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# Between Peace and Paradox

**Democratic Resilience and the Challenge  
of Violent Extremism in Ghana.**

**POLICY BRIEF 1 | FEBRUARY, 2026**

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## **Abstract**

Following the increasing spread of violent extremism in West Africa, this policy brief illustrates vulnerabilities in the democratic system of Ghana and examines how these translate into individual push factors towards violent extremism. The results show that socio-economic and political exclusion, corruption as well as ethnic tensions and migration play a significant role in understanding the causes of and the journey towards extremism and offers pathways for preventing violent extremism.

**Keywords: West Africa, Sahel, Ghana, Democracy, Violence, Extremism**

## Introduction

Since 2020, Africa has experienced a resurgence of military coup d'états which has been described as the third wave of coups in Africa, encompassing takeovers in Sudan, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon.<sup>1</sup> The increase in military takeovers has not only weakened the regional stability but furthermore set precedents for military leaders in other West African countries that may harbour coup ambitions. Ghana so far has been resilient to the threat of a coup d'état which is illustrated by recent Afrobarometer surveys which show that the majority of Ghanaians believe that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.<sup>2</sup> Yet, Ghana's democracy is not immune to internal tensions that are under pressure with the increasing political instability in the West Africa sub-region, especially along its shared border with Burkina Faso and to a lesser extent also with Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire.

## Vulnerabilities in Ghana's democracy

Ghana, as any democracy, has vulnerabilities that could be exploited by extremist groups, such as poverty, unemployment, and development gaps. These vulnerabilities are especially relevant considering the low trust of society in state institutions, as recent surveys illustrated that 40% of Ghanaians

hold no trust in parliament, electoral commission, and the police.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted here that the results are reversed for the Ghana Armed Forces, where roughly 41% of the population trust the military substantially.<sup>2</sup> Considering the regional context, roughly 33% of Ghanaians would approve of the army governing the country and, in the case that elected leaders abuse power, around half of Ghanaians perceive military intervention as legitimate.<sup>2</sup> If democratic institutions lose their credibility within society, this not only undermines the democratic culture but also the democratic legitimacy, followingly making Ghana vulnerable to extremist movements that propagate alternative systems.

Ghana's role as a transit point for smuggling has further undermined the trust in security forces: since 2023, Ghana has become the largest money laundering zone by volume for stolen cattle from Burkina Faso as well as Côte d'Ivoire, a tool that is significantly used by armed groups to finance their operations and establish influence in local communities.<sup>3</sup> Such issues create economic and security conditions that make violent extremism more attractive to the individual, as illicit groups may offer employment and safety. Linking to the illustrated vulnerabilities of governance, these illegal activities have also undermined Ghana's political process, in the form of illicit financial flows (IFF).

<sup>1</sup>Afriqie, F. A. (2024). Demystifying the season of putsch in Africa's Sahel: Gaining insight into Niger's dynamics. *The Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, 46(1 & 2), 58–83.

<sup>2</sup>Afrobarometer. (2025). Ghana Round 10 summary of results. Retrieved from <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ghana-round-10-summary-of-results/>

<sup>3</sup>Berger, F. (2025). Cattle rustling and insecurity: Dynamics in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.

As such, CDD Ghana has shown that major financiers of political parties and candidate campaigns have engaged in criminality, such as illegal mining, illegal oil distribution, fraudulent business, procurement infractions, and associated kickbacks from the award of contracts, albeit the extent of financing remains unclear.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, there is a notable linkage between security issues and governance issues that undermines the public trust in democracy and risks the corruption of political processes. It is important to note here that these vulnerabilities do not automatically lead to radicalisation but rather create a fertile ground for the structural drivers underlying radicalisation, as such vulnerabilities, if left unaddressed, could later translate into push factors towards radicalisation.

## Push factors to violent extremism

While some individuals are attracted by the ideology and the thrills of extremist groups, other individuals seek to join these groups because of personal grievances.<sup>5</sup> One major push factor towards violent extremism can be socio-economic deprivation, which includes not only material deprivation, but also

structural inequalities.<sup>6</sup> For the case of Africa, studies found that poverty has been the most cited push factor of radicalisation, whereas unemployment was frequently cited to foster frustrations while also offering a higher practical availability to extremist recruitment efforts.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, it needs to be noted that the majority of Ghanaians have stated that their present living conditions are very bad (44%) or fairly bad (22,9%).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in 2024, 41% of Ghanaians were classified as multidimensionally poor with approximately 64% of the population affected living in rural areas, while averagely only 30% were living in urban areas.<sup>8,9</sup> Consequently, multidimensional poverty is twice as high in rural areas, highlighting significant development gaps that need to be addressed, as this form of socio-economic marginalisation can foster grievances. As has been noted by theoretical scholars, it is primarily the economic performance that matters in the perception of democratic performance.<sup>10</sup> If people believe the economy – and consequently the democracy - not to be performing, they may stop supporting the system altogether.<sup>10</sup> Followingly, such issues actively

<sup>4</sup>CDD Ghana. (2022). Understanding how illicit money fuels campaign financing in Ghana. Retrieved from <https://cddgh.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Final-Report-CDD-Campaign-Financing-FCDO-11th-June-2021.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>Prah, P. K. W., & Chanimbe, T. (2021). Ghana's readiness to combat terrorism: Strategies of security institutions. *The International Journal of Intelligence, Security, and Public Affairs*, 23(3), 367–399.

<sup>6</sup>Vergani, M., Iqbal, M., Ilbahar, E., & Barton, G. (2020). The three Ps of radicalization: Push, pull and personal. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43(10), 854–885.

<sup>7</sup>Afrobarometer. (2025). Ghana Round 10 summary of results.

<sup>8</sup>Ghana Statistical Service. (2024a). Ghana 2024 statistical year overview.

<sup>9</sup>Ghana Statistical Service. (2024b). Multidimensional poverty. (Ghana 2023 Annual Household Income and Expenditure Survey, Q4).

<sup>10</sup> Diamond, L. J. (1990). Three paradoxes of democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 1(3), 48–60.

undermine Ghanaian democracy and may give rise to extremist causes. This is especially relevant when considering Ghanaian youth who make up a majority of the population, yet significantly struggle with unemployment and education opportunities.<sup>11,12</sup> Considering the discussed vulnerabilities, these economic drivers could push individuals, especially young people, towards criminal livelihoods of which many overlap with extremist networks, as they offer an alternative livelihood to such individuals.

There are also political push factors that need to be considered as they undermine the individual trust in governance and create grievances, through perceived injustice or political marginalisation.<sup>13</sup> A recent report from Ghana Statistical Service has shown that over 70% of respondents felt that the political system offers little to no opportunity for citizens to influence decision-making, highlighting a significant disengagement from governance processes.<sup>14</sup> This issue is especially significant among the youth who perceive to be excluded from democratic processes and decision-making.<sup>11</sup> Such feelings of political exclusion need to be taken seriously as they could translate into grievances, potentially making individuals more susceptible to recruitment attempts

from extremist groups that offer not only financial benefits, but also a sense of belonging and political purpose. These factors reflect a central tension of democracy: while democratic systems rest on the rule of majority, not all groups may feel represented in these processes. This democratic tension can translate into a political alienation that pushes individuals towards radicalisation or violent extremism.

Finally, there are also social factors that may push individuals towards violent extremism, such as social exclusion, dispossession, victimhood, victimisation, stigmatisation, ethnic and religious tensions as well as migration.<sup>13</sup> While Ghana generally fosters a peaceful coexistence, extremist groups are keen to exploit grievances, especially along cultural, ethnic or religious lines. Thus, border communities that are experiencing a substantial amount of migration, as well as refugees that feel excluded, could be prone to extremist propaganda and recruitment efforts. As is shown by data from UNHCR, migration to Ghana has increased since 2022, amounting to 20,534 refugees last year, which has placed additional pressure on Ghana's already limited resources and contributed to a rising inequality and social tensions.<sup>15,16</sup> In the

<sup>11</sup>Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny, J. (2020). International Youth Day: Unemployment and education are Ghanaian youth's most important problems (Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 382).

<sup>12</sup>UNICEF. (2022). Generation Unlimited Ghana: Ghana country assessment of the youth ecosystem.

<sup>13</sup>Vergani, M., Iqbal, M., Ilbahar, E., & Barton, G. (2020). The three Ps of radicalization: Push, pull and personal. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43(10), 854–885.

<sup>14</sup>Ghana Statistical Service. (2025). The governance series (Issue 1).

<sup>15</sup>UNHCR. (n.d.). Refugee data finder. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>

<sup>16</sup>Yakohene, A. B. (2025). Tackling violent extremism and terrorism in Ghana: Interventions of the state.

Upper West Region, the presence of Burkinabe migrant labourers has worsened chieftaincy conflicts and intercommunal violence relating to land access, and the migration of farmers and herders.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the sustained migration has led to a rising Anti-Fulani Sentiment in Ghanaian border communities, with as much as 42% of host communities attributing the increase in insecurity, banditry, and cattle rustling to Fulani migrants, albeit largely without evidence.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, these ethnic tensions can give rise to violent extremism, especially under the conditions of limited resources and insecurity.

## Conclusion

As has been noted by scholars, “terrorism occurs when opportunity, motivation, and capability meet. The prevention of terrorism therefore requires the elimination of at least one of these three factors.”<sup>19</sup> This statement does not just apply to terrorism, but can also be applied to violent extremism, more generally. Consequently, to prevent the radicalisation of individuals and violent extremism, Ghana must address the motivations of individuals which includes the elimination of socio-economic deprivation, in the form of poverty and unemployment, political exclusion, and corruption, as well as ethnic tensions, all of which can push individuals towards violent extremism through grievances as well as exploitations by extremist actors.

To counter the illustrated push factors, Ghana needs to foster development initiatives, policy inclusion and anti-corruption efforts, as well as community resilience initiatives, that specifically consider rural communities, the youth, as well as migrants. As Ghana is a role model of democracy in the region, so is its approach to countering violent extremism. With regional insecurity on the rise, other countries can learn from Ghana’s example, offering the possibility to consolidating and protecting democracies in West Africa from the rise of violent extremism.

## Recommendations

- The government of Ghana, in collaboration with private sectors, should implement and strengthen development programmes that focus on job creation and poverty reduction, which especially consider the youth and rural communities.
- Within border communities, civil society organisations, religious leaders, and security services should collaborate to foster mutual respect between ethnic groups and prevent conflict and prejudices around migration.
- Throughout the country, the government of Ghana and its public institutions should promote public campaigns and actively engage with citizens to strengthen trust in their operations and legitimacy.

<sup>17</sup>Aubyn, F. K. (2021). The risk of violent extremism and terrorism in the coastal states of West Africa: Assessing Ghana's vulnerabilities, resilience and responses. *Conflict Trends*, 2021(3), 14–21.

<sup>18</sup>Berger, F. (2025). Cattle rustling and insecurity: Dynamics in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.

<sup>19</sup>Prah, P. K. W., & Chanimbe, T. (2021). Ghana's readiness to combat terrorism: Strategies of security institutions. *The International Journal of Intelligence, Security, and Public Affairs*, 23(3), p.371.

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