



# A House Divided

Isaac Bohulu



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First published in 2017 as a full book under the title “This Nation Must Change, A voice from the village

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Cover photos by Neom and Jonathan Bean on Unsplash

Book cover design: Isaac Bohulu

## Dedication

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**To:**

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

## A HOUSE DIVIDED

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“So Grandpa, what are we talking about today?” I asked, looking at the old man.

“Let’s take a look at our parliament.”

“Ok, grandpa you said earlier on that parliament is not independent enough”, I consented, placing the constitution on a small table beside me.

“No, don’t put it down” Grandpa protested pointing to the constitution, “you will need it soon”

I picked up the constitution, flipped through it, and asked Grandpa:

“What do you want me to read?”

“Open to the section on the appointment of ministers of state. I have forgotten the specific article; find it” Grandpa ordered.

I checked the table of contents and found the relevant section to be Article 78.

“I found it Grandpa; it’s Article 78. Do you want me to start from the beginning?”

“Yes, at the very start”

*“Article 78(1): Ministers of State shall be appointed by the President with the prior approval of Parliament from among members of Parliament, or persons qualified to be elected members of Parliament, except that the majority of Ministers of State shall be appointed from among members of Parliament.”<sup>1</sup>*

“Article...”

“It’s ok”, grandpa stopped me before I could proceed, “that’s the section I needed.”

“Grandpa, what is your issue with this article of the constitution”, I quizzed, wondering what this old man had in mind”

“Do you know why I say parliament is not independent enough?”

“Is it because the President appoints the majority of his ministers from parliament?”

“Yes, that is one reason. But there is another reason, and I want us to consider that first”

“Another reason; which is it?”

“My son, the very composition of parliament works against its independence.”

*The very composition of parliament, works  
against its independence*

“I don’t understand Grandpa; how do you mean?”

“Be patient, you will soon find out. Let me ask you; how do people get to become members of parliament?”

“They contest the parliamentary elections, and if they win, they get into parliament.”

“Yes, that is obvious enough; but how do they get to contest the elections?”

“Oh, that? They go through the political party primaries and, if they are successful, get to contest the parliamentary elections.”

“And they contest the parliamentary elections on the ticket of political parties, don’t they?”

“Yes, Grandpa”

“So you see, my son, parliament is composed of the elected representatives of political parties”

“Yes, that is the case, grandpa”

“Do you therefore see that those who enter parliament go there to represent political parties, and not the people?”

“Hmm grandpa, that is a contentious one. MPs represent constituencies; that’s a fact.”

“That is what you have been made to believe. MPs supposedly represent constituencies, but what they represent in reality is the branch of their Parties in the constituencies. They don’t represent the people.”

*What MPs represent, in reality, is the branch of their parties in the constituencies; they don’t represent the people”*

“Grandpa, that is very debatable”

“You say so because you refuse to accept the truth. Tell me; the people who contest the parliamentary primaries, are they ordinary people or political party people?”

“They are political party people, Grandpa, you can’t contest if you do not belong to a political party”

“Great; and who are the people who vote for the contestants in the primaries; ordinary people or political party people?”

“It’s party people, grandpa.”

Grandpa’s line of thinking was beginning to make sense to me. Apart from the very few who may contest as independent candidates, the choice of a parliamentary candidate is entirely the choice of a political party; the ordinary constituents are not involved in any way whatsoever.

“I think I am beginning to see your point now, Grandpa”

“I am not done yet. Look, what really happens is that the parties select their candidates and present them to the electorate for election. But the person who

gets elected is a party person from the very beginning. Do you see that, my son?

“Yes, Grandpa; that means that the MP for this constituency, for example, is, in reality, party A’s MP, or party B’s MP for the constituency, depending on which party’s person won the election”.

“Exactly; and that is, actually, their official designation, did you know that?”

“Yes Grandpa, I know that”

“So get it straight my son, and don’t be deceived; MPs, in reality, do not represent the people in the constituencies. They represent political parties.”

*Get it straight, and don't be deceived; MPs, in reality, do not represent the people. They represent political parties*

“You are right, Grandpa, and that probably explains why they always toe the party line in parliament.”

“You are seeing the light now; and why do you think they always toe the party line, my son?”

“I think it’s because they feel some allegiance to their parties. After all, without their parties they will not be in parliament.”

“Excellent, my son, that is exactly the case. The first allegiance of MPs is to their political parties, not to the people they are supposed to represent.”

*The first allegiance of MPs is to their political parties, not to the people they are supposed to represent*

“I see, grandpa. That is a new insight into things.”

“Did you know that in parliament every party has a chief whip?”

“Yes, Grandpa; and I hear their duty is to ensure that their MPs toe the party line.”

“And have you observed that in our parliament, national issues are politicized, with the majority taking to one side, and the minority taking to the other side?”

“Yes Grandpa, our parliament is too politicized. Serious issues affecting the people are discussed

through political party lenses, and many times, MPs take entrenched positions on issues.”

“Exactly; and it’s all because, in parliament, MPs represent the interest of their parties.”

“But Grandpa, they agree sometimes, don’t they?”

“Yes, that may be true; but what we see is completely different. The few times we see them agreeing, appear to be when the issues under debate affect them directly.”

“They agree also when our national football teams go for international tournaments and win.”

“True; but on the issues which affect the people of this country, however, our MPs always toe the political party line.”

“Grandpa; sometimes I think they do that to score points to enhance their chances of winning or maintaining political power.”

“So what does that do to the interest of this nation? It is relegated to the background.”

“Grandpa, I remember the CNTCI and the STX incidents that resulted in fiascoes; look at the embarrassment those two incidents caused to this nation”

For the benefit of the reader, CNTCI refers to a loan agreement contracted by the NPP administration under former President J. A. Kuffuor. During discussions of the loan agreement in parliament, the then NPP majority in parliament exploited its superior numbers to push the loan agreement against the vehement protestations of the minority NDC opposition. That loan never materialized, and the location of the CNTCI was later said to have been a hair salon.

Similarly, during the administration of the late former President John Evans Atta Mills, the majority NDC in parliament used its numerical advantage to pass a loan agreement with STX of Korea to deliver housing units to Ghanaians, despite the vehement protestations by the minority NPP. The STX housing project never materialized, following board-room fights among promoters of the project.

“Very embarrassing indeed, my son; but the embarrassment could have been avoided, if our MPs had looked at the two agreements with the national interest as the main consideration.”

“Grandpa, the sad thing about all this is that, in both cases, the Majority MPs accused their colleagues in the Minority of being jealous of their success in attracting funding into the country”

“And that is not surprising; that is what happens when MPs take entrenched positions along political party lines.”

“So Grandpa, it’s possible that all this division along political party lines affects the quality of debate in parliament”

“That’s the whole point, my son. The mere composition of the parliament of this country drives it to serve the interests of political parties. I dare say that if there is any independence from political party

influences in parliament, our MPs are yet to demonstrate it.”

*If there is any independence from political party influences in parliament, our MPs are yet to demonstrate it*

“That means that the party in the majority always gets its way, even when its policies may be wrong.”

“Exactly, my son; and sadly, in the end, it is this nation that becomes the loser.”

“Very sad indeed; and I thought that our MPs were serving the people’s interest first!”

“Well, now you know, my son. But that’s not all. There is yet another thing that severely weakens the independence of parliament”

“Is it the appointment of the majority of ministers from parliament, Grandpa?”

“Yes, my son; it weakens parliament not in one, but in two ways.”

“I think the first way is that MPs appointed ministers of state are almost always absent from parliament.

That means they are not able to contribute to parliamentary debates.”

“Brilliant point, my son; and have you noticed anything else?”

“Yes, Grandpa, anytime issues with serious political implications are to be voted on, such minister-MPs always present themselves in parliament. I wonder how informed they are when they present themselves to vote for their Party’s position.”

“So you see, my son; that is another proof that MPs in parliament serve the interests of their parties.”

“You are right, grandpa. There should be no doubt about that.”

“But the point I am making on the appointment of MPs as ministers is this; it robs parliament of the quality and richness of its already politicized debates.”

“Yes Grandpa, very much so.”

“And can you guess the second effect this has on parliament, my son?”

“Hmmm Grandpa, errrrm no; please tell me.”

“Do you think that MPs who are appointed as ministers will do a good job of scrutinizing bills brought before parliament?”

“Grandpa, are you saying they will not have the time to do that?”

“Not only that; I don’t think they will be well-disposed to doing so, my son.”

“And why not, Grandpa?”

“It’s simple; first, such MPs will always support their parties’ positions. Then, more seriously, an MP who is also a minister may not have the courage to oppose a bill that has been proposed by the executive of which he or she is a member.”

“That is a very serious point you’ve made, Grandpa.”

“It is, my son; and it should be easy to see that a minister-MP in our parliament is doubly impotent. He

or she cannot oppose the party; he/she cannot oppose the executive government!”

*A minister-MP in our parliament is doubly impotent. He or she cannot oppose the party, he or she cannot oppose the executive government*

“My son; I hope you now see how our parliament has little independence, and why I say it is weak.”

“Yes, Grandpa, MPs don’t seem to have the power to speak their minds in parliament, because they have to toe the Party line. Then, minister-MPs

*How can parliament check political corruption, if what MPs do is to toe the party line?*

cannot oppose any bills brought before the House. It’s a double weakness, and that is very serious.”

“Very serious indeed; and this nation should not allow this weakness to continue. This weakness needs to be addressed with all the seriousness it deserves”

“I agree, Grandpa; how can parliament check political corruption, if what MPs do is to toe the party line? We need a parliament that will discuss issues with the interest of the nation at the forefront.”

“You are right, my son; but sadly, we cannot achieve that so long as people are not free to speak according to the dictates of their consciences, just because they enter parliament on the ticket of political parties.”

“But Grandpa that’s a tough one; how can we change that; how can this weakness of parliament be addressed?”

“My son, we as a people need to change our thinking.”

“Change our thinking; how?”

“We all need a new thinking on how our people are represented in parliament.”

“But Grandpa, how else can we get MPs, if not through political parties?”

“And who said it is only through political parties that we can elect MPs, my son; who said?”

“But Grandpa, that is what we are used to; the norm all over the world.”

“And what has that norm achieved for this nation, my son? All it has brought about is a polarized, weak, and dependent parliament. And, a while ago, I thought you were not satisfied with that.” Grandpa said, a little agitated.

“No, Grandpa; I have not changed my mind on that. I was just wondering how else we could elect MPs outside of political parties.”

“Let me tell you how; have you considered the possibility of using the district assemblies?”

“The district assemblies?” I shouted the question, a little taken aback.

“Yes, the district assemblies; I think a sure way to strengthen parliament is to get people to become MPs on the ticket of the metropolitan, municipal, and district assemblies.”

“Are you suggesting that MPs be sponsored by district assemblies rather than by political parties?”

“Exactly; we should let these local assemblies elect their own people to represent their constituents.”

“And what advantage will that bring?”

“Can’t you see it? MPs sponsored by district assemblies will owe allegiance to the people in the districts. They will speak at all times for their constituents, the real people on the ground.”

“Uh-huh, grandpa”

“And since the interest of the people, collectively, is the interest of the nation, MPs sponsored by district assemblies will be speaking to the interests of this nation as a whole.”

“Hmmm, I see, Grandpa.”

“Are you sure you see what I mean?” Grandpa quizzed, looking intently into my face.

“Yes, Grandpa; It will eliminate the politicization of national issues that plague our parliament,” I said;

the import of Grandpa's argument coming strongly to me.

"Exactly; and the removal of this politicization will make our parliament an effective instrument in the development of the state. And you know why?"

"Yes, Grandpa. MPs will speak according to the dictates of their consciences; they will do a better job of scrutinizing government plans, and they will make better decisions."

"Exactly, my son; but let me emphasize that, for this to work, the district assemblies should be insulated from political party influence."

"How do you mean, Grandpa?"

"I mean the present system of keeping political parties away from the local government system should remain."

"I guess you are right; otherwise the whole purpose of getting district assembly-sponsored MPs would be defeated."

“Exactly; and there is something else that must happen”

“Yes, Grandpa?”

“Any person who seeks to become a member of parliament must serve in a metropolitan, municipal or district assembly first.”

*Any person who seeks to become a member of parliament must serve in a metropolitan, municipal or district assembly first*

“You mean aspirants for parliament must first serve in the district assemblies; why is that Grandpa?”

“Yes my son, and not only should they serve in the local assemblies; they must serve two consecutive terms before they qualify to contest for a parliamentary position.”

“That’s a very stringent condition.”

“Yes my son; but it is necessary.”

“And why is it necessary to serve in the assembly, and for two terms at that, before anybody qualifies to contest for parliament, Grandpa?”

“We must ensure that such persons will serve their people well, prove their merit at the local level, and show that they can competently represent the interest of their constituents at the national level.”

I was very impressed with Grandpa’s point. I began to see another advantage this arrangement would bring to parliament and the positive impact it would have on its independence.

“Grandpa, that is so true, I said nodding my agreement. And I think I see another important advantage that this new arrangement will bring.”

“You do?”

“Yes, Grandpa; I think making service in the district assemblies a condition for a career in parliament, will draw the best brains into the metropolitan, municipal, and district assemblies.”

“And can you imagine the improvement that will make in their human resource capacity my son?”

“Yes, Grandpa; and an improved human resource will enhance the capacities of the assemblies to deliver development to their areas.”

By this time, I was all for Grandpa's ideas. The current process of selecting parliamentary candidates is too centered on political parties. In some cases, MP aspirants are imposed on the constituency branches of political parties by their national executive. Some of those so imposed often pop up from 'nowhere', their capabilities often unknown.

Having people to serve in the district assemblies for two terms will test their commitment, and offer them the opportunity to prove their capabilities. And it is only committed persons who are likely to be elected to two consecutive terms.

Serving two terms will also completely isolate people who may want to adopt the 'hit-and-run' approach, by which they will seek to gain entry to the district assemblies just to satisfy a necessary condition. I said that to Grandpa, and his response was:

"You are right my son. You see, parliament is a very key state institution, and its independence is vital to national development."

"I agree, Grandpa."

“For that reason, any influence that stifles its independence must be decisively moved out of the way.”

“Yes Grandpa, it must.”

“What I have tried to make you appreciate, is that the election of MPs on the ticket of political parties, and the appointment of the MPs as ministers, seriously weaken the independence of that institution”

“Yes. Your point has been well made, and I agree with you perfectly. But I think our constitution will need to change, Grandpa”

“Of course, that will be necessary. You are holding the constitution; tell me the changes that we will need to make.”

There was a pause lasting some minutes, as I flipped through the constitution to find the appropriate provisions. When I found them I gladly announced:

“Yes, Grandpa; Article 55(3) of the constitution empowers political parties to sponsor candidates for parliament; that will need to change”

“Yes, my son. That power must pass to the district assemblies.”

“Also Article 78(1) of the constitution will need to change. The president of the republic should not have the power to appoint ministers from parliament.”

“That is correct my son. It should never be possible for any member of parliament to be appointed as ‘minister’, whilst serving a term in parliament.”

*It should never be possible for any MP to be appointed as ‘minister’, while serving a term in parliament*

“It should also never be possible for any parliamentarian to vacate their seat to take up an appointment as ‘minister’ while their term of office has not expired.”

At this point, we had been talking for over two hours. I was surprised because the old man had not gotten up at all to go to the washroom. I thought I should allow him to rest, so I suggested to him that we take a break.

“You are right, my son. I wanted us to finish the stuff on parliament. Now that we are done I can take a break. But you have to come back in the afternoon.”

“What time exactly, Grandpa?”

5 pm will be fine. We can talk for two hours before I go to bed. Is that ok?

“Perfect, Grandpa”

END OF PART 4

