



Revolutionary populism and democracy in Ghana

JEFFREY HAYNES

London Metropolitan University, UK

Email: tsjhayn1@londonmet.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The article examines two decades of Jerry Rawlings' rule in Ghana. It seeks to explain why Rawlings' revolutionary populism did not develop in the direction that he envisaged: a new kind of popular democracy. Instead, Rawlings oversaw the reintroduction of Ghana's popularly preferred political system: 'Western-style' multi-party democracy, despite his avowed intention of not doing so. To what extent was this outcome surprising or puzzling? The article explains that it was neither surprising nor puzzling as Rawlings' regime, the PNDC, lacked the capacity to introduce a radical new political system, despite his desire to do so. His aim – to craft a new kind of popular democracy – was not achievable as both internal and external opposition forces were stronger in their desire for multi-party democracy and a neo-liberal economic system.

Keywords – Jerry Rawlings, Ghana, revolutionary populism, multi-party democracy, Defence Committees.

INTRODUCTION

Flight-Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings led a successful *coup d'état* in Ghana on 4 June 1979. A few weeks earlier he had been jailed after an unsuccessful coup attempt. On 4 June, Rawlings was released from prison by a group of disgruntled soldiers. Like Rawlings, they were revolted by Ghana's corruption and economic decline at the hands of its ruling generals. Following a brief period in power, Rawlings handed over to an elected government in September 1979. Twenty-seven months later, on 31 December 1981, he was back in power, again by *coup d'état*. This was not a brief interregnum: Rawlings quickly established a seven-man Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), comprising three civilians and three armed forces personnel, plus Rawlings as chair, which stayed in power for more than a decade. Seeking to justify the coup, Rawlings claimed the PNDC

was a short-term response to Ghana's political and economic crisis (Novicki 2021 Int.). In January 1993, the PNDC stood down for an elected, multi-party government, with Rawlings as president. After two terms in office, he finally relinquished power in January 2001, as the constitution demanded. Thus, beginning his political career as a military dictator with revolutionary aspirations, Rawlings ended it as a twice democratically elected civilian president.

During PNDC rule, Rawlings found it very difficult to establish the PNDC's legitimacy among Ghanaians. The government it replaced, the People's National Party (PNP) administration of Hilla Limann, was democratically elected in September 1979. During Limann's rule, which ended with Rawlings' second successful coup, Freedom House (FH) designated Ghana as 'free', that is, with a high level of both political rights and civil liberties. During PNDC rule, FH consistently labelled Ghana as 'not free', with a low level of political rights and civil liberties. In Rawlings' two terms as elected president (1993–2001), FH termed Ghana 'partly free'.¹

Rawlings' period as elected president coincided with the return of multi-party democracy, despite Rawlings' claims that such a political system was inappropriate for Ghana. This points to a puzzle: why did Rawlings' revolutionary populism not develop as he envisaged: a sustainable new political system, but eventually led to the reintroduction of multi-party democracy? The article argues that Rawlings lacked the capacity to successfully develop a new, untried and radical, political system. His desire to craft a new political system was no match for the wish of opposition forces – both internal and external – to return to multi-party democracy and a neo-liberal economic system.

Following the end of Rawlings' long period in power in January 2001, democracy strengthened in Ghana. In 2020, Ghana was one of only seven countries among the 54 in Africa to be designated as 'free' by Freedom House.² According to the USA's National Intelligence Council: 'Following two decades of rule under Jerry Rawlings, Ghana has emerged as one of Africa's most liberal and vibrant democracies, reclaiming a position of political leadership on the continent' (National Intelligence Council 2008).

This article examines the period of Jerry Rawlings' unelected rule in Ghana between 1982 and 1993, during which political freedoms were heavily circumscribed. Over this period, Rawlings' revolutionary populism did not develop into the country's guiding ideology; instead, Ghana eventually returned to the political system that Rawlings overthrew at the end of 1981: multi-party democracy. The article is in four sections. The first examines various manifestations of populism in Africa, locating Rawlings' revolutionary populism in Africa's radical military interventions in the 1980s. The second section examines Rawlings' revolutionary populism, the vehicle for what he called a 'new democratic revolution'. The third assesses alternative ideological conceptions of a 'new democratic revolution' advanced by Rawlings' opponents in the PNDC. The fourth section explains the experiences of revolutionary populism in Ghana, by highlighting the divisiveness of Defence Committees, envisaged by Rawlings as the spearhead of Ghana's 'new democratic revolution'.

The original contribution of the article is to explain the relationship of Rawlings and democracy in Ghana. The paper does not seek to examine the full two decades of Rawlings rule in Ghana. It focuses mainly on the revolutionary phase of the PNDC regime, that is, the 1980s, until the early 1990s' 'democratic' turn. While Rawlings failed to develop a 'new democratic revolution' via the PNDC organs, its political by-products are important for what they tell us about the country's democratic development. The paper examines the relationship between revolutionary populism and the multiparty democratic arrangement which emerged under Rawlings' leadership. The critical question the paper focuses on is: how did revolutionary populism prepare the grounds for the re-introduction of democratic, civilian rule in Ghana in the early 1990s? Part of the answer is that the Defence Committees/Committees for the Defence of the Revolution were a bridge between revolutionary populism and multi-party democracy: the institutional bases of Rawlings' political party, the National Democratic Congress to which in response, the anti-PNDC opposition coalesced to form a rival party, the New Patriotic Party, which gained power in January 2001 under John Kufuor.

Ghana under Rawlings is a reminder that so-called undemocratic regimes can initiate democratic experiments. Ghana is an example of how Africa's re-democratisation started, linked to a degree of both internal and external compulsion. Beginning on undemocratic foundations, Ghana's democratic experiences are a crucial subject, especially important because of recent democratic reversals in, *inter alia*, Chad, Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso. Ghana, on the other hand, is different: in January 2023, the country celebrates 30 years of multi-party democracy, the longest-lasting civilian regime since Ghana's founding in 1957. Some credit for the longevity of democratic civilian rule should go to Rawlings, originator of the Fourth Republic (Bob-Milliar 2021 Int.; Prempeh 2021 Int.).

Before proceeding, a few words about methodology. Research, including numerous personal interviews, was conducted in Ghana in June–October 1985 and August–September 1990, in Britain (mainly London) in 1986–88, and via the internet in 2021,³ due to restrictions linked to the coronavirus pandemic. The interviews from the 1980s and 1990 are still relevant today as many are with key players in the original PNDC, many of whom were not interviewed at the time by researchers. Collectively, they bring authenticity to the discussion of revolutionary populism in Ghana from the perspective of those seeking to develop a new ideological approach to ruling the country and to put this into effect via practical politics.⁴

The article draws on policy speeches, statements, remarks, press conferences, writings, and 30 of the author's personal interviews with individuals knowledgeable about Rawlings-era Ghana. The paper is also informed by primary source data, including policy documents and legislation. Finally, the paper takes into account critiques of and commentary on the Rawlings' administration's policies from both Ghanaian and non-Ghanaian scholars, human rights advocates and journalists. In sum, the article draws on a range of appropriate sources to assess the ideology and politics of Rawlings and the PNDC regime during 1982–93.

Attempts to establish revolutionary populist regimes in Africa in the 1980s took variable directions. Countries that tried revolutionary populism experienced different forms of political mobilisation, but only in Ghana did a robust multi-party democratic system consolidate. The Rawlings period is an illustration both of the uniqueness of individual African countries' political experiences and of collective vulnerability to global factors. In Ghana's case in the 1980s and 1990s, the hegemonic effects of neo-liberalism moulded what was possible, both economically and politically.

Rawlings's political legacy divides 'ordinary' Ghanaians.⁵ Some regard him as a reprehensible military dictator, who presided over a lengthy period of political oppression, with disappearances and incarceration of opposition figures, significant media repression (Blay-Amihere 1987 Int.), and a societal 'culture of silence'. For years, many Ghanaians were unwilling publicly to express their true opinions of Rawlings and his government. On the other hand, today large numbers of Ghanaians regard Rawlings as a national hero – he is widely known as 'Junior Jesus' and 'Papa Jerry' – who saved the country from ruin, enabled Ghana's democratisation and set the scene for sustained economic development.

Initially Rawlings' 31 December 1981 coup appeared to enjoy broad support in Ghana (Haynes 1999). Rawlings aimed to lead a popular revolution via a populist approach. As Morgül (2019: 275) notes, the mobilisational power of revolutionary populism depends on the capacity to (1) clearly express political and economic divisions between 'the people' and their 'enemies', (2) exemplify revolutionaries' moral and pragmatic legitimacy as bona fide popular representatives, and (3) in order to drive the revolution ideologically, focus popular outrage against existing power holders and economic elites.

Revolutionary populists' capacity to achieve their goals requires both leaders and activists to accomplish two key symbolic tasks. They must (1) focus differing social grievances in relation to the same basic dichotomy: a division between 'the people' and their 'enemies' and (2) as popular representatives establish and maintain moral and pragmatic legitimacy (Resnick 2017, 2019; Morgül 2019). To build moral legitimacy requires revolutionary populists to convince 'the people' that they are both honourable and upright, selflessly committed to defend and advance the people's interests against internal and external enemies. Moral legitimacy alone cannot construct a wide-ranging revolutionary movement. Revolutionary populists must concurrently build pragmatic legitimacy by demonstrating capability to deliver on promises to advance popular well-being. They need three attributes to demonstrate success: (1) power to subjugate the enemies of the revolution; (2) efficacy in helping resolve people's quotidian problems; and (3) practicality of chosen alternatives to address current political, economic and social problems (Morgül 2019: 276–7).

Like populists elsewhere – for example, in Europe, North America, South America and Asia – those in Africa are typically charismatic individuals with

political strategies involving direct ties to the ‘people’ via the use of high-profile public performances (Mudde 2007; Weyland 2013; Resnick 2017; Haynes 2020). Weyland (2013: 20) notes that they express political power via ‘personalistic leadership that feeds on quasi-direct links to a loosely organized mass of heterogeneous followers’. Typically, political appeals are based on a ‘thin’ ideology that ‘considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”’ (Mudde 2007: 23).

Rawlings was not the first populist to make a stir in Africa. As Resnick (2019) observes, since the 1960s ‘[p]opulism has made inroads into the politics of sub-Saharan Africa’. In addition to Ghana, over time several other African countries have been led by populists – including Burkina Faso, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and South Africa. Bienen (1985: 558) identifies Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, Guinea’s Sekou Toure and Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere as early, influential populists. Bienen characterises them as individually stressing the need for broad popular mobilisation in pursuit of equity and autonomy. Unlike Rawlings, however, these leaders did not emphasise the need to eliminate corruption, instead highlighting what Bienen calls ‘national reassertion’, involving a claim that what is needed politically and socially is a revival of ‘traditional values’ in order to recover from and respond to the deprivations of colonialism (Bienen 1985: 558). As Ahlman (2017) shows, Rawlings’ revolutionary populism, like the populism of Nkrumah two decades earlier, should be seen in the contexts of African decolonisation, postcolonial history and post-1945 international development, dominated by the East–West conflict. Like Nkrumah, Rawlings provides a model through which to reflect on the changing nature of citizenship and political and social participation in Ghana, Africa and the broader postcolonial world.

A second generation of populists emerged in Africa in the 1980s. These revolutionary populists advocated revolution to eliminate corruption and elitism, and to escape from neo-colonialism and dependency. As well as Rawlings, other contemporaneous examples include Captain Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, who achieved power via a coup in 1983, Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, who came to power in 1986 via a successful guerrilla campaign, and Master Sergeant Samuel Doe in Liberia who led a violent coup in 1980 (Bienen 1985). They all claimed to be leading popular uprisings against corrupt and incompetent civilian rulers. They espoused radical rhetoric against establishment elites, railed against internal and external structural forces that, they alleged, were to blame for their countries’ poverty and exclusion, and undertook often high-profile acts to provide enhanced public visibility (Rothchild and Gyimah-Boadi 1989; Carbone 2005; Harsch 2014; Resnick 2017). Finally, Africa’s revolutionary populists shared a disdain for conventional multi-party democracy and actively suppressed opposition and banned political parties, including in the PNDC period in Ghana (Mensah 1988 Int.).

Ghana, Burkina Faso, Uganda and Liberia had different political outcomes following revolutionary populism. While Ghana is today one of Africa’s few

democratic success stories, with a viable multiparty system and significant democratic freedoms, elsewhere things turned out differently. Burkina Faso underwent three decades of undemocratic personalist rule under Blaise Compaoré. He led a *coup d'état* in 1987 when Sankara was killed. Compaoré served as president until 2014. In 2022, Uganda had been ruled by Yoweri Museveni for three and a half decades, following periodic, democratically dubious, elections. Samuel Doe established the People's Redemption Council in Liberia, and assumed the military rank of general. Doe's regime was violently overthrown in 1990, and Liberia subsequently endured years of civil war and conflict. In 2018, an elected government was installed, led by the former football star, George Weah.

Like revolutionary populists elsewhere in Africa, Rawlings found it impossible to rule without foreign financial assistance. According to the *Financial Times*' William Wallace (2020), Rawlings became a 'market realist', converted to the 'magic of the market' to achieve Ghana's economic redemption. Ghana had – and has – a high level of dependence on external financial assistance. Despite this, Rawlings retained his revolutionary populist stance and consistently employed anti-elitist appeals, seeking to mobilise a broad-based political coalition against economic elites said to be exploiting and despoiling Ghana (Rawlings 1984). He was hardly unique in this respect: All populists vilify 'the elite', claiming they want to take power to reclaim it for 'the people'. Thus, populists like Rawlings express, both performatively and orally, concern for and proximity to the 'ordinary' man and woman. The aim is to oversee a hegemonic process, whereby the populist develops intellectual and moral leadership (Gramsci 1971) and seeks to assimilate various social groups' demands into his or her own political agenda.

Revolutionary populists differ from electoral populists in three main ways. First, revolutionary populists pursue more radical goals than their electoral counterparts. They pursue a comprehensive transformation of political and/or social institutions, not a mere change in government personnel. Second, also in contrast to electoral populists, revolutionary populists in opposition operate largely outside established institutional channels, sometimes crossing the line into illegality. If they achieve power, like Rawlings, they attempt to build new and alternative institutional channels to encourage popular mobilisation. Finally, Moffitt (2016: 51–2) argues that in electoral populism the leader is the single most important actor, while in revolutionary populism political performances tend to be more collective. The main reason for this, Morgül (2019) claims, is that unlike populist party leaders who tend to get plenty of national media coverage during electoral campaigns, revolutionary populists cannot usually rely on the mass media to directly address distant audiences. Rawlings was able to get sustained media coverage following the 31 December coup because his government controlled the popular press, television and radio (Blay-Amihere 1987 Int.).

In addition to revolutionary and electoral populism, Cheeseman and Larmer (2015) identify a third kind in Africa: 'ethnopolitism'. At first glance,

ethnically based and populist forms of mobilisation appear to be contradictory and ultimately mutually exclusive phenomena. This is because appealing to voters on the basis of a shared sense of economic grievance against powerful or wealthy sections of society does not fit well with the emphasis on sectional divisions necessary to rally support on the basis of ethnicity or region. Nevertheless, from the early 2000s various opposition political parties in Africa rose to prominence by fusing populist and ethnic constituencies to produce 'ethnopolitism'. Examples include Kenya and Zambia, where politicians were able to harness an apparently incompatible combination to considerable electoral effect. In Ghana, during Rawlings' rule opponents from both left and right sought to tar him with the ethnicity brush, claiming that he favoured his Ewe mother's home Volta Region, where most Ewes live. Evidence indicates, however, that Rawlings was ethnically blind, focusing development assistance on less developed areas of the country, especially underprivileged rural areas, not on one ethnic group or region (Jeffries 1996).

For revolutionary populists to achieve their goals requires fulfilment of two key symbolic tasks: (1) focus differing social grievances in relation to the same basic dichotomy: division between 'the people' and their 'enemies'; and (2) as popular representatives establish, build and maintain moral and pragmatic legitimacy (Resnick 2017, 2019; Morgül 2019). To build moral legitimacy, revolutionary populists need to convince 'the people' not only that they are honourable and upright but also that they unselfishly seek to defend and advance 'the people's' interests against attack from internal and external sources. But it is not sufficient to claim moral legitimacy alone when the goal is to build a revolutionary movement. To achieve this, revolutionary populists must also build pragmatic legitimacy, necessarily demonstrating their capability to advance popular well-being. Overall, revolutionary populists require three qualities to demonstrate success: (1) power to subjugate the enemies of the revolution; (2) efficacy in helping resolve people's quotidian problems; and (3) practicality of chosen alternatives to address current political, economic and social problems (Morgül 2019: 276–7). Rawlings' revolutionary populism failed in the first respect, that is, power to subjugate the perceived 'enemies of the revolution'. In Rawlings' eyes, such people were the pro-Western democrats and capitalists who paradoxically were those who eventually persuaded him to return to a conventional multi-party democracy and a 'typical' African capitalist economy, consistently dependent on Western financial inputs to thrive. Regarding Rawlings' capacity to help resolve Ghanaians' quotidian problems, the critical recovery of Ghana's failed productive base was pivotal in leading to the country's sustained economic growth and widespread improvements in living standards. Finally, Rawlings showed himself to be quite pragmatic when choosing 'alternatives to address current political, economic and social problems'. His revolutionary populism was constant but his notion of revolution changed over time, moving away from radical and confrontational politics towards a more consensual approach to political development.

RAWLINGS' REVOLUTIONARY POPULISM

This section examines the PNDC regime's ideological divisions, shaping contours of revolutionary populism in Ghana. Rawlings claimed to want a 'new democratic revolution' to 'pass power to the people'. He believed that popularly elected governments, of which there had been several in Ghana from independence in 1957, were most notable for their elected leaders' corruption and democratic failures. According to Rawlings, these elected governments gave 'no real opportunity for participation. The ballot box was used to usurp the people's power, allowing them only a meaningless choice, making spectators out of us, after which people could only look on helplessly as the politicians lined their own pockets and thereby systematically destroyed the social and economic fabric of the nation' (Novicki 1984). In other words, elites hijacked Ghana's multi-party democracy and Rawlings wanted popular democracy instead.

Rawlings pointed to several countries, including Mozambique, Cuba and Libya, which he believed had desirable political systems. Mozambique had its no-party, grassroots political structure, headed by the 'dynamic groups' (*grupos dinamizadores*) created by *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (FRELIMO) following its 1975 takeover. In addition, Cuba's people's democracy was expressed in popular committees. According to Smith (2020), he regarded Cuba's popular committees as 'foundation stones for a new political structure, promising grassroots accountability, equality and international solidarity'. Like Mozambique, Cuba was an early supporter of Rawlings' revolution. He made several trips to Cuba and in 1984 Fidel Castro awarded him the Order of Playa Girón.⁶ Subsequently, 'thousands of young Ghanaians studied in Cuba at different levels of education' (*Modern Ghana* 2021).

Rawlings looked admiringly at Libya's system of 'people's democracy', referring to the country under Colonel Muammar Qadhafi's leadership as a 'revolutionary dream'. Libya was also an early supporter of Rawlings. The PNDC's first foreign policy act was to re-establish diplomatic ties, severed in November 1980 by the PNP government, after Qadhafi was accused of plotting subversive activities in Ghana (Freudenheim and Rhoden 1982).

In February 1982, Libya reopened its 'people's bureau' (that is, embassy), in Accra and 'donated tons of badly needed food and medicine' (Dash 1982). According to Robert Fritts, US Ambassador to Ghana, 1983–86: 'Rawlings saw Libya and Cuba as models. ... Rawlings was intrigued by radical revolutionary regimes in Africa and the world ...'. Fritts notes that Rawlings 'was feted by Castro and Qadhafi with whom he developed kindred relationships'. For the West, Ghana's newly friendly relations with Libya 'confirmed suspicions' that 'Qadhafi had played a direct role in the 31 December coup that overthrew President Hilla Limann'. In addition, Western governments 'were concerned over an expanding wedge of Russian, Chinese, Libyan and Cuban influences and that Ghana could become a platform to destabilize West Africa' (Fritts 2020).

Despite their claimed support for Ghana's revolution, little concrete assistance was forthcoming from European communist countries such as East Germany, even though a PNDC member, Chris Atim, visited in early 1982. Moreover, the price of Libya's support for Ghana's revolution was a permanent presence and significant involvement in the country, to which Rawlings was not prepared to agree (Haynes 1990). Neither Cuba or Libya was willing nor able to offer significant economic support to Rawlings. Western countries and Western-dominated international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, could – and did. The price the West extracted was Rawlings' agreement to put at arm's length his relations with foreign revolutionary regimes (Haynes 1988: Ch. 5). If Rawlings was serious about finding a way out of Ghana's economic quandary, adoption of a Western-financed economic recovery programme was the only plausible course of action (Jeffries 1996). However, the price was not only cooling relations with Libya and the eastern bloc but also significant loss of popular support from the revolution's early domestic enthusiasts. This was because the Western-supported economic recovery entailed major reductions in consumption for most Ghanaians and an extended period of economic austerity.

CHALLENGES TO RAWLINGS' REVOLUTIONARY POPULISM

Adoption of a Western-supported economic recovery also led to a reorientation of Rawlings' plan for a new democratic revolution. The PNDC regime announced its revolutionary goals soon after the 31 December 1981 takeover. PNDC Law 42, which suspended the 1979 constitution produced in 1978 by a Constituent Assembly under the direction of the Akuffo-led Supreme Military Council, gave the new regime expansive powers.⁷ Section 1 of the Law, 'Directive principles of state policy', included the 'basic framework for the exercise of all powers of Government' (Provisional National Defence Council 1983). It claimed that the revolution would transform Ghana so the 'people' had power, not civilian elites or senior military personnel. Political power would be built from the grassroots upwards, with local committees' decisions feeding into those of district and regional bodies, in turn responsible to a popularly elected national representative body. The community grassroots political entities were People's Defence Committees (PDCs) and workplace counterparts were Worker's Defence Committees (WDCs). Rawlings claimed the Defence Committees were Ghana's 'highest form of democracy'.⁸

The Defence Committees represented Rawlings' desire to get away from the old way of doing politics to something new and revolutionary: popular political organisations of *all* the people. Rawlings' view was however strongly challenged from within the PNDC by the mutually antagonistic June Four Movement (JFM) and the New Democratic Movement (NDM). Both believed that Ghana's revolution should be a class-based not populist transformation. The JFM – named after the day in 1979 when Rawlings initially seized power – comprised mainly youthful activists. Many were university students at the University of Ghana,

Legon, near the capital, Accra. In addition, the JFM also had some support within the lower ranks of the armed forces. The JFM was represented in the PNDC by Chris Atim and Sgt. Daniel Alolga-Akatapore. They believed the Defence Committees should be expressions of class-based power, vehicles of the working class, petty bourgeoisie and small farmers, and excluding chiefs and wealthy people. For the JFM, Defence Committees were 'substitutes for a real party organisation ... the material out of which a revolutionary party would be formed' (Ray 1985: 68). The JFM perceived political development differently to Rawlings: the JFM wanted to construct a 'new democracy' à la Chairman Mao's revolution in China (Ray 1985: 19). This would be a class-based revolution, involving liquidation of old production relations, and giving the working-class political power (Atim 1986 Int.; Alolga Akata-Pore 1987 and 1988 Int.). The JFM's approach contrasted with that of Rawlings who favoured not a class-based revolution, but a broad-based social and political transformation to eradicate social injustice. By the end of 1982, Atim and Akata-Pore were ousted from the PNDC, both choosing exile in the UK. Their precipitous exit was linked to two serious coup attempts in October and November. (For details see Haynes 1988, especially Chapter 4.)

The New Democratic Movement (NDM) was also close to Rawlings and the PNDC. Formed in April 1980, a few months after the JFM, the NDM's leaders and ideologues included Fui and Tsatsu Tsikata, Abraham Doodoo, E.T. Mensah, Kwesi Botchwey, Kwame Karikari, Akilakpa Sawyerr and Akoto Ampaw.⁹ Many were law lecturers at the University of Ghana, Legon and several served in the PNDC at various times, remaining politically and personally close to Rawlings (Tsikata 1985 Int.).

In a March 1982 position paper, the NDM set out how it saw the class forces polarised in Ghana and the character of the new political bodies, the PNDC and the Defence Committees. The NDM saw the first tasks as struggling 'for the consolidation of the progressive tendency within the PNDC', and to help build up levels of political 'education and organisation of the mass of the people' (Tsikata 1985 Int.; Hansen 1987: 187). The NDM recognised that the main organised force behind the PNDC was the military, and urged replacement of the old hierarchical command structures with a new democratic system (NDM Press Conference 1982: 6). In addition, the NDM considered that while the 31 December 'action' had dislodged the political rule of imperialism and its local allies, these same forces were in overall terms 'a hundred-fold more powerful than the popular forces' (NDM Press Conference 1982: 6). Consequently, the main short-term political focus was first 'anti-imperialism', and second popular revolutionary democracy, to be achieved via the hegemony of the Defence Committees under PNDC leadership. Finally, the NDM stressed, it was essential to have maximum unity of all progressive forces and movements (Hansen 1987 Int.).

The JFM and the NDM fought for ideological supremacy during the first months of 1982. Neither could offer a viable political programme or lead popular mobilisation in their preferred revolutionary direction. JFM and

NDM ideologue-activists who refused to compromise with Rawlings were ousted, both from the PNDC and from Rawlings' personal-political orbit. From mid-1982, Rawlings focused on building a broad, inclusive popular organisation to pursue what he saw as a more organic, authentic Ghanaian experience: towards enhanced community organisation, development, popular power and social justice.

DEFENCE COMMITTEES AND REVOLUTIONARY POPULISM

Rawlings' 31 December 1981 coup appeared to enjoy popular support and initially there was a broadly receptive social and political climate for the PNDC. Rawlings' populist discourse sought to build a broad revolutionary coalition to take the revolution forward. Institutionally, in addition to the Defence Committees, the PNDC created a National Defence Committee (NDC), a system of Public Tribunals (PTs) and a network of People's Shops (Konings 1984; Haynes 1988: Ch. 4). The NDC was the national body to guide and lead the DCs ideologically. The PTs were a novel system of popular justice, dealing with profiteering, corruption and abuse of power, plus various 'anti-state' activities. Collectively, the DCs, NDC and the PTs were the PNDC's attempt to change the political and judicial complexion of the country in a revolutionary direction. Along with People's Shops, DCs distributed goods from government supplies, including rice, soap, tinned milk and batteries. Overall, the PNDC's aim was 'subordination of the administrative apparatus to direct public scrutiny' in order 'to establish direct ties with eclectic constituencies through new, local-level, avowedly participatory structures' (Resnick 2019: 5).

By mid-1985, that is, three and a half years into the revolution, Rawlings admitted that revolutionary populism had not created a 'new democracy'. Rothchild (1985) suggests several reasons why. First, Rawlings' 'inspirational personality and the new government's populist commitment' had initially 'raised a depressed nation's hopes'. Rawlings had promised 'full public participation in decision making, a redistribution of wealth, a reduction of neocolonialist influence, and a crackdown on *kalabule* (hoarding, overpricing, smuggling, and other "corrupt" practices)'. Popular participation and enhanced 'equality were to be the foundation for economic opportunity and self-sufficiency, without any trade-off between these objectives'. These objectives were fatally challenged by unplanned, highly impactful, events in 1983 and 1984. First, Ghana unexpectedly received over a million illegal Ghanaian immigrants summarily expelled from Nigeria. Second, there was a very serious economic decline. These were severe challenges, which Rawlings could not fix by vague allusions to the desirability of a new revolutionary democracy. From 1983, a Western-supported economic recovery programme injected hundreds of millions of dollars into Ghana's economy. Nevertheless, two years later 'the best that can be said is that the marginal improvement in the economic picture has given [Rawlings] some breathing room' (Novicki 1984: 8; Novicki 2021 Int.). The poor economic situation encouraged new forms of labour

migration, economic enterprise, cultural production and social practice. As Hart (2016) notes, at this time new modes of autonomy and mobility developed, shaping practices and values and forming foundations of today's society in Ghana.

Often, PNDC activists struggled to convince local communities that Defence Committees were desirable, appropriate or purposeful (Mahama 1985 Int.; Marfo 1985 Int.; Anonymous Int. 1985). Over time, Rawlings moved towards this view. In November 1984 DCs were replaced by Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs). CDRs were PNDC-loyalist organisations lacking independence. Rawlings claimed CDRs were basic building blocks of a popular revolution to build a new democracy from community level upwards. It soon became clear, however, that in line with economic imperatives, CDRs were initiators and executors of community development projects, not vehicles of popular power (CDR 1986*a*). This highlights that by 1985 the principal goal of the revolution had become economic growth and community development not popular revolution. CDRs were to organise communal labour under the leadership of traditional authorities, including chiefs. In contrast, the DCs explicitly excluded chiefs and other members of the elite from membership. CDRs were channels for passing commands, information and initiatives downwards, while information would go the other way about potential or actual 'trouble-makers', particularly political dissidents and smugglers. It was essential, Rawlings made clear in an interview with the CDR newspaper in late 1986, that the CDRs win popular acceptability through action rather than rhetoric. It was up to them to show through concrete economic success that they were a 'crucial factor in the nation's long-term development' (CDR 1986*b*: 47–8). Notably absent from Rawlings' comments in the interview was any allusion to revolution or people's power.

Unlike DC leaders, in 1985–86 CDR executives were elected throughout the country. In contrast to DC activities, which many Ghanaians considered neither democratic nor representative and had accordingly boycotted, CDR elections seemed generally fair, well-conducted and well-supported (Author's personal observation, Tamale, August 1985; Al-Hassan 1985 Int.). CDR executives were elected by secret ballot, or, in communities containing a majority of illiterate people, by a show of hands, for a period of two years. Leaders were eligible for re-election to the same post once only. In a measure designed to create CDR leaders' accountability, they could be ousted for unspecified 'misconduct' if supported in a no confidence resolution supported by two-thirds of local CDR members.

Shortly before the abolition of DCs and introduction of CDRs, Rawlings was interviewed by Margaret A. Novicki for *Africa Report*.¹⁰ Novicki (1984) asked him what his plans were for the democratisation of Ghana's political system, what the role of the DCs was in this process, and whether they would form part of an eventual electoral system. Rawlings' responses were informative, clarifying what he saw as the revolution's successes and failures. Rawlings admitted that DCs had not developed into authentic vehicles of popular representation.

He claimed that he was not surprised by this outcome, because when ‘power and responsibility for carrying out certain basic functions in communities and workplaces is suddenly thrust into the hands of the people, there is bound to be some confusion’. Rawlings noted that some DC activists had ‘tried to use PDCs to further their own ends’. He claimed that such people were now ‘weeded out’ and the ‘responsible grass-roots initiative has grown stronger and has gained confidence’. He maintained that DCs were still ‘the basic foundation of democratization in Ghana’, elected by their members and building from the local level ‘to the district level and above ... We are working towards democracy from the bottom up, instead of from the top down’. Rawlings highlighted DCs’ community improvement activities – including ‘neighborhood sanitation, road building and maintenance, the building of clinics, primary schools, dams, and fishponds’ as well as planting ‘trees, cultivat[ing] community farms, organiz[ing] anti-smuggling patrols in border areas, and supervis[ing] the distribution of basic commodities through the Community [that is, Peoples] Shops’. He concluded by stating that ‘The process in which we are engaged is a slow one. We are learning as we go, sometimes making mistakes, but we believe that the end result will be a more genuine democracy than we have seen before’ (Novicki 1984: 4–8).

Despite Rawlings’ professed support for the DCs, CDRs replaced the Defence Committees soon after his interview with Novicki in *Africa Report*. The redesignation was announced in November 1984, a week before an important aid donors’ meeting where the World Bank would help present Ghana’s case for more money for its economic recovery. It seems likely that the DCs were redesignated as a necessary price for continued World Bank support. Certainly, the World Bank did not regard the Defence Committees as helpful components of economic recovery, judging them to be divisive and disruptive (World Bank 1983). The Bank’s view was that to improve the economic climate to make it more conducive for ‘private economic activity’ it was essential to reduce uncertainties, including ‘perceived or real threats of coercion and interference’ in order to elicit ‘a quick response from the private sector’. To do this, ‘the general political and social milieu (must be) favorable’. The Bank allowed that DCs could play ‘useful roles in increasing production and productivity’ yet ‘their *exuberance and misplaced enthusiasm* may have the potential of causing unintended harm in the economy and interfering with the efforts the Government is making towards economic recovery’ (emphasis added; World Bank 1983: 51).

DC ‘exuberance and misplaced enthusiasm’ was manifested in various ways, in both urban and rural settings, as was their ‘increasing production and productivity’. Many DCs encountered problems due to a lack of clarity in their functions and conflicts with existing power holders. In addition, they lacked clear operational guidelines and objectives. Rawlings’ apparent assumption that by fiat effective political power had been transferred to ordinary people via the DCs was misplaced. For Agyeman-Duah (1987: 120) the ‘PDCs/WDCs initiated a reign of terror reminiscent of the Red Guards in China during Mao’s cultural

revolution'. Agyeman-Duah's characterisation of the DCs, however, overstates their destructive proclivity. While there were undoubtedly DC excesses, including molestation, harassment and intimidation of some citizens (*Daily Graphic* 1982), there were also examples of DCs undertaking constructive activities, including urban beautification schemes and city farms. Activities of the Opera Square DC in central Accra illustrate some of the conflicting pressures which drove urban DCs.

In the early 1980s, the Opera Square area of Accra contained both shabby, cheap housing and large retail outlets selling expensive, imported consumer goods. During 1982, the local DC attempted to improve the living standards of the local people, as well as dealing with individuals it accused of exploitation. The Opera Square DC established a ten-acre farm at Adenkrebibi on the outskirts of Accra from where it harvested maize, cassava, cocoa-yam, yam, okra, onions and peppers. Crops were sold locally, and the money realised was used to buy building materials, such as cement, for local rehabilitation projects, including refurbishment of public toilets in nearby Cow Lane and Okaishie (Hassan 1985 Int.).

Claiming to be an approved expression of popular local government, the Opera Square DC established what may have been Ghana's first 'people's court' in February 1982 (Amnesty International 1984: 4). During its first six months, the people's court tried various cases including one involving alleged mistreatment of a local person by a police officer. Despite some DC members' fear at what would happen if the police officer was found guilty, he was convicted and ordered to pay his victim restitution (*Nsamankow* 1982). The Opera Square DC was able to operate the people's court during 1982 without intervention from the PNDC, demonstrating not only the ability to take the law into its own hands but also a lack of clear guidance from the National Defence Committee. In addition, the Opera Square DC invaded several local supermarkets during 1982, including Piccadilly and Glamour Stores. DC members physically mistreated the shops' managers, accusing them of 'selling goods above the controlled price'. Finally, Opera Square DC members patrolled their local area, acting as vigilantes, punishing by beatings and fines traders alleged to be selling goods above controlled prices. If offenders persisted, the DC would attempt to remove them physically from the area. Unsurprisingly, such actions did not endear the DC to all locals, many of whom were traders (Sackey 1985 Int.).

A second example of an active urban DC comes from Nima, another poor area of Accra. The June Four Movement managed to organise branches in Accra, Koforidua and a few other urban centres prior to the December 31 coup. In Accra, the JFM claimed to have established 10 'local organising committees' in working-class areas including Nima, Dansoman, Nungua and Madina (United Front 1983: 6). Following the PNDC's takeover, these committees reconstituted themselves as Defence Committees.

The Nima DC helped to transform the slum area into one where a reasonable standard of living, by Ghanaian standards at least, was possible. DC members

unblocked stinking road drains, removed and burnt piles of rubbish – which reached up to 10 metres in height, and refurbished the dilapidated public toilets in the area (Ray 1985: 72). In addition, the DC led local people in planting food crops by roadsides and on patches of waste ground. Maize, peppers and other crops were harvested and sold, with the proceeds going to fill the coffers of the DC. There was local disquiet regarding what happened to the money which the DC accumulated by its various activities. A local resident complained in July 1982 in a letter to the independent *Standard* newspaper that the local DC activists were a clique, which dealt violently with those accused of anti-social behaviour. A particular criticism expressed by this correspondent was that while he appreciated the DC's 'efforts to clear up the (public) toilets, he was not happy at paying a charge of 20 *pesewas* [less than one penny] for the privilege of using it'. He claimed that 'if you refuse to pay or dare say anything against their wishes, they harm you with their tools ... What happens to the money?'

Like urban DCs, the quality and effectiveness of rural counterparts varied. Initially chiefs were often targets of DCs. J.K. Dougotey, chairman of Somanya PDC in the Eastern Region, warned that if chiefs failed to cooperate with the DCs they would find themselves "overtaken by events" (*Ghanaian Times* 1984). Dougotey's warning followed the failure of chiefs from the Yilo-Krobo Traditional Council Area (Eastern Region) to attend a meeting arranged by local DCs to discuss their involvement in the revolution. Some local chiefs employed local soldiers to maltreat DC members, and on one occasion nine DC activists in the Volta region were allegedly murdered by military personnel following the orders of local chiefs.¹¹

Rural DCs were often led and organised by literate young(ish) people, including teachers, that is, 'educated people who would take it upon themselves to be a PDC leader, so elected leaders became kings' (Ray 1985: 71; Yahaya 1985 Int.). This was meant in the sense that sometimes they tried to wield authoritarian powers. Some rural DCs invited illiterates such as farmers to join but the response was patchy (Nugent 1995). While farmers could 'organise around their concrete interests ... often the educated people presented (them) with a *fait accompli*, as a result farmers didn't bother to attend meetings' (Graham 1983: 2–3; Yenmaligu 1988 Int.). In addition, some farmers considered that the DCs were exclusively for the youth 'because they were vigorous' (Payne 1985 Int.; Ray 1985: 71; Adu 1988 Int.). Others felt that there was no point in getting involved with the DC because nothing would come of their efforts. As one elderly trader put it: 'The government is my parent, it makes no difference to us what kind of government it is, I can't change it' (Osai 1985 Int.).

As already noted, chiefs were excluded from DC membership,¹² although it is doubtful whether many would have wanted to join organisations often led by young people who explicitly challenged the traditional power structure. Ray reports the case of a rural DC in Daboya (Northern Region) which lacked clear goals or a programme of action while failing to challenge the local chief as community leader (Ray 1985: 81). The Daboya DC was not however typical

of rural DCs: often they were leaders in community development projects, just as some were in urban areas, including Accra. Development projects including digging of wells and pit latrines, repairing of roads and bridges, and refurbishment and building of school rooms and health centres. Local people contributed unpaid labour and, in some cases, cash sums for such purposes. Often, rural DC effectiveness depended on the ability to work both with local chiefs, as well as with PNDC-appointed district and regional officials (Nugent 1995). District or regional officials would supply some of the necessary materials such as sand or bricks for development projects.

Both urban and rural DCs were able to attract local people when there was an important issue to mobilise around, but there was not a clear-cut pattern across the country. For example, in Bawdie, a border village in the Western Region, the DC was strong for two reasons. First, the village was located near an old gold mine, still with traces of gold in the bed of a nearby river. Outside people came to prospect and to protect their asset local people organised themselves in the DC. Second, Bawdie was typically short of amenities. The DC, already organised to protect the community's gold, also built a communal toilet, cultivated a farm of 60 acres and made a football pitch. 'It was a close-knit village, so people were enthusiastic. Yet they wouldn't discuss national politics with you' (Adu 1988 Int.). At Techiman in Brong Ahafo the local people organised themselves into a DC which once a fortnight collected farmers' produce to sell. Farmers received a reasonable return for their goods and could see it was in their mutual benefit to act collectively (U. Graham 1985 Int.). At Anfoega, Volta Region, the local DC, with the chief's support, contacted the regional Defence Committee administration to help resolve a land ownership issue. In the early 1960s some village land had been confiscated when the Volta Lake was being enlarged in order to feed the dam at Akosombo. The villages claimed that they had not received compensation from the government and wanted some land in return. 'They felt that this is what the PDC should be discussing.' It does not appear, however, that compensation was forthcoming due to the government's failure to agree on the legitimacy of the villagers' case (Yenmaligu 1988 Int.).

A balanced assessment of rural PDCs should take into account the attitude of small-scale farmers to the 31 December coup. Experiences in Ghana indicate that most rural people do not swiftly respond to a change in government. Rural dwellers' response to Rawlings' coup appears generally to have been 'slow, suspicious and generally cynical', according to former JFM leader and PNDC member, Zaya Yeebo (1985: 69; Yeebo 1987 Int.). Many regarded Rawlings' revolution as merely the latest attempt by soldiers to wield power. For others, Rawlings' return was seen as a hopeful sign. Overall, however, it is probably true to say that the call to form DCs was greeted with less enthusiasm in rural compared with at least some urban areas. When rural DCs were formed, mobilising local people around a specific issue, they appear to have been well supported. On the other hand, DCs that attempted to challenge the powers of traditional rulers directly, discovered that the latter could not be displaced

easily (Ahorse 1985 Int.). In addition, rural DCs that attempted to reduce smuggling found themselves in conflict with both border guards and police, as well as with those farmers and traders who relied on smuggling to augment their incomes. Such DCs often found themselves very unpopular locally (Nugent 1995).

Finally, there was an organisational failure to link rural and urban DCs into a common structure, and no attempt to build a worker–small farmer front of the kind that the JFM in particular claimed was necessary to secure the revolution's objectives. The DCs national organisation, the National Defence Committee, failed to mobilise rural people, although there were local issues and grievances around which they could have coalesced, for example, where land had been illegally confiscated by either multinational corporations or large-scale local farmers. Yeebo (1985: 66) reports that 'dispossessed peasants (who had lost land in Oyarifa and Tono) had hoped that the regime would intervene on their behalf and joined PDCs for this purpose'. By the end of 1984, when the DCs were replaced by CDRs, in only a few areas, including the Northern and Upper regions, were rural DCs flourishing.

CONCLUSION

The 1980s and 1990s were a period of rapid urbanisation in Ghana, in common with many other African countries. Rawlings came to power seeking fundamental political and economic reforms. Paller (2019) emphasises in Ghana the importance of informal institutions and the politics of belonging in the context of daily life, contrasting them with formal and electoral paradigms that Ghanaian leaders, including Rawlings, sought to impose from above. Without focusing explicitly on Rawlings, Paller (2019) examines controversies about public goods provision, civic participation, ethnic politics and democratisation, contextualised by the issue of urban sustainability as Ghana rapidly changed. Rawlings, seeking to develop new understandings of democracy and provide novel explanations for good governance and development, employed a narrative of a failing and corrupt Ghana, which required a new way forward characterised by new democratic and developmental arrangements.

Rabinowitz (2018: 196) itemises Rawlings' successes in this regard:

J.J. Rawlings successfully presided over a stable polity for two decades. He took over a state that had all but collapsed and left one in its stead with real institutions and political stability. What is more, he left power [willingly] ... setting the stage for Ghana's future democratic success. Overall, Rawlings' success has to be understood as due to his leadership and more specifically to his willingness to carry through the crucial resuscitation of his country's failed productive base by sacrificing his political capital in the urban areas.

To what extent were Rawlings' successes linked to his revolutionary populism? For revolutionary populists to achieve their goals requires fulfilment of two key symbolic tasks: (1) focus differing social grievances in relation to the

same basic dichotomy: division between ‘the people’ and their ‘enemies’; and (2) as popular representatives, establish, build and maintain moral and pragmatic legitimacy (Resnick 2017, 2019; Morgül 2019). To build moral legitimacy, it is necessary that revolutionary populists convince ‘the people’ that they (1) are honourable and upright; (2) unselfishly seek to defend and advance ‘the people’s’ interests; and (3) defend them against internal and external attack. Moral legitimacy alone is not however sufficient; it is also necessary to build a viable revolutionary movement via pragmatic legitimacy, demonstrating the capability to deliver promises to advance popular well-being.

Overall, revolutionary populists require three qualities to demonstrate success: (1) power to subjugate the enemies of the revolution; (2) efficacy in helping resolve people’s quotidian problems; and (3) practicality of chosen alternatives to address current political, economic and social problems (Morgül 2019: 276–7). Rawlings’ revolutionary populism failed in the first respect, that is, power to subjugate the perceived ‘enemies of the revolution’. In Rawlings’ eyes, such people were pro-Western democrats and capitalists, the very people who were instrumental in bringing about the return of a conventional multi-party democracy and a ‘typical’ African capitalist economy, dependent on Western financial inputs. Regarding Rawlings’ capacity to help resolve Ghanaians’ quotidian problems, as Rabinowitz notes above, ‘the crucial resuscitation’ of Ghana’s ‘failed productive base’ was pivotal in leading to the country’s sustained economic growth and improvements in living standards. Finally, Rawlings showed himself to be quite pragmatic when choosing ‘alternatives to address current political, economic and social problems’. His revolutionary populism remained in place but his notion of revolution changed over time, moving away from radical and confrontational politics towards a more consensual approach to political development.

Two main reasons explain the failure to develop Rawlings’ – albeit fuzzy – aim of a ‘new democracy’ via revolutionary populism. First, his understanding of Ghana’s new democracy appears to have changed over time (Prempeh 2021 Int.). Initially he adhered to the notion of ‘radical democracy’, to use Parry’s (1969: 141–58) term, to be delivered via revolutionary populism. Rawlings seemed to believe that an allusion to a vague radical democracy would marshal sufficient support for the revolution and diminish many Ghanaians’ cynicism and demoralisation caused by long-term political and economic disappointments. Rawlings considered that ‘the greatest problem with governing countries in the Third World is the apathy and ignorance of a greater part of the people – they must be taught to participate in the life of the state’ (Rawlings quoted in Rubin 1987: 310). The key, Rawlings claimed, was to build popular confidence by establishing appropriate political and economic structures and to lead by example (Rubin 1987: 310). One of the reasons for such popular ‘apathy’, however, may well have been because Rawlings did not have the capacity to develop authentic mechanisms by which citizens could feel they were making meaningful contributions to Ghana’s development.

Turning to the populist power to subjugate ‘enemies of the revolution’, Rawlings proclaimed the Defence Committees were the basis of ‘genuine democracy’. Yet, they were not welcomed, accepted or supported by many Ghanaians. Instead, they were widely seen as vehicles for have-nots’ attempts to improve their personal societal and economic position and to settle scores with enemies. It didn’t help that some activists stole from their own communities. Overall, the Defence Committees did not amount to a practical alternative to address political, economic or social problems. Much of the blame must be attributed to Rawlings and the PNDC, whose ad hoc and ideologically incoherent claims were met by many Ghanaians with bafflement. Many were unsure what the Defence Committees were, what they were supposed to achieve, and from where their legitimacy and authority came.

The PNDC came to power via a military *coup d’état*, proclaimed a ‘new democratic revolution’, yet failed to provide appropriate guidance, support and ideological clarity so the Defence Committees could plausibly develop into viable expressions of popular power. Confusion and lack of a clear plan or programme reflected a lack of PNDC consensus regarding what the goals of the revolution were and how they would be achieved, that is, who were ‘the people’ and who were their ‘enemies’. Failure to clarify this – and in particular the initial refusal of Defence Committee membership for chiefs and the wealthy, followed later by a welcoming of the former and an acceptance of the latter – indicated that the dichotomous categories – ‘people’ and ‘enemies’ – remained fluid and politically problematic.

Initially, Rawlings and the PNDC envisaged that Defense Committees would be the main vehicles of political development, economic recovery and growth, the focal point of citizens’ efforts to pull themselves up by their bootstraps via self-help methods (see Haynes 1988: Ch. 5). Whether such an approach would ever have been plausible is debatable, but in the dire economic circumstances of the early 1980s, they were demonstrably implausible. To Rawlings’ credit, he did not let ideology stand in the way of the only available practical solution: the turn in 1983 to financiers of Ghana’s economic recovery, Western governments, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These Western entities regarded the DCs and other revolutionary institutions, such as the People’s Tribunals, as troublemakers and inherently destabilising elements, anathema to Ghana’s economic recovery and political stability. The turn to the West was unpopular among many of the PNDC’s early urban supporters, including many unionised workers (Yankey 1985 Int.; Haynes 1991*a*). Yet, following the failure of European socialist countries and other ‘radical’ countries, including Libya and Cuba, to support the revolution economically, Rawlings had no plausible option other than to turn to the West. For Rawlings, the crucial necessity of stemming Ghana’s economic decline outweighed the ideological imperative of developing revolutionary political institutions.

Finally, for reasons of space the paper does not examine in detail the return to multiparty democracy in 1993. Multiparty democracy is one of Rawlings’ key

legacies, with major, long-term, impact on Ghana's political culture, as the country emphatically turned away from non-democratic political options, including military coups. Despite – or perhaps because of – the strengthening of opposition to PNDC rule, Rawlings did not slacken his grip on the reins of power – until persuaded by both local and external pressure, underpinned by the emphatic results of a referendum in the early 1990s on Ghana's political way forward: the emphatic popular choice was multi-party democracy (De Graft Johnson 1986 Int.; Ahwoi 1990 Int; Prempeh 2021 Int.). The political opposition had long charged the PNDC government with being concerned only with staying in power (Frimpong-Manso 1986 Int.). This charge seems plausible, while allowing that Rawlings did not seem to know how to 'pass power to the people', once his flagship political institutions, the Defence Committee, did not become vehicles of popular democracy.

The referendum indicated that the overwhelming popular desire was for a return to multi-party democracy, with relatively few Ghanaians appearing keen on Rawlings' alternative: a 'controlled' democracy (Rothchild and Gyimah-Boadi 1989; Haynes 1991*b*, 1999, 2003; Nugent 1995; Jeffries 1996; Rabinowitz 2018). On the other hand, the Defence Committees/Committees for the Defence of the Revolution were a bridge between revolutionary populism and multi-party democracy: the institutional bases of Rawlings' political party from 1992, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) to which in response, the anti-PNDC opposition coalesced to form a rival party, the New Patriotic Party, which gained power in January 2001 under John Kufuor.

In conclusion, Ghana experienced a long period of revolutionary populism under Rawlings' leadership. The failure to develop workable expressions of popular power led the PNDC to retain expansive authoritarian powers for far longer than most Ghanaians thought was necessary or appropriate. Over time, fewer and fewer Ghanaians appeared to believe that Rawlings was sincere when he continued to insist on popular democracy, decentralised political power, and that the fruits of economic growth would be equitably spread (Haynes 1991*b*). Yet, the failure to develop popular democracy via revolutionary populism laid the foundations for Ghana's period of successful multi-party democracy which continues after three decades, with the country one of very few in Africa with clear and emphatic democratic credentials.

NOTES

1. Freedom House data on Ghana is at <<https://freedomhouse.org/>>.
2. In 2020, FH designated seven (of 54) African countries as 'free': Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Mauritius, Namibia, Sao Tome and Principe, and South Africa. This was the lowest number of 'free' countries in the region since 1991. <<https://freedomhouse.org/article/democratic-trends-africa-four-charts>>.
3. Interviews in 2021 were conducted via Zoom with Margaret Novicki, former editor at *Africa Report*, who interviewed Rawlings several times in the 1980s and 1990s, H. Kwesi Prempeh, Executive Director of the Ghana Center for Democratic Development, Accra, and George Bob-Milliar, political scientist, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi. The author sought respondents' views on Rawlings and his political legacy. No current 'Ghana news' websites were consulted for the paper for, as one of the reviewers of this paper commented: 'the internet has become an information junkyard, and

all manner [of] information is offloaded online'. The questions asked in 2020–21 were as follows: (1) Do you think that Rawlings managed to achieve a revolution in Ghana? (2) In a brief biography of Rawlings, published after his death, there is the following, which relates to the 1979 period: 'He read widely and discussed social and political ideas with a growing circle of like-minded friends and colleagues.' <<https://www.ghanaweb.com/person/Jerry-John-Rawlings-166>>. Do you know who his main political influences were? (3) Do you think Rawlings was at heart a democrat? (4) Why do you think that Rawlings so divides Ghanaians? (5) How do you see his political legacy?

4. Regarding the 1980s/1990 interviews, while it is possible that their information is of less use compared, say, with more recent material, many were with key members of the early PNDC regime, including Kwasi Adu, Kwamena Ahwoi, Chris Atim, Daniel Aloga Akata-Pore, Yao Graham, Emmanuel Hansen, Valerie Sackey, Fui Tsikata, Huudu Yahaya, Zaya Yeebo, Yen Yenmaligu (for full list, see 'Interviews' list). Many contemporary accounts of the early years of Rawlings' revolution do not feature such interviews, and more generally key individuals in the PNDC regime were later often unwilling to discuss that period in Ghana's political history. Inclusion of such interviews is crucial to an understanding of Rawlings' revolution, enabling the reader to 'hear' the thoughts of key players in the first decade of Rawlings' revolution. The main criteria to identify such respondents was their significance in the PNDC regime and closeness to Rawlings. During the 1980s in Ghana, it was difficult to obtain the views of opposition figures. The author interviewed opposition politicians and other anti-PNDC respondents in London in the 1980s. They included: anti-PNDC Ghana Democratic Movement leaders, J.H. Mensah, Dr J. De Graft Johnson and R. Frimpong-Manso, plus: Richard Baiden, former Acting Secretary-General of the Ghana TUC, Kofi Mpeanim, Ghanaian businessman, and Kabral Blay-Amihere, the last editor of the *Ghanaian Free Press* until its demise in April 1986. Finally, the questions asked depended on who was being interviewed, whether PNDC associates or opponents. The technique was to start with general questions about the state of Ghana, the PNDC, Rawlings' leadership, and prospects for the revolution and the political future and, depending on answers, further related questions were then posed to acquire further relevant information.

5. An online news magazine, *The Conversation*, published numerous responses to Rawlings' death, mainly from Ghanaians. Responses were polarised: some praised Rawlings for his national leadership, others regarded him as a brutal leader who comprehensively failed Ghana. <<https://theconversation.com/saint-or-sinner-rawlings-was-pivotal-to-ghanas-political-and-economic-fortunes-150025>>.

6. The Order of Playa Girón is a national order conferred by the Council of State of Cuba on Cubans or foreigners for their leadership in the struggle against imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, or who have contributed to peace and the progress of humankind <<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=%E2%80%98Playa+Gir%C3%B3n%E2%80%99+Order>>.

7. The AFRC under Rawlings supervised the implementation of the 1979 constitution when he transferred power to President Limann on 24 September 1979.

8. Peoples Defence Committees (PDCs) and Workers Defence Committees (WDCs) are referred to generically as Defence Committees in this article.

9. Fui and Tsatsu Tsikata, Kwesi Botchwey, Kwame Karikari and Akilakpa Sawyer were university lecturers at the University of Ghana, Legon. Abraham Doodoo was a senior civil servant. Akoto Ampaw was a journalist and leader of the All-Africa Students Union between 1979–83.

10. *Africa Report* – 'America's Leading Magazine on Africa' – was published periodically between 1970 and 1995, published by the US-based African-American Institute, founded in 1953. *Africa Report* archive at <<https://www.aionline.org/africa-report/>>.

11. See, for example, 'Four PDC men beaten up on Chief's orders', *Ghanaian Times*, 5 January 1983, p. 1; Ray, 'Ghana', p. 71. For details of the alleged murders in the Volta Region, in which several PDC activists were killed, see, 'Minutes of the 9th meeting of the NDC', p. 3. (Bru-Mindah 1985 Int.; Chireh 1985 Int.; Y. Graham 1985 Int.)

12. Zaya Yeebo (1985: 66) argues that some chiefs used PDCs to settle long-running family feuds or land disputes in their favour, and to eject tenants and collect rent. In Akropong, Eastern Region, a chief formed a PDC 'comprising the members of the council of elders for settling a chieftaincy dispute'.

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