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# Explaining region creation conflicts in Ghana\*

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## ABSTRACT

For the first time in its history, Ghana held a referendum in 2018 to divide some of its regions to create new ones. Though the regions are purely administrative, the division faced resistance in some areas and not in others. This study combines qualitative comparative analysis with process tracing to show that the resistance occurred within regions with relatively high support for the opposition party, but only in the combined presence of (traditional) elites competing from either side of the region and controversies regarding claims to (traditional) political authority. Further, it finds a bottom-up mechanism of the resistance, evolving as the threatened interests of stakeholders grew from the community to the regional, national and diaspora levels. As in other African cases, this suggests that the sources of conflicts in Africa are not so much about ethnic differences but more about elites' unequal access to political and economic resources.

**Keywords**—Regions, conflict, chiefs, Ghana, qualitative comparative analysis, process tracing, Africa, territorial politics.

## INTRODUCTION

On 27 December 2018, a landmark referendum in Ghana mandated the creation of six new subnational regions by separating four of the existing ones. The *Western North* region was carved out of the *Western* region, the *Ahafo* and *Bono-East* regions from the *Brong-Ahafo* region, *Oti* Region from the *Volta* Region, the *Savannah* and *North-East* regions from the *Northern* Region. With

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this regional reorganisation, Ghana's regional administrations have increased from 10 to 16 (Kaledzi 2018). Per Ghana's unitary status, these regional administrations are direct extensions of the central government, and hence, they do not exercise any devolved powers over policy, legislation or finance. Nevertheless, the 20-month referendum process, which began in June 2017 and concluded in December 2018, was a delicate issue with serious outcomes that threatened the social cohesion in the largely peaceful West African state. The paradox, however, is that the tensions were only observed in some regions but not in others.

As part of the referendum process, stakeholders were minded to campaign for and against the region creation. This process unfolded in mainly two patterns of either conflict or cooperation. For some areas, the campaigns progressed without incident (Kombat 2018). In others, the pro- and anti-region creation campaigns were so fierce that the police and military intervened to deter violent outbreaks (Ayamga 2018), warning journalists about possible attacks on the referendum day (Graphic Online 27.12.2018). Considering that these regional administrations had no devolved powers and that the same constitutional procedure was applied in all the cases, it is intriguing that such contrasting outcomes ensued.

At the height of the controversy was a failed suit brought before Ghana's supreme court challenging the constitutionality of the referendum arrangements as recommended by the commission supervising the process (Welsing 2018). For suit proponents, a referendum to alter the boundaries of a region needed the approval of all inhabitants from both sides of the region and not just the inhabitants in the areas that wanted out (Abubakar 2018). For suit opponents, the recommendation was consistent with other referendums in Ghanaian history and globally, where only areas to be separated were invited to a referendum (Ghana Commission of Inquiry into the Creation of New Regions 2018). Such constitutional matters may suggest to casual observers that the region creation conflicts in Ghana were fundamentally a legal dispute. However, this study considers such a perspective insufficient to explain the contrasting outcomes because social conflicts have structural and direct causes (Galtung & Høivik 1971). Besides, such acts of social resistance have both hidden and open motivations (Kaufman 2011; Mac Ginty 2013), it was likely that other more subtle factors explain the difference.

Therefore, this article aims to explain the observed conflict outcomes using a combination of qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) and process tracing (PT). The QCA approach was used to explore a justified set of conditions implicated in other forms of territorial splits (see Young 1994; Crawford & Hartmann 2008; Diprose 2009; Sambanis & Milanovic 2011; Mavungu 2016) to identify conditions that differentiate the contentious and non-contentious cases in this Ghanaian process. It identified three necessary conditions for the resistance including: (1) the region being a stronghold for the opposition party, (2) influential chiefs competing on either side of the target region, and (3) controversies about historical claims to political authority. The PT then

focused on evidence from a typical case of the Volta Region to trace how these conditions played out to create the observed tensions. It finds that the high political opposition in the stump region created a fertile context for resistance over what was perceived as a government-sanctioned separation to gain political advantage. This resistance developed in four phases from the community to regional, diaspora and national levels. The resistance was initiated by chiefs in some communities because the separation threatened the ethnopolitical capital within the community. In solidarity, other chiefs and actors in the region faulted the separation procedure proposed by the Commission of Inquiry and tried to stop it through court suits. When these suits failed, some of these chiefs and their diaspora affiliates adopted ethnopolitical frames of grievance to mobilise the resistance further. Finally, national political opposition and secessionist actors rode on the resistance to advance political and secessionist goals.

The findings presented in this article contribute significant and original insight into territorial politics and governance in Ghana and Africa. Concerning Ghana, much of the literature concerned with decentralisation-related conflicts is about creating districts (Lentz 2006; Ayee 2013; Resnick 2017). Studies on region creation conflicts are few and outdated (Ayee 1994b; Bening 1972, 1999) because region creation is rare.<sup>1</sup> Yet region creation politics is significant because, as noted elsewhere, the constitutional process of region creation is the ‘most enduring’ feature of Ghana’s federal foundations (Penu 2022: 34). As the analysis would show, the process stresses most of the critical fault lines of Ghanaian society concerning ethnic politics (Brown 1982; Lentz 2006), secessionist politics (Brown 1980; Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization 2018), or polarised two-party politics (Morrison & Hong 2006; Briggs 2012). Considering that the latest process is the most elaborate in Ghanaian history (constitutionally and spatially), it offered a significant opportunity to interrogate which fault lines are the most vulnerable in Ghanaian society and provide suggestions for mitigating them.

For Africa, this Ghanaian case study presents an example of the political implications of decentralisation schemes on the continent (see Boone 2003; Crawford & Hartmann 2008; Cheeseman *et al.* 2016). So far, much of this literature is heavily focused on cases experiencing or recovering from intense conflicts rather than in more stable contexts. Moreover, this case presents a rare decentralisation scheme in which the creation of administrative sub-units is procured through a referendum, as if in a devolved system. So far, the South African constitutional set-up (see Ramutsindela & Simon 1999: 490–6) is the only comparable case on the continent where changes to internal boundaries have also seen similar conflict outcomes (Mavungu 2016). Considering that both constitutional set-ups are a consequence of the forced union of pre-colonial autonomous polities to form modern states, the findings ultimately contribute to understanding the contemporary ramifications of colonialism’s legacy in Africa.

The article is organised as follows. The next section presents a background to the case(s), the analytical design, and an overview of the data sources informing

the analysis. This is followed by a literature review to justify the explanatory model and its relevance within the Ghanaian context. After discussing the findings, the article presents empirical and theoretical conclusions. There is also a brief note on policy lessons.

#### CASE BACKGROUND: REGIONS AND REGION CREATION IN GHANA

Gaining its independence from Britain in 1957, Ghana briefly experimented with federalism before a 'defederalisation' process ushered the country into a unitary and centralised presidential system (Penu 2022: 27). The West African country has about 30.8 million people and comprises over 60 ethnicities, none of which enjoys a majority share of the population. It runs a presidential system of government and operates on a mainly three-tiered government structure: central, regional and district.<sup>2</sup> Though the regional administration sits at the apex of the local governance machinery, it does not have any legislative or financial powers. Its function is limited to development coordination and supervising the district governments on behalf of the central government<sup>3</sup> (Ayee 1994a: 85). Moreover, the president appoints the top leaders of these regional administrations.

Ghana had five regions at independence in 1957. Subsequently, 11 others have been created to reach 16 (one in 1959, two in 1960, one in 1982, one in 1983 and recently six in 2018) (Ghana Commission of Inquiry into the Creation of New Regions 2018: xix). Apart from the recent six, none of the others came into being through a referendum even though almost all of Ghana's constitutions had entrenched clauses requiring a referendum. The only one that came close was in 1959, during the separation of the *Ashanti* region to form the *Brong-Ahafo* region. However, a constitutional amendment abolished the referendum rule before the new region was effectively created (Bening 1999: 128). Consequently, two other regions were created in 1960 without a referendum. The referendum requirement was re-introduced after a *coup d'état* in 1966. However, a subsequent series of *coups d'état* meant that the military regimes of 1982 and 1983 could create new regions without going through a referendum (Bening 1999: 145). In between these *coups d'état*, there have been five constitutions that all contained the referendum requirement. One of them is the current 1992 constitution under which the recent regions were created.

Under the current constitution (The Republic of Ghana 1992: Chapter 5), the new regions were created as follows. First, citizens who felt that their areas needed a regional government submitted petitions to the president. After consulting an advisory council of state on the proposal, the president set up an independent commission of enquiry to investigate the merit of the petition. The commission's investigation involved reviewing the petitions and organising hearings across the country to determine which ones had merit. The objective was mainly to determine if there was a need and substantial popular demand for the petition. For the cases deemed meritorious, the commission recommended

the areas to be included in the new region and the areas where the referendum was to be held. With that recommendation, the national electoral commission concurrently organised a referendum for citizens eligible to vote in the designated areas. The question posed at the referendum was: ‘Are you in favour of the creation of the new region? YES or NO?’ (Ghana Commission of Inquiry into the Creation of New Regions 2018: xxvi). The referendum was decided by at least 50% turn-out and at least 80% voting in favour of the proposal. When this threshold was met in all six cases, the president, as enjoined by the constitution, issued constitutional instruments to formalise the creation of the new regions.

Such a framework makes the referendum (if sanctioned by the commission) the most decisive part of the region creation process, thereby justifying the massive popular participation and interest. Therefore, this study is interested in explaining the conflicts emanating from the region creation process from the time of petitioning until the referendum was held (i.e. from June 2017 till December 2018).

#### METHODOLOGY

##### *Cases*

Figure 1 captures the cases under consideration and outlines their spatial distribution within Ghana’s territory. The case definition in this study is more about the context of the separation process than the region as a geographically bounded unit. In some of the cases (highlighted blue), actors in the stump region did not actively mobilise a sustained resistance to the region creation proposal. However, there were sustained protests and petitions in other areas (highlighted red), some even backed by a series of legal suits against the proposal.

The sample consists of the six most recent cases plus one case that occurred around the time of independence (1959) concerning the separation of the *Ashanti* region to form the *Brong-Ahafo* region. This historical case was included for analytical reasons. It is analytically comparable because it is the only other process in Ghanaian history that was initiated and sustained during a constitutional dispensation where a referendum was necessary for region creation (until the rule was changed). With just a few of such region creation cases in Ghana, its addition increases the sample size of the study. It also improves the strength of the QCA for finding an explanatory proposition. The addition of this historical case improves the empirical base for the analysis, but its omission does not significantly distort the conclusions drawn from that analysis. Hence there was a strong justification for including it. To summarise, the list of cases is as follows:

1. Case 1: 1959\_ASH\_BA (the separation of the *Ashanti* region in 1959 to create the *Brong-Ahafo* Region).
2. Case 2: 2018\_BA\_AH (the separation of the *Brong-Ahafo* Region in 2018 to create the *Ahafo* Region).

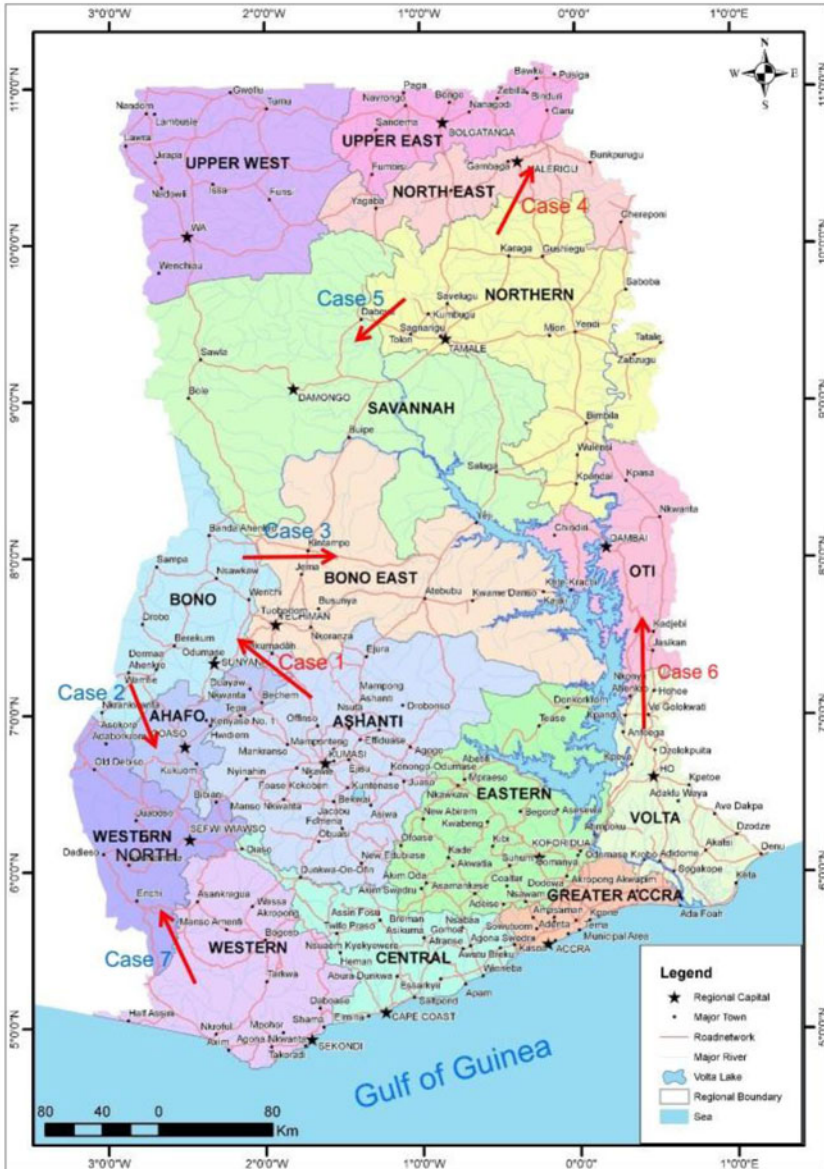


Figure 1. Map of Ghana showing the spatial distribution of conflict cases (in red) and non-conflict cases (in blue). (Source: Centre for Remote Sensing and Geographic Information Services 2020; annotations by author.)



3. Case 3: 2018\_BA\_BE (the separation of the *Brong-Ahafo* Region in 2018 to create the *Bono-East* Region).
4. Case 4: 2018\_NR\_NE (the separation of the *Northern* Region in 2018 to create the *North-East* Region).
5. Case 5: 2018\_NR\_SAV (the separation of the *Northern* Region in 2018 to create the *Savannah* Region).
6. Case 6: 2018\_VR\_OT (the separation of the *Volta* Region in 2018 to create the *Oti* Region).
7. Case 7: 2018\_WR\_WN (the separation of the *Western* Region in 2019 to create the *Western North* Region).

### *Analytical design*

Two analytical techniques are applied in sequence. First is Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), a technique introduced by Charles Ragin (1989) that compares a set of few conditions (2–10) that are expected to contribute to the outcome of interest across a moderate number of cases (5–100) whilst still focusing on qualitative case-sensitive data (Berg-Schlosser *et al.* 2009: 6). QCA assumes ‘causal complexity’, which is composed of three main arguments of ‘conjunctural causation’, ‘equifinality’ and ‘causal asymmetry’ (Schneider & Wagemann 2012: 78). Within the QCA, crisp-set categorisation was used to develop a ‘data matrix’ (Rihoux & De Meur 2009). This means that data on each of the seven cases were reviewed to determine if the case presented (‘1’) or did not present (‘0’) the condition or outcome (see Table A.I). The Boolean minimisation analysis (see Appendix) was conducted using a ‘two-step’ approach which helped differentiate between the remote (structural) and proximate (non-structural) conditions that contributed to the outcome (Schneider & Wagemann 2006).

*The conditions of interest:* Seven hypothesised conditions were identified after a review of related literature. The remote (structural) conditions included whether: there has been a *long history of the demands for a new region* (Young 1994; Diprose 2009: 129), there is *socio-economic inequality* and *ethnic distinctiveness* between either side of the region being separated (Stewart 2008; Sambanis & Milanovic 2011; Fjelde & Ostby 2014; Nwangwu *et al.* 2020), there were ‘*lootable*’ *natural resources in the region being divided* (Le Billon 2001; Bretthauer 2015), *the region (historically) supports the ruling or opposition political party* (Hartmann 2008: 175; Drutman 2020), *there are competing elites on either side of the region* (Kanbur *et al.* 2011: 150; Sambanis & Milanovic 2011: 31) and *the controversies surrounding the separation of the region are purely administrative or socio-cultural* (Young 1994: 785).

*The outcome of interest:* A conflict case was not necessarily defined as involving direct violence between opponents. Instead, conflict was defined ‘as a contested incompatibility’ (Bartusevic<sup>ius</sup> & Gleditsch 2019: 228); a zero-sum ‘competition’ where the gain of one party’s objective is at the detriment of the rival party achieving theirs (Fink 1968: 431–2). Hence a conflict is when region

creation opponents take actions aimed at an objective that threatens the successful creation of the region and vice-versa. Operationally this meant observing ‘contentious political performances’ (Tilly & Tarrow 2015: 7) such as street protests, issuing threats, presenting petitions and legal suits. Whilst not as destructive as civil wars, analysing such low-intensity conflicts continues to be relevant both in academic and policy terms because they disrupt social cohesion and can become the ‘formative’ stages of more violent outcomes (Bartusevičius & Gleditsch 2019: 225).

The process tracing (PT) analytical technique is based on general guidelines in the literature (Collier 2011; Beach & Pederson 2019). PT uses evidence from within a case to make inferences about causal explanations (Bennett & Checkel 2014). The technique seeks to establish a causal mechanism that produces the studied outcome in the case (Hedström & Ylikoski 2010). This study adopts the PT technique because the objective is to explain contentious performances during sub-national territorial reorganisation, and as Tilly (2001: 37) argues, contentious performances are ‘better explained by studying mechanisms because they are outcomes of processes rather than events’. The PT results presented in this study are not so detailed to support a causal proposition but are sufficient to trace the deep interactions of the identified contributory factors in yielding the observed conflicts.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Data were collected through desk and fieldwork in Ghana between July 2019 and March 2020. They included 25 in-depth interviews with selected key persons involved in the region creation process across all the regions. These involved two members of the commission of inquiry, two officials of the ministry in charge of region creation, three journalists who reported about the process, and one official of the National Peace Council. The conflicting parties included nine persons who supported the process and eight persons who were in opposition. There were also 130 pieces of documentary data collected. These included government and non-government reports, statutes, news articles, published books, journal articles, online news broadcasts, petition documents and the text of a supreme court ruling. Archived material was obtained from the Public Records and Archives Administration Department in Accra, Ghana, to obtain data on the historical case. Content of all these data sources was reviewed and thematically coded with the NVivo qualitative data analysis software (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2019). Table A.I has footnotes showing the data sources used to prepare the truth table. The Boolean minimisation analysis was aided by the Excel add-in of the Tosmana software (Cronqvist 2019).

### GHANAIAN SOCIETY AND THE EXPECTED CONDITIONS FOR REGION CREATION CONFLICTS

The initial set of conditions under focus in this study’s explanatory proposition were carefully selected based on their relevance to the Ghanaian context. This



section explicitly justifies the proposition by discussing four features of Ghanaian society to show the contextual relevance of these conditions.

First is the historical connection between ethno-regionalism and partisan national politics in Ghana. With a very prominent and diverse ethnic demography, ethnic identity is instrumental in local and national partisan politics. Since independence, the ‘politicisation of ethnicity and ethnic participation in politics’ has been a fundamental feature of Ghanaian politics (Chazan 1982: 464). Ghana’s current constitution prescribes ‘reasonable regional and gender balance in recruitment and appointment to public offices’ (The Republic of Ghana 1992: Art 35 (6b)). Considering that the ‘region is also a rough guide for understanding the ethnic distribution of the country [Ghana]’ (Morrison & Hong 2006: 631), this required regional balance in appointments is practically an implicit ethnic consideration. Such ethnocentric debates also find expression at the district levels. For instance, Lentz (2006: 904) has noted that landlord–settler indigeneity debates created ‘tensions between chiefdoms and ethnic groups’ during the creation of new districts in the Northern Region of Ghana.

Ethnopolitics is also demonstrated in the clientelist attitude of national politicians towards sub-national communities. For instance, Briggs (2012: 621) shows that electoral objectives motivate the allocation of resources in Ghana. Abdulai & Hickey (2016: 71) have also demonstrated how Ghana’s two main political parties (the National Democratic Congress [NDC] and the New Patriotic Party [NPP]) have disproportionately favoured their stronghold regions in resource allocation. So far, the volatility of such ethnic politicking has been constrained. This may be due to the absence of an absolute majority for any of Ghana’s main ethnic groups, thereby forcing the two main political parties to use ‘cross-ethnic politicking’ (Frosini 2015: 131) to achieve electoral victories.

Second, the institution of chieftaincy in Ghana occupies a vital elitist role in Ghanaian society and politics. As part of Ghana’s devolved governance at independence, chiefs wielded executive and legislative powers in the regional assemblies (Ayee 1994a; Bening 1999; Penu 2022). Despite losing such control under unitary rule, chiefs remain one of two dominant institutions that citizens engage with at the sub-national level in Ghana for all forms of service delivery needs (Fridy & Myers 2019: 87). Such influence explains why chieftaincy is an important driver of ethnic-based conflicts (Jonsson 2007).

Third, there exist inter-regional inequalities in Ghana concerning access to political or socio-economic resources. Langer (2009: 537) observes that these inequalities are due to geographic and colonial policy reasons but notes that subsequent Ghanaian governments have attempted to bridge the gap. Nevertheless, Abdulai (2017: 220–1) has shown how unequal representation of some regions in policy positions leads to a biased selection of beneficiary communities when allocating donor development projects in agriculture. Bridging infrastructural deficits across communities in Ghana has been a key political strategy for political parties in Ghana (Harding 2015: 666). Yet, these inequalities persist and were used by proponents of new regions to justify their petitions (Ghana Commission of Inquiry into the Creation of New Regions 2018).

Fourth, the heavy dependence of Ghana's economy on natural resource extraction means that disputes over access to such resources are important sources of local conflict. Soon after Ghana's independence, tensions between the central government and the *Ashanti* regional government over control of cocoa prices contributed to the eventual *coup d'état* of 1966 (Apter 1955: 68 in a footnote). With its natural resources such as cocoa, gold and oil, the World Bank estimates that Ghana's natural resource rent (as a percentage of GDP) has grown from 2.9% in 1970 to 13.1% in 2017 (World Bank 2019), making it 40th in the global rents' dependence rankings (The Global Economy 2019). Despite Ghana's natural resource rents being centrally managed, there are frequent reports of conflicts between indigenes and non-indigenes (Okoh 2014: 56) over inequalities in access to mining concessions.

To summarise, the conditions being investigated are a justified set of relevant factors contributing to conflicts in Ghana. Whether related to partisan politics, ethno-regional identity or resource inequalities, these factors have been implicated as volatile elements of Ghanaian society in different ways.

#### FINDINGS

*Regional opposition stronghold, competing (traditional) elites and controversies over claims to (traditional) political authority are the conditions associated with region creation conflicts*

Table A.I shows variation in which seven cases presented (1) or did not present (0) the conditions and outcome. Notably the conflict cases were in different regional zones (see the map of Ghana in Figure 1) and cut across historical and contemporary cases. Such variation suggests that region creation conflicts are not clustered in specific areas or periods in Ghana. Hence, it is unlikely that the observed conflicts are due to 'cross-case-interdependence', which is a critique sometimes faced by QCA analyses (Marx *et al.* 2014: 123). Neither are they due to the temporal or geographic circumstances of the cases.

Table A.II summarises the first step of the two-step QCA analysis. This was to identify the structural conditions that were 'necessary' (Schneider 2019: 1114) and 'outcome-enabling' (Schneider & Wagemann 2006: 761) for the outcome. In this study, structural conditions were those conditions that were not produced by the region creation. They included ethnic distinctiveness (D), inter-group inequality (I), low regional solidarity with the government (G) and presence of natural resources (N). The Boolean minimisation (see Table A.II) showed that low regional solidarity for central government (G) was the only necessary enabling condition for the conflict outcome to occur. This solidarity was measured as (historical) electoral support for the government in either the whole region or the stump region. Considering, therefore, that Ghana is effectively a two-party state, this low solidarity for government is equivalent to high support for the opposition.

Regional opposition stronghold however co-occurred with other non-structural conditions in the conflict cases (see sufficiency analysis in Table A II and step 2 of QCA in Table A.III). These were when competing elites are present on either side of the region (condition E) AND when there was a high level of complexity in the controversies about the separation (C). In all the three cases of conflict these three conditions co-existed. With this insight, the next step of the analysis was to trace how these conditions could have led to the outcome.

*There is a bottom-up mechanism underlying region creation conflicts in Ghana*

Having identified three conditions contributing to region creation conflicts, the next phase of the analysis involved tracing how these conditions interacted to yield the conflict outcomes. For analytical purposes, Case 5 (separation of Volta region to create Oti region) was chosen as a typical conflictual case. From PT analytical purposes, conflict scenario endpoint was represented by the declaration of the security emergency on referendum day. Figure 2 summarises the conflict mechanism and this is discussed in five parts (Po–P4) as follows:

*Po (Low solidarity for ruling government creates a fertile context for resistance to region separation)*

Case 5 concerns a region that is entirely a stronghold for the political opposition. The historical electoral results (both parliamentary and presidential) show this in both the new and old regions, creating a fertile context for political concerns over region separation. In most territorial splits, the part losing territory raises the resistance.

Such regionally mediated resistance is linked to concerns over a political agenda. In Ghana, creating new districts has been noted as a strategy translating into additional parliamentary seats for the governments that create them (Resnick 2017: 53). In Spain, such regionally based concerns about a political agenda are prevalent in regional politics ‘because where the regional population does not show strong support for the national government, the legitimacy of any national institution is low in those contexts’ (Blanco-González *et al.*, 2021: 468).

Even though the government denied any political motives for the region separation, the political benefits manifested in the aftermath. In the *Hohoe* municipality, which was split to form the new region, the governing NPP won the 2020 parliamentary elections for the first time. The victory could have likely been due to removing some opposition stronghold communities (i.e. Santrokofi, Akpafu, Lolobi and Likpe, collectively called SALL) from the municipality. The NPP candidate denies having a hand in the separation of *Hohoe*, and this study found no evidence to implicate him in masterminding the territorial split. However, this piece of evidence underscores the electoral interests at stake in such territorial reorganisation, which is well established in relation to district creation contentions in Ghana.

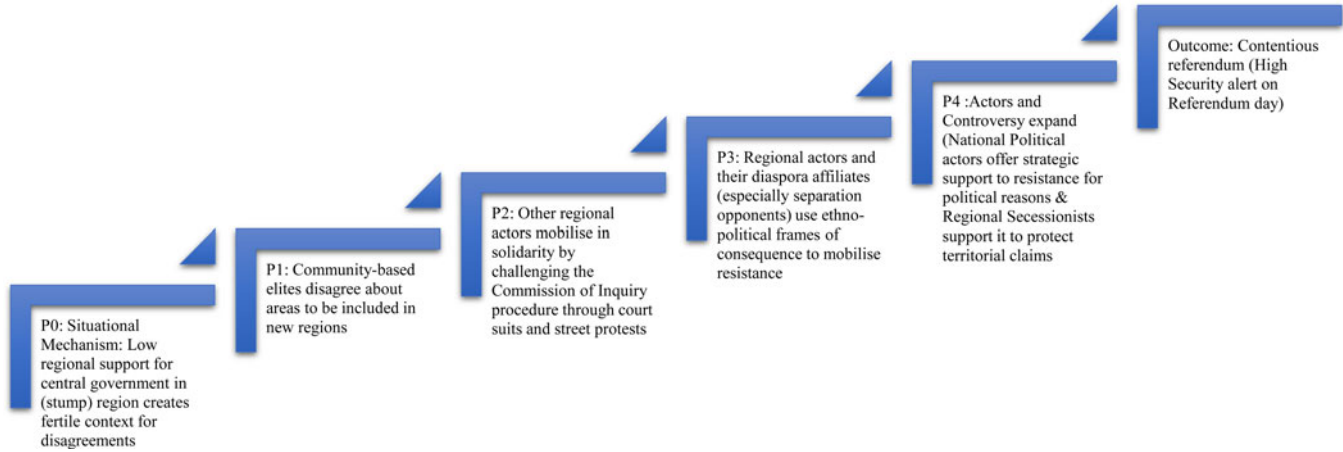


Figure 2. Mechanism of region creation conflicts in Ghana.

*PI (National political elites disagree about the process for separating regions)*

As evidence of the elite-mechanism driving the conflict, regional elites began framing the resistance. These elites were not partisan political elites but rather native chiefs. This suggests that the resistance formation was bottom-up rather than top-down (Mac Ginty & Firchow 2016: 308). Hence, initial resistance framing was located at the community level.

One such observation in Case 5 is the dissent raised by *Togbe Afede*, a prominent chief of the *Asogli* area in the old region. After the Commission of Inquiry met chiefs to discuss the procedure for the new region, *Togbe Afede* called for ‘fairness’ in the procedure for creating the regions (Awal 2018). The Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) representing the new region proponents issued a counter statement. In its press conference, the JCC ‘vowed to crush any attempt by their counterparts in the south opposing a territorial split of the region’. They said they would not be ‘intimidated’ by the south as was the case in the past (Go write your own petition 2018).

During interviews with new region supporters in Case 5, they alleged that the resistance was born out of fears that a new region would end many years of domination that inhabitants of the new region have endured from the leadership of the old region. They refer to discriminatory practices in language used for official business, resource distribution and political representation at national decision-making fora (Nyampong 2020 Int.). Actors in the old region reacted to these allegations with similar allegations about material considerations by new region proponents. As one respondent puts it, the call for a new region is by some ‘selfish chiefs’, who were deceiving their subjects for personal gain (Togbe Asamani Gboxo I 2019 Int.).

These claims and counterclaims of material considerations have some merit. Even though Ghana’s regional administrations have no political or financial autonomy over their resources, a new region means that new political positions become available to be filled, and local elites have a good chance to occupy these. For instance, five chiefs from the new region enter the national house of chiefs if a new region is formed. There is a chance to appoint regional ministers and other officers and new regional budget allocations for infrastructural projects. Hence, there are some clear material benefits that a new region could bring to its proponents. For the opponents in the old region, the loss of material benefits may not be apparent at a casual glance, however, a deeper look within the communities crystallises these interests.

One of the communities that came into the spotlight in Case 5 was the *Hohoe* municipality. The controversy was whether *Gbi*, a traditional township, should be (wholly or partly) included in the new region. The controversy started just four months into the process, even before the Commission of Inquiry was inaugurated. The contentions built up, leading to a violent clash in month 8, between the youth of *Hohoe* and their counterparts in the neighbouring *Nkwanta* (Hohoe and Buem youth clash 2018).

On one side of the clash was *Togbega Gabusu* of *Gbi*. He is the most prominent traditional ruler of the *Hohoe* area. The new region proposal excluded *Gabusu*'s traditional area from the proposed new region but included neighbouring SALL towns that co-existed with *Hohoe* in the same municipality. *Gabusu* disagreed and instead called for either the whole *Hohoe* municipality or none of it to be included in the new region. To advance his concerns, he tried to participate in the Commission's consultations at *Nkwanta*, a neighbouring town that was also to be included in the new region. The new region proponents prevented him from participating, leading to violent clashes between the youth of both sides.

Again, the clash at *Nkwanta* stems from deeper ethnopolitical interests of chiefs and other elites on both sides of the region being divided. For *Gabusu*, the consequence of the new region proposal would mean a drop in the population size of *Hohoe* and could lead to the area's loss of the municipality status (Setordjie 2018). During field interviews, opinion leaders in *Akpafu* and *Lolobi* argued that the traditional paramountcy of the neighbouring *Buem-Jasikan* masterminded their forceful inclusion in the new region proposal. As they claim, the *Buem-Jasikan* paramountcy sought to re-annexe its control over those *Guan* communities, which was broken in the 1970s after a conflict over traditional rites and lineage. For those SALL leaders, leaving *Hohoe* meant placing SALL once again under the control of the *Buem-Jasikan* paramountcy, which they vehemently opposed.

### *P2 (Competing regional elites mobilise for and against)*

The community contentions were further expanded to the regional level in Case 5 after the clash over *Hohoe* in month 8 of the process. The mobilisation involved various administrative petitions and legal suits to raise issues of procedural impropriety – however, the deeper contextual evidence points to accompanying material concerns.

In Case 5, the legal mobilisation began in month 9 with a failed human rights suit that sought to quash the process because it infringed on the right to vote for inhabitants in the old region. Then, in month 16, plaintiffs hailing from the old region initiated a supreme court petition. The suit was seeking a court declaration that 'upon a true and proper interpretation of articles 5 [of the constitution], on the creation of new regions and article 42, on the right to vote, all persons in the affected regions are entitled to be registered and to vote in a referendum on the creation of new regions' (Supreme Court of Ghana 2018: Introduction). This was followed by escalation moments in months 17–19 of the process.

The rising resistance was due to other regional actors using ethnopolitical narratives to frame the resistance. During interviews, both proponents and opponents of the separation confirm that old region youth met with their chiefs and called on them to resist the loss of their lands. In return, some chiefs in the Ewe-speaking areas vowed to continue the fight to preserve the



heritage of the *Ewe* people (Agama 2019 Int.; Nyampong 2020 Int.). The rising resistance from the old region provoked a counter-response from the new region when, in month 18, the chief of Kete, Maj. Rtd. Safianu Baba, organised a press conference and stated that:

We initially felt it was not necessary to respond to their position because we thought it was not necessary until some of their paramount chiefs waded into this fray. We, therefore, felt compelled to come out and let the people of Ghana know our real motive and also use this opportunity to reiterate our unwavering commitment to the Oti project [the new region]. (Joy News 2018: 0:48–2:20 min)

### *P3 (Actors and controversy expand)*

As the constitutional process evolved, some new voices entered the controversy. For instance, calls from the diaspora to resist the separation and preserve *Ewe* ethnic lands began emerging from month 9 and continued until month 15. During month 15, the secessionist group Homeland Study Group Foundation (HSGF) openly joined the resistance. The group has been re-stoking a long-standing campaign for the Volta Region (Case 5) to secede from Ghana. The source of that campaign stems from disaffections about the colonial separation and reorganisation of the *Ewe* ethnic folk (Brown 1980). Until this point in the process, they had only submitted counter-petitions to the Commission of Inquiry without success (Saah 2019 Int.). Hence, the group began going public. One of them was an article published on its behalf by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO), a human rights organisation based in the Netherlands. The central message in the published article is as quoted below:

Ladies and gentlemen of the press and all gathered here, we want to use this opportunity to send a signal to all those calling for the division of the Volta region, to be very careful. Right from day one of this mischief of the government of Ghana to further divide our land and add to her territory, we kept a cool head and have been engaging the affected areas in dialogue since then, so the radical posture being adopted now by the proponents of the Oti region is neither here nor there. [W]e shall however continue to use the peaceful approach. We wish to let our adversaries know that, we are not in the least afraid of the war drums being beaten, we only pity whoever would throw the first stone ... Ladies and gentlemen, for the education of the JCC of Oti region, we would love to refer them to a statement made by Mr J.K. Mensah to the Trusteeship Council at its 505th Meeting on 1 March 1954. We do not have to go into details for that document speaks for itself. A visitor doesn't claim ownership of his master's abode, unless that visitor is a bad one, and every bad nut swallowed is sure to be vomited. (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization 2018: para 1)

This argument by the HSGF speaks directly to the material interests involved, i.e. political control and land. If a new region was created, the HSGF feared a weakening of their claim to secede.

Also, political actors from the NDC, Ghana's largest opposition party, became active in the resistance in month 18. Until now, they had only tried to use low-key political intelligence at the community level to gauge the political interests at stake (Agama 2019 Int.; Eduhene 2019 Int.). Towards the end of the process, however, they made their resistance more overt. For instance, the NDC parliamentary caucus boycotted the discussion of the region creation legislation in parliament. Their reason was that the government had not published the Commission's report, so there was no transparency for them to discuss the matter objectively (Gadugah 2018).

There is reason to understand both the NPP government's delay in publishing the report and the protest from the NDC as tactical, in recognition of the electoral issues at stake. Indeed, noticing the huge resistance to the region separation in some areas, the governing NPP had tactically delayed publication of the Commission's report until the last moments, which helped buy time for the resistance to die down. However, if the report's non-publication was the NDC's grievance, the most direct way to address that concern was to request the report rather than boycott the discussions because the chair of the parliamentary committee discussing those matters at the time was a member of the NDC. Yet they chose to boycott.

Judging the climate at the time, the most plausible explanation for the NDC's boycott is 'political consequence'. The Volta Region (especially the old part from where the resistance was rising) is the most significant electoral stronghold of the NDC. The new region was also a stronghold. To not offend the two strongholds, this boycott over procedure was a good strategy for the party to show solidarity with the old region without representing a strong affront to the new region. Prior to the national polls of 2016, the NDC had also promised to create new regions. However, noticing now that there was strong local opposition, the party did not want to be associated with that process. Thus, a boycott based on procedure was the most neutral political stance on the matter. Field interviews revealed that whilst the national NDC was trying to publicly and nationally distance itself from the process, officials of the regional NDC in the new areas to be separated were busily supporting the process in the communities so that they could preserve their political goodwill with the local population (Agama 2019 Int.; Eduhene 2019 Int.).

### *O (Declaration of High Security alert in Case 5 and not in Case 6)*

On the eve of the referendum in Case 5, the Volta Regional police command declared a high-security alert in the region (Graphic Online 27.12.2018). The police warned journalists to stay away from the referendum area or join the convoys of region proponents to avoid attacks. The inhabitants of the new region feared that opponents from the old region would infiltrate the process under the guise of journalists and risk the region's attainment (Nyampong 2020 Int.).

## CONCLUSIONS

For many observers, the constitutional process in 2018 to create new regions in Ghana through a referendum was an exciting first-time observation that contributed to the country's democratic credentials. Hence, the conflicts it created in some of the targeted regions but not in others would have been quite puzzling. This study sought to explain the conflicts by identifying which (combination of) conditions differentiate the conflict and non-conflict cases and tracing how the conflict process evolved. These objectives were achieved through a combination of qualitative comparative analysis and process tracing.

Empirically, the findings show that the conflicts occurred within regions with relatively high opposition party support, but only when there was the combined presence of competing dominant elites on either side of the region and controversies regarding claims to (traditional) political authority. Whilst the regional partisan political context was an enabler to the conflicts, the issues and interests underpinning were mainly related to chieftaincy and associated ethnopolitics. Hence the findings lead to the conclusion that chieftaincy is still a potent force in collective action during political competition and participation in Ghana. This is counterintuitive because the institution of chieftaincy has been threatened in terms of its relevance to contemporary governance. Initially, chiefs wielded executive authority in regional governance. However, the drive towards professionalisation and bureaucratisation of politics in Ghana threatened the relevance of chieftaincy and led to their removal as political heads of regions in Ghana (Bening 1999). Following this, the series of constitution-making processes in Ghana have limited chiefs to focus on traditional matters (such as traditional lands administration and the application of customary law).

So far, the requests by the constitutionally recognised House of Chiefs for a constitutional review to create a second legislative chamber occupied by chiefs have not yielded positive results. Yet, as this study finds, chiefs have managed to maintain their relevance in Ghanaian socio-politics and are an important medium of influence towards contentions during region creation. This evidence adds to the already existing influences that chiefs have concerning the factors of economic production such as land (Lanz *et al.* 2018: 1526), the pursuit of service delivery (Fridy & Myers 2019: 87) and even in the election of their preferred political candidates (Brierley & Ofori 2021: 32). This study adds another dimension to this by showing that chiefs are also the main factors that determine whether the creation of a region would be conflictual or not.

The findings are also relevant to understanding the evolution ongoing in the wider space of political participation and competition in Africa. They bring more nuance to the observations that ethnic identity is a potent mobilisation tool (Fjelde & Ostby 2014: 742) on the continent. Thus, for ethnic identity difference to be relevant for collective action, especially towards (separatist) conflict, it should be concurrent with political or economic class inequality of elite actors, as observed elsewhere, such as in Biafra (Nwangwu *et al.* 2020: 8). Hence, the threats to political and social stability in Africa do not so much

derive from its ethnic differences, but more importantly, from the inequalities regarding political and economic opportunities and capabilities.

Finally, a brief note for policy attention. The study establishes the importance of both structural and non-structural factors in explaining these conflicts. Therefore, to mitigate and transform such conflicts, it may be easier and more realistic to address the non-structural (proximate) causes. Hence, a policy approach could be to manage which types of actors enter the pre-separation consultations or to identify and offer extensive ideas for reframing the issues in contention from the zero-sum (win-loss) perspective to a non-zero-sum perspective (win-win). Doing this could offer a better chance of mitigating these conflicts in the future. Since region creation is rare in Ghana, such policy suggestions may not find immediate utility at the regional level. However, they could be helpful in peacefully managing district creation processes, which are more common in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa.

#### NOTES

1. Cases occurred in 1959, 1960, 1982 and 1983.
2. Ayeé (1994a: 41, 112) refers to four tiers to include town councils.
3. This lower level is mainly made up of the district assemblies, which paradoxically have legislative and taxation powers that these regional governments do not have. In December 2019, a planned referendum to change the constitution and make district governors popularly elected was aborted due to lack of support from opposition political parties.

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## APPENDIX

TABLE A.I

Truth-Table summarising the case categorisations (author's construct based on raw data sources)\*

Conditions	Competing Dominant Elite (E)	Extent of Complexity (C)	Ethnic Distinctiveness (D)	History of separation (H)	Intergroup inequality (I)	Natural resources (N)	Low solidarity with government (G)	Social Conflict (S)
<b>Condition operationalisation &amp; calibration</b>	<b>PRESENT (1):</b> if there is found, on either side, key actors who clearly wield influence in the eventual outcome. <b>ABSENT (0):</b> if no such observation is made	<b>HIGH (1):</b> if narratives around the process refer to disagreements about a diverse mixture of public admin matters and primordial issues (i.e. identity, culture ancestry, land etc.) <b>LOW (0):</b> if disagreements are limited to public admin issues	<b>HIGH (1):</b> if the rival groups do not fall under the same broad ethnic unit <b>LOW (0):</b> if the groups fall under the same broad ethnic unit †	<b>YES (1):</b> if there has been previous sustained, or at least twice unsuccessful attempts to secede before the attempt under focus <b>NO (0):</b> if no such observation is made	<b>HIGH (1):</b> if median HDI score of the cohort of districts in one group is twice that of the rival cohort of districts ‡ (irrespective of which group fares better) <b>LOW (0):</b> if the condition above is not satisfied.	<b>SIGNIFICANT (1):</b> if there are noted in any part of the region, natural resources that are of national economic value. <b>INSIGNIFICANT (0):</b> if no natural resources are noted or those noted are not of national economic significance	<b>LOW (1):</b> if the (historical) voting pattern suggests that the government of the day did not win the regional vote count, either in the whole region or in part (especially in the stump region) <b>HIGH (0):</b> if the electoral pattern/ results indicate the government of the day has (historically) won the regional vote	<b>PRESENT (1):</b> there is evidence of direct zero-sum tactics between two identifiable groups on issues having implications for whether a new region would be formed. The conflicts are observed as 'sustained contentious performances' (e.g. protests, court suits), which may(not) have direct violence manifestation. <b>ABSENT (0):</b> if the above is not observed

Case 1 \1959 ASH_BA	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
Case 2 \2018 BA_AH	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Cases 3 \2018 BA_BE	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Case 4 \2018 NR_NE	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
Case 5 \2018 NR_SAV	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0
Case 6 \2018 VR_OT	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
Case 7 \2018 WR_WN	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0

\*The main data sources for these observations include: E & C - news articles and 2018 Commission Report; D – Kaplan (1995), H – 2018 Commission Report; I-District League Table (CDD Ghana and UNICEF, 2017); N- 2018 Commission Report; G-Electoral Commission Data (1992 – 2016); S – News Articles & Interviews.

<sup>†</sup>Based on ethnic categorisation by Kaplan (1995) in the report ‘Ethnic Groups and Languages’ earlier published in 1971.

<sup>‡</sup>If such data is not available, other evidence of disparity in access to public offices is used as a proxy (this was the case in 1959\_ASH\_BA). Where evidence was inconclusive disparity in appointments to national house of chiefs was used (this proved positive in Case 6).

TABLE A.II  
Context conditions implicated in conflict outcome (Step 1 of Boolean minimisation)

# Implicants: 4		
<b>Ethnic distinctiveness (d)*LOW SOLIDARITY WITH GOVERNMENT (G)</b>		Cases 4\2018 NR_NE, Cases 1\1959 ASH_BA
<b>History of separation (h)*LOW SOLIDARITY WITH GOVERNMENT (G)</b>		Cases 4\2018 NR_NE
<b>INTERGROUP INEQUALITY (I)</b>		Cases 1\1959 ASH_BA, Cases 6\2018 VR_OT
<b>NATURAL RESOURCES (N)*LOW SOLIDARITY WITH GOVERNMENT (G)</b>		Cases 1\1959 ASH_BA
# Solutions: 2		
<b>Ethnic distinctiveness (d)*LOW SOLIDARITY WITH GOVERNMENT (G) + INTERGROUP INEQUALITY (I)</b>		
<b>History of separation (h)*LOW SOLIDARITY WITH GOVERNMENT (G) + INTERGROUP INEQUALITY (I)</b>		
<b>(Conjunctural) Condition</b>	<b>Sufficiency consistency<sup>§</sup></b>	<b>Coverage Consistency</b>
<b>I</b>	1	0.67
<b>G**</b>	0.75	1
<b>H</b>	0.5	0.34
<b>D</b>	0.5	0.67
<b>h*G</b>	1	0.34
<b>d*G</b>	1	0.67
<b>N</b>	0.34	0.34

<sup>§</sup>The formulae for the consistency analyses (Schneider & Wagemann 2012: 124, 130) were: Sufficiency = (where x(1) and y(1)) ÷ where x(1)). Coverage = ((where x(1) and y(1)) ÷ (where y(1))). Where X stands for (conjunctural) condition and Y stands for outcome

\*\*Based on the approach by Schneider (2019), condition (G) is identified as a necessary condition, even though it does not on its own enable the outcome. Hence condition G is taken to step 2 of the analyses.

**TABLE A. III**  
**Step 2 (Analysing remote condition G with proximate conditions, using Tosmana Excel Add-in)**

CASE ID	Dominant Elite (E)	Extent of Controversy (C)	Low solidarity with government (G)	Social Conflict (S)
<b># Implicants: 1</b>				
<b>DOMINANT ELITE (E)*EXTENT OF CONTROVERSY (C)</b>		Cases 1\1959 ASH_BA, Cases 4\2018 NR_NE, Cases 6\2018 VR_OT		
<b>*LOW SOLIDARITY WITH GOVERNMENT (G)</b>				
<b># Solutions: 1</b>				
<b>DOMINANT ELITE (E)*EXTENT OF CONTROVERSY (C)*LOW SOLIDARITY WITH GOVERNMENT (G)</b>				
Solution term	Sufficiency Consistency	Coverage Consistency		
<b>DOMINANT ELITE (E) * EXTENT OF CONTROVERSY (C) * LOW SOLIDARITY WITH GOVERNMENT (G) ††</b>	1	1		
<b>E</b>	0.75	1		
<b>C</b>	0.75	1		
<b>G</b>	0.75	1		

††The solution term is perfect coverage for the outcome. Conditions are individually necessary (but not sufficient) for the outcome. The formulae for the consistency analyses (Schneider & Wagemann 2012: 124, 130) were: Sufficiency = (where x(1) and y(1)) ÷ where x(1)). Coverage = ((where x(1) and y(1)) ÷ (where y(1))). Where X stands for (conjunctural) condition and Y stands for outcome.