

Opinion – Ghana and the World Cup: Assessing Diversionary in Weak States

Written by Thomas Ameyaw-Brobbe

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THOMAS AMEYAW-BROBBEY, JUN 7 2022

Ghana secured one of the five African slots for Qatar 2022 World Cup at the expense of Nigeria. The qualification eased pressure on the Ghana Football Association (GFA) because Ghanaians suddenly forgot that they have a bad team and merely qualified on FIFA's away-goal rule. They have forgotten that Ghana is yet to win a game in 2022, finishing bottom of a group made up of lowly ranked teams like Gabon and Comoros in the Africa Cup of Nations. In preparation for the two-leg games, Ghana put together a four-man technical team, all of whom, but one, have active contracts with employers in Europe and worked concurrently for Ghana on a pay-as-you-go basis. In a rare move, their salaries were shrouded in secrecy, meaning that it is likely to be huge to shake the struggling nation. After the qualification, the government advised that the technical team be maintained until the end of the World Cup, promising maximum support although it had earlier pursued divergent interest to the GFA relating to the coaching job.

Why does the government want the technical team with a possible huge budget to be maintained? This piece goes into the minds of the country's political elites by looking at the prevailing economic situation to answer the question. The objective is to situate the piece in the intersection between sports and politics to demonstrate how sports may shape nonsporting political and foreign policy decisions and how domestic problems may shape foreign policy. To do this, I problematize diversionary theory, offering a broader meaning that fits into the context of weak states to argue that Ghana's political elites are banking their hopes on the high performance of the Black Stars – the national male football team – at the Qatar 2022 World Cup to temporarily distract public attention from the prevailing economic strife. I conceptualize weak states as those whose domestic institutions are functionally constrained by protracted bad governance and conscious political capture, enabling politicians and appointees to hold sway to achieve cash returns on their investments made in acquiring the office. Politicians, civil, and public servants take no responsibility for their actions and statements. Thus, such states elucidate security, capacity, and legitimacy gaps.

Diversionary theory explains that embattled political leaders facing survival threats divert attention outside to distract the public by provoking conflict abroad. The strategy employs three mechanisms: rally-around-the-flag – uniting in-group against out-group; gambling for resurrection – last resort aggressive moves to demonstrate competence; or scapegoating – blaming outsiders for domestic problems. Studies employing historical and case studies have provided enormous evidence of a relationship between domestic strife and international conflict. However, in many weak states like Ghana, there is little evidence of this relationship. Less evidence of diversionary tactics in weak states may be due to two reasons. First, it may reflect the research problem that academic knowledge production and distribution are asymmetric, favoring Western knowledge due to structural inequalities in the international system. Therefore, since Western IR theoretical perspectives were shaped by great power politics, power capabilities, and the Cold War era politics, they arrived at this conclusion. Second, it could be that diversionary theory's premise is problematic, jumping too many steps to make a hasty and narrow conclusion.

In the first place, a state's response to domestic strife could take different forms, depending on the structure of the state's domestic politics and the nature of the strife itself. Thus, I identify four possible responses from which leaders may choose. First, leaders with morals may resign or relinquish power due to the magnitude of the problem relative to their capability to solve. For example, five presidents ruled Argentina between December 20, 2001, and January 2, 2002, due to a serious economic crisis. However, in many weak states where immoral politicians have consciously

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created the weakness to enhance personal power and wealth, it is an aberration to talk about resignation. Second, leaders in democracy may work tirelessly to fulfil the demands of the public due to accountability. Sometimes, some authoritarian states like China may also solve the problem as quickly as possible, fearing nationalist criticism and even an overthrow by mass revolt. However, weak states have less capacity to grant public demands and the leaders have no motivation to solve problems to empower citizens at their expense.

Third, authoritarian leaders may repress the group making the demands. Choosing repression automatically makes initiating conflict abroad irrelevant. However, in weak states like Ghana practicing a loose democracy as a strategy to gain international license or accreditation of membership of modern states system, leaders try to avoid repression, except legitimate force. However, Ghana is shaping a worrying practice where party representatives use media power to repress institutions, groups and the general public demanding a better life. That is, the loose democracy is degenerating into populism, characterized by 'foot-soldiers' – party fanatics recruited and resourced by the parties or individual politicians to preach falsehood, often using verbal attacks, in the media to advance sponsors' interests. Finally, leaders may choose to divert attention, converting domestic problems to foreign policy initiative. In the traditional explanation, leaders will divert attention abroad with aggressive maneuvers. Nevertheless, weak states usually avoid external military conflicts because they are too costly. At best, they may choose to sponsor proxies, often rebel movements which also involve resources.

Consequently, what kind of response is domestic strife likely to motivate in weak states? What response strategy will Ghanaian political elites likely choose? The government's actions provide the answer, albeit covert. It chooses the fourth strategy – to divert attention. However, the explanatory currency of diverting attention by leaders of weak states has nothing to do with prompting conflict internationally. It may shift from the realist perspective. Thus, I leave the meaning of diversionary tactics to what its name suggests – distract public attention by diverting it elsewhere. The 'elsewhere' depends on the particular state and how it makes of it.

Undoubtedly, globalization makes events in one place affect other places. Nevertheless, no matter the nature of exogenous factors, a country's well-being depends on its government's efficiency and leadership capabilities. Thus, many years of government inefficiency have derailed Ghana's economic development, with the current government scapegoating COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine crisis, although the downward spiral has long existed. The Ghana Statistical Service's (GSS) Consumer Price Index (CPI) shows that the Inflation rate for April 2022 was 23.6% from 19.4% in March. The Service's data indicate that inflation increases significantly every month since 2021. However, the April figure is the highest since the Service rebased the CPI in 2019.

Inflation rates of four divisions – transport (33.5%); household equipment and routine maintenance (28.5%); food and non-alcoholic beverages (26.6%), and housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels (25.0%) – surpassed the national average (23.6%). April's food inflation is higher than the average of the previous 12 months (13.5%). The chorus of the general public – except politicians – is that life is unbearable due to the daily upward trajectory of living costs. Ghanaians are paying more for goods and services and more in taxes with the introduction of the obnoxious electronic tax (E-levy) from pockets that have remained the same. The result is significant agitation from the labor fronts for better working conditions.

Consequently, the government hopes to divert public attention from this economic strife that is likely to prolong into the unforeseeable future by distracting the Ghanaian public with sports vis-à-vis the Black Stars and the Qatar 2022 world Cup. Several Evidence show that all kinds of states and regime types from the Ancient Greeks and Romans through to Hitler's Nazi Germany in the interwar years to contemporary democratic state like the US and UK and authoritarian like China, all manipulate sport for nonpolitical sporting purposes. The reason is that international competitions stimulate populations' emotions of belongingness. It bridges diverse individuals and constituencies because they find something worth sharing, binding the people and creating a sense of 'we-ness.' Therefore, the more the national team does well and stays in the competition, the longer the population become rallied around the flag, shifting pressure from the government. Stories of the competition and successes of the national team will take over the airwaves, reducing socio-economic and political discussions. Like Karl Max's suggestion that religion is the opium of the masses, sports, have similar characteristics to create a feel-good factor, making people docile to forget about their problems.

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Although it is a tricky strategy and a short-lived solution, if Ghana does well in the 2022 World Cup the public is likely to temporarily shift its attention from the government's inefficiency in handling domestic affairs. That would imply a successful transformation of domestic politics or strife with foreign policy instrument. Nevertheless, despite the sports-politics relationship, I must note that the emphasis is on the national sport to stimulate emotions. In Ghana, it is football. Thus, we can see that the Western theoretical explanation of leaders' distracting attention through external conflict is narrow. Leaders in weak states also distract attention from domestic difficulties without creating conflict abroad.

About the author:

Thomas Ameyaw-Brobbe is affiliated with the Faculty of Business and Law, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK.