



The Status Quo



Isaac Bohulu

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Dedication

To:

*Present and future
generations of Ghanaians
whose livelihoods depend, largely,
on the output of the state*

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“Let me ask you, my son, this democracy of ours; is it really good for this nation?”

“Well...errrrm...errrrm.” I stuttered, taken aback, and not finding the words to answer this rather unexpected question. “Errmm, I think...”

“Wait,” Grandpa jumped in as if to save me from my confusion; “let me explain my question. This democracy we have fallen so much in love with; is it really serving the interests of the nation and the needs of our people?”

This democracy we have fallen so much in love with; is it really serving the interests of the nation and the needs of our people?

I did not say anything; I just looked at the old man, still taken aback by the sudden shift in the conversation.

“Yes? I am waiting; what do you say?” Grandpa pressed his question.

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“But Grandpa, why this sudden deviation? Your question is completely unexpected” I said trying to find a foothold.

I know, but go ahead and answer it; your answer is very important to me” Grandpa persisted.

“Well, Grandpa; I think our democracy is serving us fairly well. We are electing leaders of our own choice, and we are doing so freely. There is freedom of association, a free press, and a semblance of the rule of law. What could be better than that? Besides, our democracy has been described as stable for having gone through successful transfers of power from one government to another. It’s only the economy that is not so good; but, all told, I think our democracy is okay.”

“Oh democracy;” Grandpa responded in a disappointed tone, “how it has blinded even the educated. You people think that this democracy is

*Oh democracy; how it has blinded even the
educated*

okay for us but, in reality, we are running around in circles.”

“Running around in circles? I don’t understand”

“Listen; I will show you why our democracy is not working for our peoples, why it needs to change, and the things that must change.”

Ok, Grandpa, I am all ears”

“My son, let’s consider the office of ‘president of the republic’, what do think about that position?

“The president? How do you mean, Grandpa, what is wrong with that position? Our president is freely elected, so what could be wrong with him” I quizzed, not knowing what could be wrong with the president.

“Agreed”, grandpa conceded, “but don’t you think that the president of the republic is too powerful?” he added, wearing a quizzical look on his face.

“Ha, Grandpa; is that the problem?” I asked, holding back a strong urge to burst out in laughter. “The president of the republic needs to be a powerful person, otherwise how is he going to

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govern this nation? Grandpa, I don't see anything wrong with our president being powerful”

“No, he answered with a chuckle; I did not say the president doesn't need to be powerful. I said he is too powerful, and that is a problem.”

“What is this old man, driving at”, I said under my breath, as I pondered what I was going to say to him in response. I had to say something quickly because he had been looking at me since he finished speaking.

“Grandpa”, I managed to find my voice, “it is a constitutional requirement. The president of the republic is also the head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Surely, the constitution wants our president to be very, very powerful. What can be wrong with that?” I ended, this time, with a mocking smile.

“My son,” Grandpa said gently touching my knee as he spoke, “surely you know the saying ‘power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely’, don't you?” He paused to get my answer, but I only gave him a nod of my head so he continued. “When you make one person fill the

two positions of ‘president of the republic’ and ‘head of state’ you create a perfect recipe for abuse of power and political corruption, the kind that plagues our society today”.

“How’s that, Grandpa?” I challenged, thinking that he was ‘crying wolf’ where there was none.

“You still don’t understand?” he said with some exasperation. “Can’t you see that a president, under our current democratic system, is too powerful? Look, the president of the republic can be likened to a giant octopus possessing a myriad of tentacles that touch every sphere of political and economic activity. That is a recipe for absolute corruption.

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“Hmm, Grandpa, you are making things up. I think a powerful president is good for proper control of

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things in the nation.” I said, showing my disagreement rather openly.

“Don’t worry yourself”, grandpa said in a very accommodating tone, very soon you will understand clearly what I am saying to you. You may not agree now, but remember; the first thing that needs to change in this democracy is the overwhelming power of the president of the republic. In the current scheme of things, we have created a recipe for corruption and the abuse of power.”

“Okay Grandpa, I hear you,” I said, still wearing my mocking smile. So what else needs to change in our democracy?”

“Four more things that need to change in this democracy”

“Four more things Grandpa; and which are they?” I quizzed.

“One has to do with parliament, my son.”

“With parliament; what’s wrong with parliament? Parliament is made up of persons who have been elected to represent the people, what then can

be wrong with parliament?” I quizzed, determined to defend our democracy against the attacks from this old man.

“Don’t be too excited, my son;” Grandpa said, touching my knees; “you will soon find out.”

“OK Grandpa, I am all ears; tell me what is wrong with parliament?”

“Parliament is not as powerful as it should be,” Grandpa said with a clenched fist.

“Eeii grandpa, now you are talking about power,” I said triumphantly as though I had him cornered, “a moment ago, you said the president of the republic is too powerful. Now you want more power for parliament, are you not contradicting yourself?”

“No, no, no; there is no contradiction” Grandpa stated strongly, shaking his head. “Don’t you people talk about separation of powers in a democracy,” Grandpa continued, “what is the purpose of that separation, huh?” he ended, his trademark quizzical look returning to his face.

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“Separation of powers serves the purpose of checks and balances so that one arm of the state does not usurp the power of the other arms of the state,” I said confidently, remembering my A-level lessons in Government.

“Exactly, my son,” Grandpa shot back excitedly, “checks and balances; that’s the proper phrase. Now, tell me, when the president appoints the majority of his ministers from parliament, how can parliament serve as a check on the executive?” he ended rather animated.

“So Grandpa; you are saying that parliament is not independent enough because the president appoints ministers from parliament?” I asked, rather intrigued.

“Exactly; in effect, it makes parliament play second fiddle to the executive.”

“Is that to say that parliament cannot be an effective check on the executive, Grandpa?”

“What else can that mean, my son? The parliament of this nation needs to be more powerful; it must be completely independent of the executive.”

“You are right grandpa; I think I agree with you on this one. Parliament needs to be truly independent to play its watchdog role.”

“There is something else about our parliament that needs to change, but I will wait till we get there.”

“Ok, Grandpa; so what else is wrong with our democracy? You mentioned the power of the president and the independence of parliament; what else is wrong?”

“Political parties, Grandpa said wryly”

“Political parties, Grandpa? In that case, everything about our democracy is wrong?” I said, clearly mocking him, but he completely ignored my comment and continued:

“This nation depends almost entirely on political parties for the development of its economy; that is not good enough,” Grandpa said forcefully, touching my knee in the process.

“But Grandpa, that’s the role of political parties in a democracy. How can anything be wrong with that?” I asked, looking directly into Grandpa’s eyes for the first time since this conversation began.

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“The real problem is that political parties have not played this role well”, Grandpa shot back, raising his voice. “The state has given them a role to play and they have not played it to the satisfaction of the people, yet we keep them in that role; that is not good at all” he ended pointedly.

“How can you say, Grandpa, that our political parties have not played their roles well; where is the evidence?” I challenged.

“Evidence, you ask for evidence? You are in the city so you should have the evidence. Look at the economy of this nation, how well has it performed across all the years of our democracy?”

“You have a point there, Grandpa. I think that, in many ways, our political parties have not managed the economy of this nation well.” I said in agreement.

“And you know why that is so?” Grandpa said looking sharply to his left and right, as if he was afraid that someone might hear what he was about to say to me.

“I am listening Grandpa, I have no idea.”

“It’s because our political parties are concerned with seeking and retaining political power first and foremost, that is what their energy is focused on. Thinking about the people comes second.”

Our political parties are concerned with seeking and retaining political power first and foremost. Thinking about the people comes second.

“Hmmm, you have made a serious point. Political parties have to seek power first before they can govern. It’s not surprising if that is their foremost preoccupation.”

“Is it not absurd, therefore, that we allow political parties to run the economy almost exclusively?”

“I think you are right, Grandpa. In football parlance, our political parties play the role of coach, referee, and player. So, if their focus is on something else, then the development of our economy will suffer.”

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“Exactly, my son; and that is why we should not allow them to play that all-in-one role in the development of our economy.”

“Now my son, do you want to know the next thing that could be better in this democracy?”

“Yes Grandpa, I am all ears,” I answered, wondering what the next issue on his mind might be.

“The next thing that must improve in this democracy is the district assembly system. I think it’s weak” Grandpa said with emphasis.

“Weak? No, our local governance system is a model for much of Africa. How can it be weak?”

“It’s weak my son; it is weak. It has very little capacity to execute its mandate of delivering development to the districts.”

“Little capacity? I don’t understand, Grandpa.”

“Yes, little capacity in terms of financial and human resources.”

“But there is the district assemblies’ common fund. How can you talk about little financial capacity?”

“Indeed there is. But tell me, with the common fund in place, how well have all the district assemblies performed? The poor and deteriorating state of many of our towns and villages is the evidence you need.”

“Grandpa,” I said leaning forward and holding his hand, “I didn’t know you were so politically alive. I had never looked at our democracy this way.”

“That is why I am glad that you came to visit me at this time. I have been dying to tell my observations to you. I didn’t want to go down the grave with these observations. But let’s continue. There is yet one more thing that needs to improve.”

“Ok, grandpa. Let’s hear it”, I said, wondering what it might be.

“Our governments do not pull the population along with them”

“What, what is this ‘pulling’ you are talking about?”

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“Oh, I thought this would be easy to grasp,” Grandpa said a little surprised at my answer. “Now answer me, what role does the general population play in the development of the nation?”

“Role; is the general population required to play any role in development? It is the responsibility of the government to develop the nation; the population expects that. All that the people need to do is to pay tax, and that’s it.”

“That’s exactly what is happening”, grandpa responded.

“The government says ‘I can do all, I will do all, and the people say ‘do it and let’s see’, isn’t it?”

The government says: “I can do all, I will do all”; and the people say “Do it and let’s see”

“Something like that, I said nodding my head.” But can anything be done about that? I don’t see it”

“Have you considered what can be achieved if the population worked in tandem with our governments?” Grandpa asked sounding philosophical.

“Not really, Grandpa.”

“Let me tell you, we should make all citizens feel that they have important parts to play in moving this country forward. This is clearly lacking in this nation. That needs to change.”

“So you are saying, that apart from paying taxes the citizens could be more involved in the development of this nation?”

“Yes, my son. I am also saying that the responsibility lies with our governments to pull the population along in that direction. Anything short is a serious flaw in our democracy”

“Ok, Grandpa. And what is the next issue? I asked completely oblivious that he had touched on the five issues already.

“Hey wake up, my son. I said five issues, and I have already outlined my case for change” he said giving my knee a little knock.

“Already? Gosh, I lost track, grandpa. Now, let me see if I can recollect the five issues.

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“You said that our president is too powerful and that, in your opinion, is a recipe for corruption and abuse of power, right?”

Grandpa didn't answer; he waited for me to continue.

“You also said that parliament cannot perform its watchdog role on the executive well because it is not independent enough. And you also accused our political parties of not properly playing the roles assigned to them, adding that this has led to the mismanagement of our economy, is that right?”

“Yes that is so, continue,” Grandpa assured.

“Then you said that our district assembly system is weak, both financially and technically. You said that, as a result, the district assembly system does not have the capacity to deliver development to the districts.”

“Yes, well done, but there is one more left”

“Errmm.. yes, yes; you said that the government has the responsibility to pull the population along,

and get it to play a more active role, in the development of this nation.”

“Bravo, my son. You have clearly shown that you were paying attention.”

“How could I not pay attention, Grandpa? Listening to you is a great privilege, but I am wondering how the flaws you have pointed out can be addressed; What must be done?”

“I think that we need to make changes in eight broad areas, my son.”

“Eight areas Grandpa; which are these?”

“First, we must diffuse the excessive power of the president by separating his dual role of ‘president of the republic’ and ‘head of state’.”

The president of the republic should not be head of state.

“Grandpa, you mean the president of the republic should not be head of state?”

“Exactly; I think there should be a separate ‘president of the republic’ and a separate ‘head of state’.”

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“And why is that necessary? All over the world, most presidents are also heads of state. Grandpa, you are bringing up something from Mars” I said teasingly, turning my head to the side to avoid catching his eye.

“My son,” Grandpa said in a very calm tone of voice, “our people advise us not to drink the soup before the *fufuo* is ready. Be patient; I will clearly explain to you every change I am suggesting. Now, let’s just list the changes we need and then take things from there, step by step.”

“Ok, grandpa. Sorry, it’s just that I was a little taken aback by your suggestion.”

“Can I proceed?” Grandpa asked, looking straight into my eyes. I did not say anything, apart from a nod of my head.

“Ok. Now, the next change that needs to happen is to make the ‘head of state’ position reside in a body called the ‘state council’.”

The 'head of state' position should reside in a body called the 'state council'

“So you are saying, Grandpa, that the ‘head of state’ position should not be given to a single individual?”

“Exactly that, my son; and I will explain later why that should be so.”

“OK, so what is the next change?”

“You seem to be in a hurry, my son. Are you tired already?” Grandpa said, shaking my knees rather vigorously.

“No, I am not tired. I am just eager to know what you have up your sleeves. But Grandpa, I am stronger than you are, how can I be tired when you are not?”

“Ok then, let’s continue. Next change; we must completely separate the functions of parliament from those of the executive. Parliament must be truly independent of the executive arm of the state.”

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*Parliament must be truly independent of
the executive arm of the state*

“What are you suggesting, Grandpa?”

“That a member of parliament should be a member of parliament only and nothing else.”

“Oh, you are saying that members of parliament should not be ministers of state; is that it?”

“You are brilliant my son. Now you are waking up; that’s exactly what I am saying.”

“But grandpa....”

“Sssh” Grandpa hissed, his right index finger on his lips, “don’t run ahead of me. I will explain at the right time.”

“Ok, I will wait; I was only a little curious. Please continue, Grandpa.”

“I am sure you will protest vehemently against the next change needed in our democracy”

Grandpa warned, and continued:

“I think we should keep political parties out of parliament.”

“Oh Grandpa, please don’t give me a heart attack. How do you intend to keep political parties out of parliament?”

We should keep political parties out of parliament

“By vesting the district, municipal, and metropolitan, assemblies with the power to elect members of parliament from the assemblies”

“Are you saying we should not allow political parties to sponsor their members to parliament as pertains now?”

“You got it, my son, but hold your protestations till later. You will soon understand.”

“Oh Grandpa, you are pushing too many things for later. I may forget what I want to say.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t forget. I like to do things in their proper order. Let’s list the changes that

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are needed, and then we can go into the details; agreed?”

“Ok Grandpa, if you say so.”

“The next change is closely related to the one I just mentioned.”

“Ok; what is it, Grandpa?”

“That, any person who seeks to be a member of parliament should first serve in a district, municipal or metropolitan assembly.

Any person who seeks to be a member of parliament should first serve in a the district assembly system

“Hmmm; I have no comment on this one, Grandpa.”

“OK then, let’s go to the next change. The state should not allow political parties to be in complete control of the national economy.”

The state should not allow political parties to be in control of the national economy

“Are you suggesting, Grandpa, that we should not allow political parties to plan, execute, and monitor, the development of this nation?”

“We should not allow them. I think they have done a poor job at that.”

“That’s a tough one, but I believe you have strong reasons to back this suggestion. You have so far made six suggested changes to our democracy. What are the other two?”

“Next, the district assembly system should be restructured” Grandpa continued.

“You want the district assemblies restructured; and to what purpose?”

“To remove the present weakness and enable the assemblies to deliver real development to the districts.”

The district assembly system should be restructured to enable the assemblies deliver real development to the districts

“Hmmm Grandpa, I hear you.”

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“The last one is simple: The gap between the state and her citizens should be bridged”

“Is that the same as saying the state should pull the people along to play a more active role in development?”

The state should pull the people along to play a more active role in the development of the nation

“Yes, my son; exactly.”

“Grandpa, these are serious changes you have suggested, however, they are very controversial, don’t you think so?”

“No doubt they are, but controversy is not necessarily bad.”

“Not bad; how do you mean grandpa?”

“Being controversial means that you stimulate discussion”

“And you hope that discussion will lead to a sharpening of these ideas?”

“Not just that. It could also lead to the crafting of a better system of governance for this nation.”

“But Grandpa, the democracy being practiced in this nation has historical antecedents, and it's being practiced in many countries.”

“Agreed, my son; but is this democracy serving our nation well?”

“How do you mean, Grandpa?”

“How is this democracy improving the lives of our citizens; how is it fighting corruption; how is this democracy bridging the gap between the poor and the rich; tell me, my son?” Grandpa replied, almost shouting, and showing some emotion. And without waiting for me to respond, he continued:

“The only thing this democracy has done well is to create a strong power center that allows the political party ruling at any time to manipulate the state in its favour, to the exclusion of the mass of the people. Why are we clinging to this democracy like a drowning man to straw?”

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“Grandpa, you are suggesting that we craft our own form of democracy based on the changes you have mentioned; true?”

“True; the people of this country can use these suggested changes as the building blocks. Let these ideas be discussed and refined until we come up with our own form of democracy; one that truly works for this nation and her people.”

“I see,” I said, rather moved by the passion with which this old man made these points.

“And who knows my son, if we do a good job, our democracy could be a model for the whole of Africa.”

“You are right, grandpa. Ghana has always been the trailblazer for much of Africa.”

END OF PART 1