritishacademy.ac.uk/shape-the-future.
- *Conversation*. (2020 July 26). Ghana's Much Praised COVID-19 Strategy has Gone Awry. Here is Why. <https://theconversation.com/ghanas-much-praised-covid-19-strategy-has-gone-awry-here-is-why-143217> (Accessed 30/08/20).
- Darko, K. A. (2020 July 6). Ghana Sees a Record of 992 New Cases of COVID-19 as Death Toll Increases to 129. *Myjoyonline*. <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/ghana-sees-a-record-of-992-new-cases-of-covid-19-as-death-toll-increases-to-129/> (Accessed 28/08/20).
- Darko, K. A. (2020 July 6). COVID-19: Halt Voters Registration Exercise and Come Up with Safer Alternatives-Group Petitions EC. *Myjoyonline*. <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/covid-19-halt-voters-registration-exercise-and-come-up-with-safer-alternatives-group-petitions-ec/> (Accessed 28/08/20).
- Ellena, K. (2020). *Legal Considerations When Delaying or Adapting Elections* Arlington: International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) COVID-19 Briefing Series.
- Emmanuel, E. (2020, April 3). COVID-19: The Situation in Ghana. *Africablogging*. <https://www.africablogging.org/covid-19-the-situation-in-ghana/> (Accessed 28/08/20).
- *Ghanaweb*. (2020, March 16). COVID-19: CEGA Calls for Postponement. <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/COVID-19-CEGA-calls-for-postponement-of-compilation-of-new-voter-register-895576> (Accessed 28/08/20).
- *Ghanaweb*. (2020, July 7). Voter Registration: Applicants in Odorkor Disregard EC's Queue Management System. <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Voter-registration-Applicants-in-Odorkor-disregard-EC-s-queue-management-system-1001356> (Accessed 29/08/20).
- *Ghanaweb*. (2020, July 7). Social Distancing Challenges: EC Institutes Queue Management System. <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Social-Distancing-Challenges-EC-institutes-queue-management-system-1000612> (Accessed 29/08/20).
- *Ghanaweb*. (2020 July 3). Ghanaians Old Enough to Observe Social Distancing- EC. <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Ghanaians-old-enough-to-observe-social-distancing-EC-998224> (Accessed 29/08/20).
- *Ghanaweb*. (2020 July 2). Voter Registration: "Strictly Adhere to EC's Coronavirus Protocols" – Akufo-Addo. <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Voter-registration-Strictly-adhere-to-EC-s-coronavirus-protocols-Akufo-Addo-996568> (Accessed 30/08/20).
- *Ghanaweb*. (2020 July 1). Social Distance Challenges at Some Voter Registration Centres in Tema. <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Social-distance-challenges-at-some-voter-registration-centres-in-Tema-995065> (Accessed 30/08/20).

- *Ghana law hub*. (2020, April 18). Ghana: COVID-19, Election 2020 and Constitutional Matters Arising. <https://ghanalawhub.com/ghana-covid-19-election-2020-and-constitutional-matters-arising/> (Accessed 28/08/20).
- *Graphic Online*. (2018 July 23). Akufo-Addo Nominates IEA Boss Jean Mensa as New EC Chair. <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/akufo-addo-names-jean-mensa-as-new-ec.html> (Accessed 27/08/20).
- Li, K. and Corsini, C. (2020). COVID-19: Learning the Hard Way. *E-International Relations*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/07/06/covid-19-learning-the-hard-way/> (Accessed 27/08/20).
- *Myjoyonline*. (2020 June 29). EC Chair's Speech on Voters Registration Exercise. <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/full-text-ec-chairs-speech-on-voter-registration-exercise/+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=au&client=firefox-b-e> (Accessed 27/08/20).
- *Myjoyonline*. (2020 July 4). Calos Ahenkorah' Campaign Team Member Dies, 2 Others Receiving COVID-19 Treatment. <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/carlos-ahenkorahs-campaign-team-member-dies-2-others-receiving-covid-19-treatment/> (Accessed 29/08/20).
- *Myjoyonline*. (2020 July 4). Carlos Ahenkorah's Conduct Puts Ghana's COVID-19 Fight in a Bad Light-Fifi Kwetey. <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/carlos-ahenkorahs-conduct-puts-ghanas-covid-19-fight-in-a-bad-light-fifi-kwetey/> (Accessed 29/08/20).
- *Myjoyonline*. (2020 July 6). Choose Between Six-Foot Apart or Six-Foot Below. <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/choose-between-six-feet-apart-or-six-feet-below-sammy-awuku-on-observing-covid-19-protocols/> (Accessed 29/08/20).
- Pastor, R. A. (1999). The Role of Electoral Administration in Democratic Transitions: Implications for Policy and Research. *Democratization*, 6: 4, pp. 1-27.
- The Electoral Commission (2012). *The Biometric Voters Register Manual*. Accra: The Election Commission of Ghana.
- The Republic of Ghana (2020). *In the Superior Court of Judicature, the Supreme Court (Civil Division) Sitting in Accra on Thursday the 25th Day of June, 2020*. Coram Yeboah C.J. (Presiding), Dotse, Baffoe-Bonnie, Gbadegbe, Marful-Sau, Amegatcher and Kotey, JJ.S.C.
- *Universityworldnews*. (2020 June 11). Lecturers Issue Public Warning Over New Voters' Register. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200611075028349> (Accessed 29/08/20).
- UNICEF Ghana (2020 July 16). *COVID-19 Situation Report 1-15 July*. No.7 <https://reliefweb.int/report/ghana/unicef-ghana-covid-19-situation-report-7-1st-15th-july-2020> (Accessed 30/08/20)
- UNICEF Ghana (2020 August 1). *COVID-19 Situation Report 16-31 July*. No.8 <https://reliefweb.int/report/ghana/unicef-ghana-covid-19-situation-report-8-16-31-july-2020> (Accessed 30/08/20).
- UNICEF Ghana (2020 August 26). *COVID-19 Situation Report 16-31 July*. No.9 <https://reliefweb.int/report/ghana/unicef-ghana-covid-19-situation-report-no-9-1-26-august-2020> (Accessed 30/08/20).
- *VOANEWS*. (2016 July 17). Ghana Electoral Commission Steps up Preparation for Elections. *Voice of Africa News*. <https://www.voanews.com/africa/ghana-electoral-commission-steps-preparation-elections> (Accessed 27/08/20).