Rescuing Nkrumah

BY

SAM BROADWAY

In today's Ghana, the socialist ideas of the country's first president Kwame Nkrumah have been declared irrelevant by the major parties. But a new generation is reviving them and giving them an organizational home.

In June, at an easy-to-miss two-story house with chipping white paint in Accra's Asylum Down neighborhood, the Convention People's Party (CPP) — Ghana's oldest political party and the party founded by radical Pan-Africanist Kwame Nkrumah — celebrated its seventieth anniversary. Despite the presence of the Winneba Youth Choir and a large cake decorated in the party's red, white, and green, a greater number of the white plastic folding chairs arranged under the guest tent remained empty rather than filled. The honored guests sitting on stage and the media workers roaming across the view likely outnumbered the guests by two-to-one.

Elder CPP apparatchiks and former party members gave speeches to a mostly absent crowd. Despite there being few ears to hear it, a single theme emerged: the need for the party of Nkrumah and its long-separated factions to reunite and support a single candidate in the approaching presidential elections.

Reunification may be the smallest of the challenges facing the party that still boasts Nkrumah's cockerel as its symbol, in a country where the political imagination has been crippled by neoliberalism, where the two establishment parties compete primarily for who is the least corrupt and has the best slogans, and where political allegiance is fluid to nonexistent. Meanwhile, the parties the CPP hopes to reunite have maintained as much electoral significance as they have cohesion.

Despite its rhetoric, the CPP's recent past raises questions about its commitment to socialist, or Nkrumahist, ideas. Meanwhile, the dream of reversing the long-done damage of factionalization seems to be in violation of their most famous creed, uttered once or twice during the celebration: "Forward Ever, Backward Never." Fortunately, Nkrumahism in Ghana is not isolated to the CPP.

The CPP and Nkrumah: Now and Then

Once the cake had been cut and eaten (chocolate and red velvet) and the first copies of the newly republished Convention Newspaper were auctioned off (several for as much as 10,000 Ghana cedis, or roughly $2,000 — absurd for a paper retailing at around 50 cents), I had a chance to speak with the party's Acting General Secretary.

A white rooster statue at his back, Kobilah Bomfeh leaned out of his seat in the dimly lit, green-walled main office of the party's headquarters and rejected the insinuation that the CPP was a socialist party.

"The CPP's ideas are symbolized in what is authentically Ghanian and we don't believe in these cliches of Western-dominated ideas," Bomfeh declared. "We have the homegrown ideology called Nkrumahism. You can call it socialism if you're coming from the West, but to us it is Nkrumahism, which is built on Ghanaian [sic] authentic ideas: self-reliance, the right to self-determine, equal opportunity, and social

justice for all … and Pan-Africanism."

Bomfeh's definition of Nkrumahism is almost totally incorrect, even if he's right that there are some African origins to Nkrumah's beliefs. But Bomfeh's misguided statement is symptomatic of the general population's overall lack of familiarity with Nkrumah's ideological legacy.

"A reassertion of African culture … that's what Nkrumah stands for for most people," said former NDC mayor of Accra, Nathaniel Amartiefo. "The average Ghanaian, when he thinks of Nkrumah, is drawn to the idea of the African personality."

"Beyond [the Nkrumah Mausoleum and Nkrumah Circle], there's no place where you see Nkrumah defined or redefined in any form," said Emmanuel Debrah, professor of political science at the University of Ghana. Indeed, the only attempts that have been made to define or redefine the Nkrumah legacy have come in the form of politically motivated back-and-forths between the two establishment parties.

Under the late-president John Atta Mills, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) — the center-left party that associates unconvincingly with Nkrumah's legacy — officially enshrined Nkrumah as the country's founder and named his birthday, September 21, as Founder's Day. As soon as power shifted to President Nana Akufo-Addo of the rival New Patriotic Party (NPP) — the center-right party descended from capitalist and independence incrementalist J.B. Danquah — the name and date of Founder's Day changed. It is now celebrated on August 4, the day Danquah founded the United Gold Coast Convention, the organization out of which the CPP would form and which would later become the latter's chief source of opposition.

It is clear that, lacking a national consensus on and awareness of Nkrumah's legacy, Ghana's Nkrumahists need to struggle on many fronts.

"The CPP is the most popular party in the country. But it is one thing

being popular and yet another one translating that popularity into winning the votes of the people," Bomfeh said, either projecting calculated confidence or political obliviousness.

Almost every other Ghanaian you'll encounter around Accra will disagree with Bomfeh. One of my taxi drivers laughed as he realized he was dropping me off at the CPP headquarters. Amartiefo brutally diagnosed the state of the party: "Very, very arthritic. They don't have much of a life. Simply nostalgia. The recollection of old men. But as a political force they are spent."

Bomfeh still claims that it's "most likely, looking at the mood of the country" that the CPP can unify its offshoots around a single candidate in 2020.

"After all, these parties are not separate. They are not different … they all came from the CPP," he argues. But that CPP, despite celebrating its seventieth anniversary, did not, in fact, exist between 1966, when Nkrumah was overthrown, and 2000, when the ban on the party's colors, name, and symbol was lifted. With one exception in the late 1970s — when Dr Hilla Limann united the former CPP forces in the form of a quickly overthrown People's National Party — the CPP laid mostly dormant during its thirty-eight-year ban, leading most of its membership and leadership to abandon the party altogether.

It is true that many in the CPP's current leadership fought hard to reinstate the original vehicle of Nkrumah's ideology. But to suggest, as the lackluster seventieth anniversary did, that the CPP is the unmitigated, direct descendant of Kwame Nkrumah's own Convention People's Party, is to ignore the political significance and impact not only of past factionalization but present divisions.

In fact, it is the more recent divisions that should worry the leadership. Today's disagreements not only originated out of wholly different circumstances than those preceding (i.e., will rather than necessity); they also signal a serious shift in socialist political energy and consciousness

away from the CPP, its historical epicenter.

The Breakaways: Good, Bad, and Ugly

At the center of this shift was Kwame Nkrumah's ideological, and literal, heir, his daughter Samia Nkrumah. Just over ten years after the CPP ban ended, Samia became chairperson of the party. For many, this signaled a reinvigoration of the CPP's Nkrumahist ideological foundation and a renewed commitment to taking power.

"Under Samia's chairmanship … there was a revival of Nkrumahist spirit and leadership … [we] saw some genuine attempts at bringing back the party to life," said former CPP youth organizer, Ernesto Yeboah. This revival, however, was not meant to last.

By 2012, less than a year into Samia's leadership, Dr Paa Kwesi Nduom, the party's former flagbearer and 2008 presidential candidate (who also served in two ministerial positions under the NPP), broke with the party to found the center-left Progressive People's Party, for which he is the current flagbearer.

"I think, along the line, his intention was always to have a … body over which he'd be in total control," said Ivor Greenstreet, the party's 2016 flagbearer and candidate, of his predecessor. "And then maybe his route through the CPP was not because of belief in its principles or ideologies but as a vehicle to develop his own personal brand or … assist in his journey in politics."

This NPP is one of the parties that the CPP's own acting general secretary believes is "not separate" from their own.

Yeboah put it much more bluntly. "He was the former flagbearer … who wasn't even ready to associate with Nkrumah and yet [he was the]

flagbearer of a socialist party. He didn't want to say he was a socialist."

The loss of Nduom, who many within the party saw as a strong and capable leader, was a blow to an adolescent CPP redux. Though, for a party ostensibly committed to its Nkrumahist bona fides, its questionable just how much harm the loss of a covert, opportunistic liberal could have done.

The real loss came in 2015. Samia Nkrumah had stepped down as chairperson of the party to stand for the flagbearer position — the most coveted position in any Ghanaian party as it often entails presidential candidacy — in the CPP's annual congress. Despite being the CPP's only Member of Parliament in recent memory, Samia lost the election.

Depending on with whom one speaks, the reason for Samia's loss varies between her own ineptitude, on the one hand, and external interference, particularly by the NDC, on the other.

"Your rank and file have certain expectations of you as a chairman," said Greenstreet, who defeated her in the election. "They expect you to have raised money to pay for party offices. They expect you to have raised money to pay for logistics for motorbikes and pickups for party campaigns … [Samia] hadn't done that … fortunately, Bad Boy Ivor came along and did what he did."

Others, including Samia herself, claim that the political establishment had a much more intimate role in determining the outcome of the flagbearer contest.

From the outset of her political career, Samia had a reputation as a parliamentary rogue — she believed in an independent CPP — often voting in accordance with her Nkrumahist conscience and against the wishes of the ruling NDC. According to Samia, when this happened, certain NDC officials would call Greenstreet asking "Who does she think she is?"

Indeed, a US State Department cable from 2009 confirms that the NDC

was not only "paying dearly" to small opposition party MPs to join their majority but were disgruntled by Samia's independence. This hasn't helped to assuage the conspiratorial suspicions of the party's former members.

"This is a party that struggles to even do signboards to [advertise campaigns]; it struggles financially to be able to do *that*. But at the congress, so much money … an obscene amount of money was just thrown at [delegates] just to ensure that they do not produce Samia Nkrumah as a flagbearer of the party," said Yeboah, who is also the founder of the Economic Fighters League (Fighters, for short), the most recent group to form out of a CPP breakaway.

"Every single delegate was given an envelope," said Samia, using a euphemism commonly understood to mean "cash bribe." "I was running against the NDC and maybe some elements in the CPP."

By 2015, Samia was no longer an MP nor within a CPP leadership position. While her allegedly tainted loss was not the final straw, for Ernesto Yeboah, it certainly contributed to his own eventual walkout.

"We felt that [we should] work within the party to ensure that [Nkrumahist] ideas are brought to the forefront," said Yeboah about his initial decision to work with CPP. "At some point we realized that the party's leadership was not very interested in the objectives of the party itself … It was only interested in being on the periphery of our politics, taking money from either NPP or NDC. So that corruption element was very strong."

After Samia's exit, Yeboah preemptively approached several of his more ideologically committed colleagues with the idea of leaving a party they viewed as increasingly corrupt clients beholden to the establishment duopoly.

"They [the CPP] take money to compromise the objectives of the party so that we don't make any impact; because making any impact means that we'll be taking [votes] from either NPP or NDC or both, and the two

main parties not wanting that to happen will certainly find people in our midst [and] pay them to ensure that they sabotage that process," said Yeboah.

Yeboah's discontent with the CPP came to a head later in 2016 when revelations emerged that incumbent NDC president, John Mahama, had accepted a bribe in the form of a car from a contractor in Burkina Faso.

"Ordinarily, this is something that should make a party that is looking forward to [taking] political power very happy. It could have become an electoral message for the party," he said. Yeboah went on to criticize the president publicly and call for him to be investigated.

In response to his perceived arrogance towards a party that the CPP has always seen as a political ally (many of the CPP's former members were absorbed by the NDC), Yeboah received a letter from the CPP's disciplinary committee accusing him of misconduct and demanding he appear before them. He was first suspended as the national youth organizer and then ejected from the party. Though he was eventually absolved by the same disciplinary committee, Yeboah had had his last with the CPP.

"In this particular instance we had the moral duty to [condemn Mahama's actions] because he was committing a wrong against the state … These were things that we thought the party could rally around to show itself as a credible political alternative. They didn't take that," said Yeboah. Yeboah's disillusionment would lead to an organizational break with the CPP — one that leaders like Bomfeh should be less sanguine about.

The EFL: The Future of Ghana's Left?

Yeboah officially started the Economic Fighters League in 2016, along

with several like-minded former CPP members, such as Hardi Yakubu, the CPP's deputy youth organizer.

"Nationalism, socialism, and Pan-Africanism," said Yeboah, listing the three pillars of Nkrumahism after I asked about the CPP's acting general secretary's apparent confusion. "I don't know where Kabila is coming from, but it's just that diplomatic way of telling you they represent nothing. It's as simple as you don't want to say you are socialist," he said.

In just three years, the staunchly Nkrumahist organization now has a membership of approximately 2,500 and is present in all major towns and cities throughout Ghana. "Currently I'd say we are an urban-based organization, which is not desirable," said Yeboah.

However, despite their lack of financial resources — even Yeboah still has to work a day job as a communications consultant — the Fighters have struck fertile ground by tapping into the general population's growing discontent with Ghana's two-party system.

The Fighters began by expressing their distrust in Ghana's "theoretical democracy." In a country where over forty distinct languages are spoken, communicating this idea can be a challenge. So the Fighters use the word *sakawa*, which is from Ghana's most widely spoken language, Twi, and means "fake" or "counterfeit." This idea points to one of their most ambitious goals.

"One of the things that we want to change is the constitution. We feel that our constitution is undemocratic. Our constitution enforces a patriarchal society, it diminishes the role of women, it heightens political polarization because it [has] essentially built … a two-party system," said Yeboah. "So one of our objectives of this revolution — and mind you, for us, this is a revolution — [is] to bring down the system that is oppressing the larger majority of our people."

The Fighters' small size has not deterred their advocacy for local and Pan-African efforts. Recently, they spoke out in favor of Ghana's Rastafari Council's efforts to advocate for the decriminalization of

marijuana as well as in support of the similarly named, though much larger, Economic Freedom Fighters of South Africa. Neither are the Fighters operating under grand delusions.

"What we also see is that [Ghanaians] are not ready to fight," admitted Yeboah. "The conservative nature of the Ghanaian is making this revolution almost impossible. If you check our Facebook platform, we are more than 10,000, and yet those same people … are not ready to show their face. It's because of our political past … there is a fear that's buried in the hearts of many Ghanaians that makes a revolution in it's true Marxist terms … almost unlikely."

It is far too soon to declare whether or not the Economic Fighters League represents a real resurgence of leftist thought in a country where neoliberal and neocolonial economic policy has significantly narrowed the political spectrum. For many, socialism, and even Nkrumahism, is no longer on the political radar. Few even identify socialist politics with the legacy of Nkrumah or the CPP.

"Times have changed. There are very few people who remember the good things that the CPP did," said former mayor Nat Amartiefo. "To most they were the party introduced by Nkrumah that ended up oppressing their population and throwing people in jail. They have never been able to mount a counteroffensive of what they did for education, for housing, for health. They simply have never had the room."

Both Amartiefo and Professor Debrah of the University of Ghana expressed serious doubts regarding socialism's efficacy in the Ghanaian, and even the larger African, context. According to the latter "Nkrumah is a lost paradigm … socialism is no longer tenable in the African environment," and to the former, socialism only resonates with "a very small slice of the population: the educated." Amartiefo went so far as to suggest that Nkrumah's Pan-African vision and support for liberation movements on the continent were "not the kind of … adventure which the ordinary Ghanaian identified with. "It was just too ephemeral, too far away," he said.

Nkrumah may have stretched himself too thin as the leader of a newly independent West African country, especially when one takes into account his travel to Vietnam to advocate for an end to the war. But it is imperative to argue that socialism's "untenable" nature may have more to do with the country's neoliberal, neocolonial environment than its "African" one.

The CPP's leadership maintains some cautious hope that an economic critique can resonate in Ghana. "We don't know whether at a point in time people will understand that … it is the structure of [the economy] that actually is the cause of our difficulties," said Greenstreet, who ran his 2016 presidential campaign on a platform inspired by Franklin Roosevelt called *Frofroapam*, which translates to New Deal or New Covenant. "Unless we change the structure of the economy, we may find ourselves drifting along in the same kind of difficulties."

Skeptics like Amartiefo and Debrah are also not stopping Ghana's more vibrant Nkrumahists. Samia and Yeboah believe not only that Ghana is fertile ground for socialism and Nhrumahism, but that now is the time for it to begin taking shape.

"We want to be liberated from [neocolonialism]; we also want the unity of Africa," said Yeboah, "So we can say, it's now time for the people's revolution."

"This is what the country is waiting for … an alternative to these two big parties to emerge," said Samia who plans to run for a new parliamentary seat in 2020. "If there was a party operating with Nkrumahist ideology, I have no doubt they would do well. We *will* [emphasis added] break some doors and lay the foundations for these dynamic forces to emerge."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sam Broadway is a masters candidate studying journalism and Africana studies at New York University. He is a former Peace Corps volunteer, having served as an educator in Rwanda from 2013 to 2015. His primary academic interests are Sub-Saharan African politics, socialism, and documentary photography, particularly in Ghana, Uganda, and Rwanda.

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