

“Seek Ye First the Political Kingdom”?

Learning from Kwame Nkrumah’s Failures in Ghana

Tokologo African Anarchist Collective

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Ghana, West Africa, was a British colony called “Gold Coast” until 1957. It became the first independent country in “black” Africa after reforms and struggles in the 1940s and 1950s. The new president, the brilliant Kwame Nkrumah, and his Convention People’s Party (CPP), had fought for independence. Now they aimed at major changes in the society, even speaking of socialism. And Nkrumah proposed a united African government for the continent: Pan-Africanism.

But by the mid-1960s, hopes were fading. There were good reforms in education and services and self-respect for Africans that helped remove colonialism’s damages. But the CPP has become a dictatorship, with a personality cult around Nkrumah. Unions and struggles were suppressed. The economy was in trouble. A new elite hijacked independence and resources. When the military seized power in 1966, people celebrated in the streets. Today Ghana is one of the poorest African countries.

What went wrong and what can we, anarchists in Africa, learn from this experience? Nkrumah’s is the key model for African nationalists, and the test case showing the strengths and limits of African nationalism as a project – a project based on building multi-class parties, to capture the state, with the enemy seen primarily in terms of imperialism, and colonialism, with the solution seen as an independent state.

So, the lessons of Ghana are essential and remain widely applicable to countries like South Africa, where African nationalism has been and remains a very powerful current. We can learn, most of all, that revolutions and struggles are easily hijacked by elites for their own purposes. These purposes always go against the interests of the masses.

Using the state is the sure way to create a new elite. Nkrumah’s slogan, “Seek ye first the political kingdom and all things shall be added unto you,” is not useful. We say instead: All power to the working and poor people.

British Colonial Ghana

The “Gold Coast” colony included African societies like the Asante kingdom (empire), which had class divisions, a ruling elite, and a history of slavery and slave trading. The colony was ruled by British officials, African kings and chiefs, and the small African educated and business elite linked to mission and state schools.

But Britain was in charge. Society was top-down. There was no pretence of “democracy.” Although the British provided railways and hospitals, there was much poverty and racism. The economy was based on selling raw materials (metals and cash crops) to Britain. This meant it depended on British prices, and these were often low and there was always pressure by the British state to produce more.

Decolonisation

After World War Two (1939–1945) there was massive unrest by the unemployed in the in Sekondi-Takoradi (“Tadi”) port zone and Accra, by farmers and black ex-soldiers. There were riots in 1948 after 3 people were shot at a march in Accra. The Trade Union Congress (TUC) formed 1945, called a general strike in 1950.

Britain started political reforms in the 1940s, allowing unions (1941) and then allowing more elected representatives in the Legislative Council (1946) but these were elections by chiefs

The elite-led United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) (1947) wanted electoral reforms, moving the chiefs aside, so the businessmen who led UGCC would have more say. Like the ANC and other South African parties, UGCC was formed and dominated by the frustrated African elite. It kept its distance from the unrest, and from Nkrumah's calls to use mass action ("positive action") to win more radical changes. Nkrumah had 4 university degrees earned in the USA, where he lived from 1935- 1945, and returned to his homeland in 1947 after 2 years in Britain.

This led to the formation of Nkrumah's breakaway CPP (1949), aiming to ride the mass struggles to full state independence. In 1951 there were the first parliamentary elections (the country was still ruled by Britain), which the CPP won, making Nkrumah Prime Minister. After more elections, the CPP led Ghana into independence.

Consolidation of New Elite

But the new CPP government developed into a one-party state. The state became a hothouse for a new elite. The old elite, the chiefs, were either marginalised or pulled into the CPP. A law in 1958 allowed detention without trial. By 1962 the state controlled the main newspapers, and could censor news.

Access to state power was key to the growth of the new African elite: frustrated under colonialism, it used state salaries, contracts and corrupt deals to enrich itself. Reports of wrongdoing were widespread.

The more that state wealth helped the elite, the more the elite clung feverishly to office, suppressing rivals and protests, and pushing for more state ownership of resources.

1964 saw the CPP become the only legal party, centred on a personality cult and network around Nkrumah, now President-for-Life. CPP party branches and related organisations like youth groups enforced control across the country. The CPP ensured its people were in key positions in various government agencies.

As anarchists we know the state cannot be used by the mass of the people. It is a top-down institution that always puts power in the hands of a small elite. As the old British elite and African chiefs moved out of the new state, the CPP-centred new elite moved in. The nature of the state meant that the new elite, just like the old, looked on the people as a source of labour, money, and taxes – and a threat to be controlled, with guns if needed.

Moving to State-Capitalism

Nkrumah correctly saw Ghana would remain an economic "colony" of Britain (or the USA) if its economy did not change. He started efforts to industrialise the economy (building factories and infrastructure) so it could move beyond raw materials and create jobs. At first this meant encouraging foreign (mainly British and US) investment, but this left colonial-era relations in place, and did not work.

The difference with the past was that the new Ghanaian political elite benefited more. But the effects on industry were small.

So Nkrumah's CPP started to push state-led industrialisation. This included efforts like setting up a massive hydro-electrical scheme at Volta dam, state-run industries, and trade protection, called "import- substitution-industrialisation."

But although Nkrumah called the system “socialism” (and was partly inspired by the Marxist system in Russia), the reality was the new state industries were, as elsewhere, just state capitalism. They were based on wage labour and on producing goods and services for sale. And, again, the new state elite milked the new projects for its benefit.

The growing role of the state was not socialism, it was just the expanding grab of the new elite to access wealth and build capitalist industries. The top-down approach in state industries was the same as the topdown system in the state and the CPP.

World Economic Chains

Also, independent national capitalist development in a world dominated by international capitalism was unlikely. To fund the new system, the CPP-led state relied on money from exports, especially cocoa. Cocoa prices boomed in the 1950s and early 1960s. The money went to the state through “marketing boards.” This meant farmers sold to state boards at low prices, which then sold the goods overseas at much higher prices, making big profits.

But the price of goods like cocoa started to fall in the early 1960s, and the state lost money. It then borrowed heavily, going into massive debt.

Attacking the People

The new system did not put power in the hands of ordinary people. The CPP-centred new elite in the state controlled it, decided priorities and targets. The role of the working class and peasantry was to provide labour, funds and raw materials. The radical language and even the genuine socialist views of some CPP leaders (like Nkrumah who was himself generally free of corruption, unlike his followers), did not change this.

The new elite exploited the people, and the new state relied on the repression and control of the working class.

The 1958 Industrial Relations Act centralised unions into a single CPP-run body, with the only negotiating and legal rights. Urban workers were increasingly called a selfish elite (“labour aristocracy”), sabotaging the nation with wage demands. Almost no legal strikes were arranged by the CPP-run TUC. In many sectors all strikes were banned.

In 1961, a huge strike spread from Sekondi-Takoradi, including the railways, against rising taxes and a “forced savings” scheme. It drew in the unemployed and the small traders in the markets: the “common folk” against the CPP elite. After the strike, Nkrumah arrested leaders and politicians involved.

End of an Illusion

Many people had great hopes in Ghana and Nkrumah. The victory over Britain was inspiring and the “black star” of Ghana seemed to show the light to a new, prosperous Africa, free of the legacy of colonialism, racism and strife.

But using the state and a political party led straight to the opposite: a new elite captured decolonisation, for its own benefits.

Working class and poor Ghanaians continued to suffer while the new local elite and its foreign partners (initially Britain and the USA, later the Marxist USSR and its colonies) became wealthier. Mass support was built through a personality cult, with Nkrumah treated as Superman.

In 1966, the military led a coup against Nkrumah. He was out of the country. There is no doubt that the American CIA helped the military plot.

But this does not explain why people danced in the street with happiness when Nkrumah was overthrown.

They included Sekondi-Takoradi workers, who had been staunch CPP supporters in the 1950s. The masses had no more illusions and did nothing to stop the coup. Nkrumah left office in disgrace.

Everything had become managed by the party and the state, not the people. And that was where the problems started. Imperialism and the CIA played a role in undermining independent Ghana, but the local elite, which hijacked the decolonisation struggle, is just as guilty of destroying it.

And Nkrumah's nationalist vision, even in its Marxist phase, despite its heroic intentions, helped pave the way, with its statism, authoritarianism and multi-class capitalist project.

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