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Resilience and Vulnerability to Violent Extremism in Ghana:

Insights from the Democratic Peace Paradox

Sarah Sophie Kappert

Occasional Paper 65



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary	1
1. Introduction	2
2. The Democratic Peace Paradox	2
3. Resilience Factors in Ghana	5
4. Vulnerabilities of Ghana	7
5. Push factors to Violent Extremism	11
6. Conclusion	15

Summary

Following the increasing spread of violent extremism in West Africa, this paper examines resilience and vulnerability factors of Ghana, while illustrating how vulnerabilities can under particular conditions translate into individual push factors towards violent extremism. The analysis draws on the concept of the Democratic Peace Paradox and is based on both qualitative and quantitative data, in the form of statistics and surveys. 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. The paper consequently contributes to a deeper understanding of drivers of violent extremism in West Africa, offering insights on the prevention of extremism and radicalisation.

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

1. Introduction

There is a broad conception that democracies are inherently peaceful. Yet, this notion overlooks the internal tensions that are inherent to democratic systems, and, if left unattended, give rise to grievances, violent extremism, and other forms of political violence.^{1,2} Accordingly, while democracy is perceived as the most peaceful form of governance, it is also perhaps the most difficult political system to maintain, due to its internal paradoxes, which will inevitably foster tensions and continuously need to be reconciled to prevent conflict.³

This paper contributes to the democracy and violence debate by illustrating how these internal tensions may give rise to violent extremism in democracies, with a special focus on Ghana. Following the upsurge in terrorist attacks in the Sahel Region since 2012, the Sahel Region has been defined as epicentre of terrorism, marking it as a hotspot for extremist groups.⁴ This has fostered regional insecurity and instability which risks spill-over and its potential effects for other West African democracies. To further this debate, this paper examines the case of Ghana, illustrating how internal tensions in democracies create vulnerabilities that push individuals towards violent extremism. Within the Global Peace Index (GPI), Ghana places seventh within Sub-Saharan Africa, with an overall rank of 61.⁵ This marks Ghana as one of the three countries with a high state of peace in West Africa⁵, highlighting its status as a democratic role model in the region.

Yet, with increasing political instability in the West Africa sub-region, Ghana's democracy also faces increasing pressure, especially along its shared border with Burkina Faso and to a lesser extent with Togo and Côte d'Ivoire.

To investigate these vulnerabilities, the paper begins with an illustration of the Democratic Peace Paradox (DPP), before analysing the resilience factors that have so far helped Ghana to mitigate forms of violent extremism and radicalisation. It then examines vulnerabilities in Ghana's democracy, followed by a discussion of push factors that drive individuals in communities towards violent extremism. Finally, a conclusion is drawn.

2. The Democratic Peace Paradox

The Democratic Peace Theory suggests that democratic states rarely go to war with each other and are less likely to become involved in militarised disputes among themselves.⁶ This finding has been described as one of the most robust findings that have been generated by the discipline of international relations.⁶ This is not only because the theory rests on substantial empirical evidence, but also because it is further supported by a long history of academic literature. As to the question why democracies are more peaceful, some scholars argue that democracies hold inherent values and norms that prevent war, such as the perception that democracies should not fight each other.⁷ Followingly, it is noted that democracies operate under restraints

¹Ranstorpe, M., & Meine, M. (2024). *The root causes of violent extremism*. Brussels: Radicalisation Awareness Network (European Commission).

²Ruggeri, A., Daxecker, U., & Prasad, N. (2025). Political violence in democracies: An introduction. *Political Studies*, 62, 1363–1375.

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

⁴Institute for Economics & Peace. (2025). *Global terrorism index 2025*.

⁵Institute for Economics & Peace. (2025). *Global peace index 2025*. Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace.

⁶Gat, A. (2005). The democratic peace theory reframed: The impact of modernity. *World Politics*, 58(1), 73–100.

⁷Russett, B. (1994). *Grasping the democratic peace: Principles for a post-Cold War world*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

that cause them to be more peaceful in their relations with other democracies.⁷ Yet this “relationship of relative peace among democracies” is not solely caused by economic or geopolitical characteristics, but rather a result of features of democracy which include public accountability, representative institutions, and citizens’ consent in war.⁸ As democracies are based on the will of the people, wars are prevented as citizens are reluctant to bear the costs of conflict.⁹ Nonetheless, other scholars have criticised this finding, arguing that peace among democracies is not merely a result of shared morals but rather strategic interests and alliances after the Second World War, suggesting that the Democratic Peace is not a given trait of democracies but rather a historical phenomenon based on strategic calculation.¹⁰

It should be noted that although democracies appear peaceful on the surface, they can simultaneously foster internal tensions, giving rise to the Democratic Peace Paradox. While democracies may promote cooperation and non-violence in their external relations, they often experience polarisation, protests, and conflict within their own system. Followingly, the very traits that support external peace can internally cause conflict. Albeit democracies may not engage in militarised conflicts with each other, democracies hold inherent contradictions that inevitably foster tensions within the democratic system.¹¹

This has also been noted by Michel Foucault who highlighted that conflict is not eliminated through democracies, but rather institutionalised, as it is managed internally through politics.¹² Accordingly, tensions and power struggles continue and are inherent to political processes.¹³ This is especially the case for unconsolidated democracies, which increases the risk of conflict.¹⁴ The following section is going to illustrate some of these paradoxes and highlight how they translate into tensions.

The Rule of the Majority

While democracies are based on the will of the people, democratic decisions will inevitably not include all people. This paradox has been discussed by Immanuel Kant, who has often been cited as a precursor of the Democratic Peace Theory. According to Kant, democracy is necessarily a despotism: while the people collectively decide, it is the majority who potentially can impose its will, even on those who dissent.¹⁵ Subsequently, Kant argued that “all, who are not quite all, decide, and this is a contradiction of the general will with itself and with freedom”.¹⁶ This is related to the work of Foucault, in which he highlighted the persistence of class struggles.¹³ Accordingly, democracies inherently hold the threat of a majority rule that marginalises minorities and fosters resentment. While people in a democratic system may have the freedom to vote, this can also lead to the exclusion of minority parties and groups from decision making. This inherent paradox can subsequently

⁷Russett, B. (1994). *Grasping the democratic peace: Principles for a post-Cold War world*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁸Russett, B. (1994). *Grasping the democratic peace: Principles for a post-Cold War world*, 11.

⁹Easley, E. (2004). *The war over perpetual peace: An exploration into the history of a foundational international relations text*. Dordrecht: Springer.

¹⁰Gowa, J. (2000). *Ballots and bullets: The elusive democratic peace*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹¹Diamond, L. J. (1990). Three paradoxes of democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 1(3), 48–60.

¹²Foucault, M. (2003). *Society must be defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*. New York: Picador.

¹³Foucault, M. (2003). *Society must be defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*. New York: Picador.

¹⁴Mansfield, E. D., & Snyder, J. (2007). *Electing to fight: Why emerging democracies go to war*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹⁵Kant, I. (1970). *Perpetual peace: A philosophical sketch*. Cambridge: International Relations and Security: Network Primary Resources in International Affairs (PRIA).

¹⁶Kant, I. (1970). *Perpetual peace: A philosophical sketch*, 4.

foster political exclusion and may even feed into political extremism, if minorities feel excluded from the political process.

Polarisation

A significant paradox within democracies is the fact that they require conflict, but not too much conflict.¹⁷ While there is no democracy without competition and conflict, political conflict can hold the risk of becoming too intense, and therefore undermine political stability.¹⁷ Accordingly, it has been posited that difference and division are inherent to a democracy.¹⁸ However, a stable democratic culture presupposes the establishment of a common ground that allows for reflexive democratic decision making.¹⁸ Polarisation along conflict lines can undermine this common ground,¹⁸ and potentially foster conflict. Consequently, political competition needs to operate within defined boundaries, while cleavages should be resolved through consent.¹⁷ If those boundaries are crossed or political competition becomes too intense, this inherent feature of democracy risks undermining the foundation of it.

Liberal Freedoms

Another inherent tension of democracy is the factor of liberal freedoms. While democracies are built on freedoms that allow citizens to organise themselves, participate in the political process, and to be heard, academic works have suggested that this freedom of speech and association also offers room for groups that seek to actively undermine democracy.¹⁹ As such, it has been illustrated how the commitment

to civil liberties has provided right-wing extremist groups in the United States with the opportunity to organise and recruit, resulting in an increase of attacks by white supremacist groups.¹⁹ Consequently, while liberal freedoms represent a core value of democracies, they can also be exploited for anti-democratic causes and extremist rhetorics. While preventive measures can be taken to control liberal freedoms, this needs to be carefully managed as such measures could foster grievances and further support extremist mobilisation efforts.¹⁹ The paradox of liberal freedoms accordingly needs a careful monitoring and managing to sustain democracy and prevent anti-democratic exploitation.

Democratic Culture

Finally, democracy must be perceived as legitimate by the people, which requires a moral commitment and an emotional allegiance of society, both of which develop as a result of effective performance.²⁰ According to Diamond, “democracy will not be valued by the people unless it deals effectively with social and economic problems and achieves a modicum of order and justice”.²¹ The paradox here lies in the fact that effective performance sometimes requires unpopular policies that elected leaders will be reluctant to pursue to maintain the public consent.²⁰ As the effects of many policies unfold over a long period of time, effective policies consequently threaten to undermine the consent on which they rest on.²⁰ Accordingly, people may prefer not to be governed through their own consent, if they feel that democracy is not working

¹⁷Diamond, L. J. (1990). Three paradoxes of democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 1(3), 48–60.

¹⁸Stavrakakis, Y. (2018). Paradoxes of polarization: Democracy's inherent division and the (anti-)populist challenge. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 43–58.

¹⁹Hand, A. W., & Saiya, N. (2023). Democracy's ambivalent effect on terrorism. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 67(7–8), 1618–1643.

²⁰Diamond, L. J. (1990). Three paradoxes of democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 1(3), 48–60.

²¹Economist Intelligence Unit. (2024). Democracy index 2024. London: Economist Intelligence Unit.

for them.²⁰ In a region that is increasingly experiencing military rule, the question of public support is consequently significant. While each democracy needs to find its balance between effective policies and public consent, it is monumental that citizens feel the benefit of democracies—otherwise they may stop supporting it altogether.

Thus, while democracies may foster peace externally, their inherent qualities present paradoxes that inevitably foster internal tensions within society. Understanding that democracies are not inherently peaceful but need constant maintaining and monitoring is the foundation to building a sustainable democracy. In the following sections, the paper addresses the resilience factors of Ghanaian democracy, before highlighting its vulnerabilities to illustrate gaps.

3. Resilience Factors in Ghana

Ghana is often described as a role model for democracy in the region, due to its stable political environment and its regular, and relatively peaceful, transitions of power. Indeed, Ghana is the only country in West Africa to score above 6 (out of 10) within the Democracy Index.²¹ As of 2025, Ghana is also the only coastal state in the central belt that has not been attacked by Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).²² Consequently, Ghana has so far been a positive example in combatting violent extremism. Several factors can be identified here that have fostered the

Ghanaian resilience towards violence extremism.

Democratic Legitimacy

Ghana is often described as a model for other African countries, given its stable characteristics and electoral processes.²³ Since its transition to a multiparty democracy in 1992, Ghana has undergone consistent constitutional changes of government through elections, which is widely recognised as the hallmark of a democratic system.²³ As the region has increasingly experienced coup d'états in recent years, Ghana has been described as a “democratic bulwark” by the US Institute of Peace.²⁴ This democratic legitimacy represents an important resilience factor against the spread of violent extremism that has affected the Sahel Region. This is also illustrated by the recent Afrobarometer survey which illustrates that the majority of Ghanaians believe that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.²⁵ As long as citizens believe their state to be legitimate, they are more likely to address grievances through institutions, rather than resorting to violence or violent extremism. This resilience factor is consequently especially relevant in the context of West Africa, where extremist groups are known to exploit governance vacuums. However, as recent research has shown²⁶, this resilience factor remains under pressure, highlighting the need to enhance Ghana's security responses with inclusive and community-driven approaches that

²¹Economist Intelligence Unit. (2024). *Democracy index 2024*. London: Economist Intelligence Unit.

²²Berger, Flore. 2025. *Cattle Rustling and Insecurity. Dynamics in the Tri-Border Area between Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana*. Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime.

²³de Bruijne, K., Courtright, J., Suaka Yaro, D., Ellis, G., Mensah, P. N. K. A., Khalfaooui, M., & Tanko, E. (2024). *A beacon of democracy? How hyper-political competition increases the risk of violent extremism in Ghana*. Clingendael. Netherlands Institute of International Relations.

²⁴de Bruijne, K., Courtright, J., Suaka Yaro, D., Ellis, G., Mensah, P. N. K. A., Khalfaooui, M., & Tanko, E. (2024). *A beacon of democracy? How hyper-political competition increases the risk of violent extremism in Ghana*, 1.

²⁵Afrobarometer. (2025). Ghana Round 10 summary of results. Accra: Afrobarometer.

²⁶Aning, K., & Amedzator, L. (2022). *Beneath the seeming resilience: Assessing Ghana's vulnerabilities to threats from violent extremist groups*. Accra: Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre.

strengthen local capacities against violent extremism.^{27,28}

A Culture of Peace

Ghana further benefits from a very active civil society, especially in the sector of peace, that are engaged in counter-extremism efforts as well as the mediation of conflicts. This has not only fostered a national resilience, but also resilience in the communities. These efforts of civil society are further amplified by state efforts. As such, the National Peace Council (NPC), established in 2006, has played a significant role in addressing conflicts.²⁹ Its creation followed the success of the Northern Region Peace Advisory Committee in mediating the 2002 Dagbon Chieftaincy conflict.²⁹ Consisting of representatives from Muslim, Christian, and traditional religious groups, the council has played a vital role in maintaining peaceful elections, facilitating peace agreements among political parties, and further fostering awareness on the threats of terrorism and violent extremism.²⁹ However, this cannot be described as a sole achievement, as the NPC is well linked to state institutions as well as civil society organisations that have fostered this impact.²⁹ This approach aligns with what Aning defines as regionally adaptive hybrid peacebuilding, that is not only context-specific, but further integrates local, national, and regional dynamics of conflict resolution.³⁰ Accordingly, the National Peace Council can be seen as part of a wider Ghanaian

peace infrastructure. To better include civil society in combatting violent extremism, Ghana has also launched the “See Something, Say Something” campaign which is aimed at motivating citizens to report suspicious activities and contribute to national security through grassroots involvement.²⁹ While this initiative reflects the recommendation of the UNDP for a whole-of-society-approach, the report also highlights the need to strengthen the translation and localisation of the initiative, as such campaigns will only be effective if they are sustainably established at the grassroots level.³¹ Consequently, Ghana has benefitted from a resilient civil society which is further supported by state initiatives. An active civil society is a significant tool in combatting violent extremism as it mitigates communal tensions and fosters community resilience to extremist efforts.

Ethnic-Religious Coexistence

Ghana is home to over thirty million people that identify with different ethnic, regional, and religious groups.³² While this has caused regional and ethnic divisions in the past, these groups nowadays co-exist within and across their respective group lines.³² This peaceful coexistence can be attributed to the fact that the country has been structured as a decentralised, unitary state after the overthrow of Nkrumah in 1966 which keeps ethnic, religious, and regional cleavages below the national level.³² Furthermore, the 1992 Constitution prohibits identity-based political

²⁷Amedzrator, L. M., & Mensah, A. (2025). *In the eye of the storm: Building resilient communities to resist the operations of violent extremist organisations in Ghana* (Occasional Paper No. 64). Accra: KAIPTC.

²⁸UNDP. (2023). *Vulnerability assessment on the threats of violent extremism and radicalisation in northern regions of Ghana*. Accra: United Nations Development Programme.

²⁹Yakohene, A. B. (2025). *Tackling Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Ghana: Interventions of the State*.

Aning, K. (2024). *Responses to insecurity in Africa: The challenge of peacebuilding*. Accra: Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre.

³⁰Aning, K. (2024). *Responses to insecurity in Africa: the challenge of peacebuilding* (Claude Ake Memorial Papers, Issue 13. The Nordic Africa Institute.

³¹UNDP. (2023). *Vulnerability assessment on the threats of violent extremism and radicalisation in northern regions of Ghana*. Accra: United Nations Development Programme.

³²Ibrahim, S., & Gariba, J. (2024). Ghana's resilience to terrorism: Costly signalling of terrorist groups or strength of counter-terrorism strategy? *Ghana Social Science Journal*, 21(2), 69–87.

formations, effectively preventing political parties to have regional, ethnic, religious or other sectional connotations.³³ As parties are further obliged to have branches in all regions of the country, this prevents ethnic, cultural or regional differences from undermining political processes.³³ While identity differences still matter in political choices, it is consequently argued that state policies have helped to moderate its mobilising effects, weakening its potential to be exploited by extremism.³³ This has fostered respect and tolerance for group differences within the state itself and strengthened sub-state level cohesion.³³ The resilience here lies in the fact that these dynamics prohibit the proliferation of extremism, while at the same time increasing the costs of terrorism, as it lowers Ghana's attractiveness for targeting.³³

Security Initiatives

Ghana has enabled several legal and policy measures to respond to terrorism, and further address violent extremism.³⁴ Examples are the Anti-Terrorism Act (2008), the amendment to the Anti-Money Laundering Act (2008), the Organised Crime Act (2010) as well as the National Framework for the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism and Terrorism (NAFPCVET) (2019).³⁴ This makes Ghana well prepared to react to threats of terrorism, as well as violent extremism. Furthermore, Ghana has engaged in national and regional counter-terrorism efforts, such as the Operation Conquered Fist, the African Union Plan of Action on the Prevention and Combatting of

Terrorism as well as the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy Implementation Plan.³⁴ Ghana has also established the Accra Initiative in 2017 to foster regional security cooperation in West Africa.³⁴ These efforts align with the cooperative security model which “posits that states can enhance their security through collaboration, information-sharing, and joint actions, rather than relying solely on unilateral measures”³⁵. As is proposed by this theory, collective action and cooperation among states as well as different security agencies can lead to a greater efficiency in managing threats, especially transnational challenges, which is clearly embodied by Ghana's various security operations and initiatives.³⁴ As national security depends on the security of neighbouring states, and regional issues are often interconnected, the Ghanaian security approach following reflects a strong resilience.

4. Vulnerabilities of Ghana

Despite the illustrated factors of resilience, Ghana, as any democracy, has vulnerabilities that could be exploited by extremist groups, including the proliferation of small arms, illicit financial flows, illicit activities, as well as governance deficits. While these vulnerabilities may not directly translate into violent extremism, they have the potential to create grievances and further provide opportunities for extremist groups to exploit, which could later contribute to individual push factors. The following chapter is going to analyse these vulnerabilities in the context of violent extremism.

³²Ibrahim, S., & Gariba, J. (2024). Ghana's resilience to terrorism: Costly signalling of terrorist groups or strength of counter-terrorism strategy? *Ghana Social Science Journal*, 21(2), 69–87.

³³Ibrahim, S., & Gariba, J. (2024). Ghana's resilience to terrorism: Costly signalling of terrorist groups or strength of counter-terrorism strategy? *Ghana Social Science Journal*, 21(2), 69–87.

³⁴Yakohene, A. B. (2025). *Tackling Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Ghana: Interventions of the State*.

³⁵Yakohene, A. B. (2025). *Tackling Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Ghana: Interventions of the State*, 14.

Small Arms Proliferation

The proliferation of small arms and weapons, and the increasing availability of firearms, both through local manufacturing and trafficking, remain a significant vulnerability factor in Ghana as they heighten the risk of violent conflicts. Despite Ghana's security initiatives, the country is facing increased organised crime, such as illicit arms trafficking, and insecurity across its borders.³⁶ As has been reported by the National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons, there have been as much as 53 gun incidents in the first quarter of 2025, illustrating a sharp increase compared to the same period in 2024 which only recorded 15 cases.³⁷ Consequently, there has been a 253% increase in gun incidents since last year which underlines the growing concern for gun violence.³⁷ Furthermore, the first quarter of 2025 saw a broader spectrum of gun-related crimes, suggesting an increase in the use of firearms in criminal activities.³⁷ While there have been no recorded cases for violent confrontations, chieftaincy-related disputes as well as land disputes in the first quarter of 2024, these incidents surged in 2025.³⁷ This highlights the significant role of small arms proliferation in escalating conflicts into violence. Furthermore, the proliferation of weapons facilitates criminal activities, such as arms smuggling. The fact that 54% of the weapons found at crime scenes have been unidentified highlights that there is a significant amount of illegal firearms present in Ghana, albeit a determination of the exact amount remains a challenge.³⁷ It has been found that local gunsmiths produce small arms in most West African countries, including

Ghana.³⁶ Furthermore, the Tri-border area between Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso has been frequently used for the smuggling of small amounts of small arms and artisanal weapons, with Bawku, Tumu, Hamile, Sampa, and Elubo serving as key smuggling hubs.³⁶ Consequently, Ghana serves as a source of arms and ammunition, albeit in regional comparison, this can be defined as small-scale trafficking.³⁶ Nonetheless, the proliferation of small arms still poses a vulnerability to Ghana as trafficking is perceived as a valid career for youth in Ghana, due to the money provided and the lack of alternative employment.³⁸ While Ghana has pursued a two-pronged approach of targeting the economic and security component of arms trafficking, poor institutional coordination has led to conflicting initiatives, with overlapping small arms laws and regulations complicating enforcement.³⁸ These dynamics weaken state authority, empower non-state actors, and create resource networks that could be exploited by external extremists. Consequently, small arms proliferation represents a significant vulnerability that increases Ghana's exposure to regional instability and risks the escalation of conflicts into violence.

Illicit Financial Flows

Illicit financial flows (IFF) present a vulnerability for Ghana, as they undermine governance legitimacy and further open space for illicit networks. As IFFs divert public resources, they weaken Ghana's ability to invest in its infrastructure while further undermining public trust. Ghana's extractive sector has been identified as the main enabler of IFFs, as gold mining

³⁶Mangan, F., & Nowak, M. (2019). *The West Africa–Sahel connection: Mapping cross-border arms trafficking*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

³⁷National Commission on Small Arms and Light Weapons. (2025). *Open-source gun incidents (OGI) in Ghana: First quarter report (January–March 2025)*. Accra: Government of Ghana.

³⁸Mangan, F., & Nowak, M. (2019). *The West Africa–Sahel connection: Mapping cross-border arms trafficking*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

and informal mining (“galamsey”) are the main channels of IFFs.^{39,40} IFFs from illegal mining in Ghana were estimated at approximately \$1.7 billion in 2013.³⁹ The report further indicates that trade mis-invoicing during the period 2002 to 2011 amounted to \$14.39 billion, representing annual average losses of \$1.44 billion.³⁹ This represents a significant loss of funds that followingly undermines Ghanaian development and investment. A report of Global Financial Integrity indicates that these practices sustained, as mis-invoicing has been identified as a key risk of IFFs throughout the mining process.⁴⁰ Yet, this is not an isolated issue of the extractive sector as it holds several consequences for Ghana’s democracy. As the role of government officials and multinational mining companies is believed to be significant within IFFs⁴⁰, this undermines the public trust in Ghana’s democracy. This issue is further exacerbated by the fact that these IFFs have begun to enter the political process in form of campaign funding. An exploratory study of CDD Ghana has identified nine major financiers of political parties and candidate campaigns that have also 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.⁴¹ Ghana’s vulnerability here consequently presents as the undermining of public trust in democracy, both through illicit funds that delay development and a perceived corruption of political processes, which can hold severe consequences, especially

in marginalised regions where limited development investment already fosters feelings of neglect. This issue is especially relevant when considering the current regional context. Since 2020, Africa has experienced a resurgence of military coup d’états which followed an upsurge in terrorism and insecurity in the Sahel. This has been described as the third wave of coups in Africa, encompassing takeovers in Sudan, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon.⁴² 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. In this regard, it needs to be noted that roughly 33% of Ghanaians would approve of the army governing the country.⁴³ In the case that elected leaders abuse power for their own gain, around half of Ghanaians perceive military intervention as legitimate.⁴³ Drawing on the Democratic Peace Paradox, this vulnerability illustrates that, while democracies may maintain a stable and peaceful environment, illicit financial flows can create internal tensions, especially if the support of society for democratic rule seizes. Illicit financial flows that undermine public trust and delay national development, paired with a substantial support for military intervention, followingly represent a significant vulnerability that later could translate into individual push factors towards violent extremism, such as perceived economic exclusion and inequality, as well as corruption, that undermine the democratic legitimacy.

³⁹ACEP. (2015). *Illicit financial flows and the extractive industry in Ghana*. Accra: Africa Centre for Energy Policy.

⁴⁰Global Financial Integrity. (2025). *Mapping of illicit financial flows risks along the supply chain of gold mining in Ghana*. Washington, DC: Global Financial Integrity.

⁴¹CDD Ghana. (2022). *Understanding how illicit money fuels campaign financing in Ghana*. Accra: Centre for Democratic Development.

⁴²Afriyie, 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.

⁴³Afrobarometer. (2025). *Ghana round 10 summary of results*. Accra: Afrobarometer.

Illicit Crime

Despite the significant resilience potential in communities, Ghana's security border posts are ill-equipped,⁴⁴ thereby rendering border communities susceptible to the infiltration of extremist groups. This argument gains further leverage when considering the role of illicit crime, such as artisanal mining, smuggling, cattle rustling, and counterfeit goods.⁴⁵ Since 2023, Ghana has become the largest money laundering zone by volume for stolen cattle from Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire.⁴⁶ As cattle rustling is a tool that is significantly used by armed groups, such as JNIM and the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP), to finance their operations and establish influence in local communities,⁴⁶ this offers an entry point for extremist groups into local communities. It here needs to be noted that JNIM has increasingly been using Ghanaian territory since 2022, both as a hiding retreat, and to further obtain resources, including food, fuel, motorcycles, as well as recruits.^{47,48} In addition, there have been reports of bandits and criminal groups operating in Upper West Ghana and along the Ivorian-Ghanaian border, both in cooperation and independently from JNIM.^{47,49} The tri-border area between Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso has been identified as a main hub for illicit cross-border trade, including the smuggling of various goods from Ghana, such as cyanide, mercury, explosives, fertilizer, and gold.⁵⁰ Furthermore, counterfeit goods, as well as cannabis, are smuggled from Ghana to Burkina Faso, for both

domestic consumption and transport to Mali.⁵⁰ This issue is not to be understated, as it not only presents a significant security issue, but further facilitates financial flows to extremist groups, consequently sustaining them. According to studies, Ghana currently serves as a supply line, while the perception of the Ghanaian army as relatively strong has caused the group to refrain from attacks.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, Ghana's role as a transit point and operational area for smuggling can raise crime and insecurity in border areas. This not only undermines the trust in border communities but further creates economic and security conditions that make violent extremism more attractive to the individual, as illicit groups may offer employment and safety. Consequently, Ghana's role in illicit trade creates a vulnerability that could reinforce push factors, such as poverty and youth unemployment, by fostering the attraction of shadow economies.

Governance Deficits

The 2024 Afrobarometer Round has revealed that there is generally a low trust in Ghanaian political institutions.⁵¹ As is shown by the Afrobarometer survey, close to 40% of Ghanaian society do not trust the Parliament and the Electoral commission at all.⁵¹ With further 34.8% of society stating that they trust parliament only a little, and in the case of the electoral commission 30.5%, this reflects that around three quarters of society have no to little trust in the political institutions.⁵¹ This issue is also mirrored in the case of the police.⁵¹ While there is proportionally a higher trust

⁴⁴Ibrahim, S., & Gariba, J. (2024). Ghana's resilience to terrorism: Costly signalling of terrorist groups or strength of counter-terrorism strategy? *Ghana Social Science Journal*, 21(2), 69–87.

⁴⁵Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. (n.d.). *Observatory of illicit economies in West Africa*. Geneva: GI-TOC.

⁴⁶Berger, Flore. 2025. *Cattle Rustling and Insecurity. Dynamics in the Tri-Border Area between Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana*. Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime.

⁴⁷Berger, Flore. 2025. *Cattle Rustling and Insecurity. Dynamics in the Tri-Border Area between Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana*. Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime.

⁴⁸de Bruijne, K., Courtright, J., Suaka Yaro, D., Ellis, G., Mensah, P. N. K. A., Khalfaooui, M., & Tanko, E. (2024). *A beacon of democracy? How hyper-political competition increases the risk of violent extremism in Ghana*. Clingendael. Netherlands Institute of International Relations.

in the courts of law, 28.4% still do not trust the institution, whereas 33.5% hold little trust.⁵¹

Trust	Parliament (%)	Electoral Commission(%)	Police (%)	Courts (%)
Not at all	39.7	39	41.9	28.4
Just a little	34.8	30.5	28.8	33.5

Figure 1: Trust in Ghanaian Political Institutions.⁵²

These results consequently show that there is generally a low trust of Ghanaian society in political institutions as well as state institutions. Drawing on the Democratic Peace Paradox, it has been prior illustrated that democracy needs continuous maintenance to mitigate tensions and sustain its democratic legitimacy. If democratic institutions lose their credibility in society, this undermines the democratic culture and makes Ghana vulnerable for extremist movements that propagate alternative systems. It especially should be noted here that the results are reversed for the Ghana Armed Forces, where roughly 41% of the population trust the military a lot and around approximately 25% trust it somewhat.⁵² This also relates to the prior illustrated support for a military takeover. Such a low trust in state institutions followingly undermines the democratic legitimacy and, if left unaddressed, could later translate into push factors of perceived political exclusion, as well as corruption.

What is important to note here is that these vulnerabilities do not automatically

lead to radicalisation but rather create a fertile ground for the structural drivers underlying radicalisation. Consequently, these vulnerabilities translate into specific social, economic, and political pressures – here identified as push factors – that may place Ghana at risk.

5. Push factors to Violent Extremism

While some individuals are attracted by the ideology and the thrills of activism within extremist groups, other individuals seek to join these groups because of personal grievances, problems, and frustrations.⁵³ Within the academic literature, relative deprivation of a group, which includes economic, political, and social deprivation, has been the most cited push factor for radicalisation.⁵⁴ Based on the case of Ghana, the following chapter illustrates the factors that push individuals towards violent extremism, by looking at the economic, political, and social drivers of radicalisation.

Economic Drivers

One major push factor towards violent extremism can be socio-economic deprivation, which includes not only material deprivation, such as poverty and inequality, but also structural inequalities, such as unemployment and economic marginalisation.⁵⁵ For the case of Africa, poverty has been the most cited push factor of radicalisation, whereas unemployment was frequently cited to foster frustrations and offer a higher practical availability to extremist recruitment efforts.⁵⁵

⁵¹Afrobarometer. (2025). *Ghana round 10 summary of results*. Accra: Afrobarometer.

⁵²Afrobarometer. (2025). *Ghana round 10 summary of results*. Accra: Afrobarometer.

⁵³Prah, P. K. W., & Chanimbe, T. (2021). Ghana's readiness to combat terrorism: Strategies of security institutions. *International Journal of Intelligence, Security, and Public Affairs*, 23(3), 367–399.

⁵⁴Vergani, M., Iqbal, M., Ilbahar, E., & Barton, G. (2020). The three Ps of radicalization: Push, pull and personal. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43(10), 854–870.

⁵⁵Vergani, M., Iqbal, M., Ilbahar, E., & Barton, G. (2020). The three Ps of radicalization: Push, pull and personal. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43(10), 854–870.

In Ghana, nearly the majority of the population stated that their present living conditions are very bad (44%) or fairly bad (22,9%).⁵⁶ The 2024/2025 Afrobarometer round further illustrates that the perceived living conditions of the majority of Ghanaians have worsened.⁵⁶ In addition, approximately 27% of Ghanaians stated that they are unemployed, but looking for a job.⁵⁶ Indeed, it needs to be noted that in 2024, 41% of Ghanaians were classified as multidimensionally poor.⁵⁷ Linking to the Democratic Peace Paradox, it was illustrated that people support democracies as long as they feel the benefit of it. Socio-economic gaps, like a perceived low standard of living and unemployment, consequently threaten the democratic culture of Ghana, and undermine the consent of society. Data here further shows that, on average, approximately 64% of the population affected by multidimensional poverty were living in rural areas, while averagely only 30% were living in urban areas.⁵⁸ Consequently, multidimensional poverty is twice as high in rural areas, highlighting significant development gaps that need to be addressed, as this form of inequality and socio-economic marginalisation can foster grievances and push individuals towards extremist groups.

This issue is especially relevant when considering Ghanaian youth (under the age of 25), which approximately make up 56% of the population.⁵⁹ As has been shown in a recent Afrobarometer Report, the Ghanaian youth (18-35 years)

especially struggles with unemployment and education opportunities.⁶⁰ Poverty and unemployment can present significant push factors to the individual, as it not only limits the perceived personal opportunities, but further fosters feelings of economic exclusion. As unemployment also translates into a higher practical availability of recruitment efforts, these structural issues offer an entry point to extremist actors. As noted earlier, Ghana has been increasingly used as a hub for money laundering which has fostered illicit economies. In such an environment, unemployment as well as multidimensional poverty could push citizens, especially young people, towards criminal livelihoods of which many overlap with extremist networks.

The importance of these potential economic push factors cannot be understated and further reflect the discussed paradox of democracy. As has been noted, it is primarily the economic performance that matters in the perception of democratic performance.⁶¹ If people believe democracy – and consequently the economy - not to be performing, they may stop supporting the system altogether.⁶¹ Consequently, the here discussed economic drivers - poverty, unemployment, and socio-economic exclusion - may not only push individuals towards violent extremism, but further actively undermine the democratic system.

⁵⁶Afrobarometer. (2025). *Ghana round 10 summary of results*. Accra: Afrobarometer.

⁵⁷Ghana Statistical Service. (2024a). *Ghana 2024 statistical year overview*. Accra: Ghana Statistical Service.

⁵⁸Ghana Statistical Service. (2024b). *Multidimensional poverty: Ghana 2023 annual household income and expenditure survey*. Accra: Ghana Statistical Service.

⁵⁹UNICEF. (2022). *Generation Unlimited Ghana: Ghana country assessment of the youth ecosystem*. Accra: UNICEF Ghana.

⁶⁰Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny, J. (2020). International Youth Day: Unemployment and education are Ghanaian youth's most important problems (Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 382). Accra: Afrobarometer

Political Drivers

Political push factors include such factors that undermine the individual trust in governance and create grievances that consequently lead individuals towards violent extremism. These factors could include perceived injustice, political marginalisation as well as political grievances.⁶²

The analysis shows that such feelings of political exclusion have been present in Ghana. A recent report from the 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.⁶³ Instead, only 12% felt that the Ghanaian political system provides room for citizen participation.⁶³ This highlights a significant disengagement from governance processes,⁶³ that needs to be seriously considered as it could foster feelings of political marginalisation and missing representation, potentially making individuals more susceptible to recruitment attempts from extremist groups. Again, this issue is significant among the youth who feel excluded from democratic processes and decision making.⁶⁴ This is also reflected in the fact that only a third of Ghanaians believe that ideas of young people should be considered for the improvement of the country.⁶⁴ Considering the fact that the youth significantly struggles with poverty and unemployment, this economic and political exclusion makes Ghanaian youth highly vulnerable to possible manipulation by extremist groups, who offer financial

benefits but also a sense of belonging and political purpose. While there are many efforts in civil society to include the youth in policy decision-making processes,⁶⁴ the Afrobarometer surveys show that there is still room for efforts that not only include but also acknowledge and respect the opinions of the youth.

Linking to the identified vulnerabilities, it needs to be noted that corruption in Ghanaian public institutions remains a wide-spread issue, with approximately 18% of respondents admitting that they engaged in bribery to access public services.⁶⁵ This is in so far relevant as that corruption has been identified as a relevant push factor in African radicalisation.⁶⁶ Consequently, these issues of disengagement and corruption could further undermine the already low trust of Ghanaians in political institutions, reinforcing their political alienation and making them more susceptible to the recruitment efforts of extremist groups.

The discussed political push factors towards violent extremism reflect the paradox of democracy: while Ghana's democracy rests on the principle of majority rule and frequent elections, not all groups may feel represented in these processes. While the whole of society decides, not all are represented or included. In the case of Ghana, this does not only apply to the youth, as there already is a broader pattern of political disengagement in society. As groups and individuals feel persistently excluded from

⁶¹ Diamond, L. J. (1990). Three paradoxes of democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 1(3), 48–60.

⁶² Vergani, M., Iqbal, M., Ilbahar, E., & Barton, G. (2020). The three Ps of radicalization: Push, pull and personal. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43(10), 854–870.

⁶³ Ghana Statistical Service. (2025). *The governance series*. Accra: Ghana Statistical Service.

⁶⁴ Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny, J. (2020). International Youth Day: Unemployment and education are Ghanaian youth's most important problems (Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 382). Accra: Afrobarometer.

⁶⁵ Ghana Statistical Service. (2025). *The governance series*. Accra: Ghana Statistical Service.

⁶⁶ Vergani, M., Iqbal, M., Ilbahar, E., & Barton, G. (2020). The three Ps of radicalization: Push, pull and personal. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43(10), 854–870.

the political processes, such democratic tensions can translate into a political alienation that pushes individuals towards radicalisation or violent extremism.

Social Drivers

Finally, there are also social factors that may push individuals towards extremism. These factors concern the everyday social experiences of individuals, such as social exclusion, dispossession, victimhood, victimisation, stigmatisation, ethnic and religious tensions, as well as migration.⁶⁶ While Ghana generally fosters a peaceful coexistence, extremist groups are keen to exploit grievances, especially along cultural, ethnic or religious lines. This is even more significant for groups that feel excluded from power and development.

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 UNHCR, migration to Ghana has increased since 2022, amounting to 20,534 refugees last year.⁶⁷ This increase in migration has placed additional pressure on Ghana's already limited resources and contributed to a rising inequality, and social tensions.⁶⁸ It further needs to be noted that the majority of migrants originates from Burkina Faso and Togo.⁶⁷ While this is not unsurprising, the spillage of Burkinabe refugees has put stress on local communities: in the 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.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the sustained migration has led to a rising Anti-Fulani Sentiment in Ghanaian border communities. As many Fulani communities from the Sud-Ouest have fled to northern Ghana, mutual resentment between communities has been growing.⁷⁰ As much as 42% of host communities attribute the increase in insecurity, banditry, and cattle rustling to Fulani migrants, albeit largely without evidence.⁷⁰ These local conflicts could be exploited by extremist groups for support, especially in the communities along the shared border with Burkina Faso.⁶⁹ Followingly, these forms of intercommunal tensions significantly threaten the resilience of border communities and foster the potential radicalisation of individuals, especially among marginalised populations.

The fragility of Ghana's borders and their linkages to illicit economies, already highlighted as a vulnerability, is consequently directly linked to these social push factors, such as tensions in border communities and ethnic conflict. Considering the Democratic Peace Paradox, this also reflects the paradox of civil liberties as well as polarisation. While freedom of movement, association, and religion can be factors of resilience, they also allow radical actors to mobilise individuals and fuel ethnic tensions, especially in the context of migration. Consequently, although ethnic and religious coexistence have been identified

⁶⁶Vergani, M., Iqbal, M., Ilbahar, E., & Barton, G. (2020). The three Ps of radicalization: Push, pull and personal. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 43(10), 854–870.

⁶⁷UNHCR. (n.d.). *Refugee data finder*. Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

⁶⁸Yakohene, A. B. (2025). *Tackling Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Ghana: Interventions of the State*

⁶⁹Aubyn, 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.

⁷⁰Berger, Flore. 2025. *Cattle Rustling and Insecurity. Dynamics in the Tri-Border Area between Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana*. Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime.

as a resilience factor of Ghana, this ethnic diversity can also foster tension, under the conditions of limited resources and insecurity, as has been the case with migrants in border communities.

6. Conclusion

While democracies tend to be externally peaceful, they are not inherently immune to internal conflict. Instead, it is important to notice the internal tensions in democracies that may foster violent extremism and push individuals towards radicalisation. This paper has identified democratic legitimacy, a culture of peace, peaceful ethnic-religious coexistence, and effective security initiatives as significant factors that have contributed to Ghana's resilience. Nonetheless, the country is still confronted with vulnerabilities, such as regional instability, illicit crime, governance deficits, and political violence. 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". 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 eliminate the motivation of individuals which has been discussed as push factors within this article. This 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 exploitation by extremist actors. To counter the illustrated push factors, Ghana needs to strengthen its investment in development, inclusive decision-making, anti-corruption efforts as well as community resilience, 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.

About the Author

Sarah Sophie Kappert is a doctoral researcher at the Institute for Development and Peace (INEF) at the University of Duisburg-Essen, where she serves as a researcher in the project “African Non-Military Conflict Intervention Practices” (ANCIP). Having obtained her master’s degree in International Relations and Development Policy from the University of Duisburg-Essen, her work centers on unconstitutional changes of government, multipolarity, and norm contestation.

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KOFI ANNAN INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING TRAINING CENTRE
PMB CT 210, CANTONMENTS, ACCRA-GHANA | T: 233(0)302718200 | F: 233 (0)302718201