

Ghana thrusts economy into limelight in tight race for president

AFP- When Ghana's Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia announced last year he would run for president, his ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) was certain he would lead them to an unprecedented third term.

Even their slogan dared to say they would be "Breaking the eight" – a reference to going beyond President Nana Akufo-Addo's two terms of four years to reach a third mandate.

Just days before the December 7 election though, Bawumia faces a very tight contest against former president John Mahama who hopes to tap into the frustration of many Ghanaians over the country's economic management.

"The new government that is coming, whether A or B or C. Anybody who is coming, they should wake up with the economy," Richard Norte, a boutique owner in Accra, told AFP.

"They should work out the economy for us."

Results from Saturday's election to decide the successor to Akufo-Addo, who must step down after two terms, and for the new parliament, are expected a few days after the ballot.

A gold, cocoa and oil exporter, Ghana has a history of political stability in a region where recent coups and jihadist insurgencies have other tested democracies.

Since the country emerged from its own military rule in 1992, political power in Ghana has alternated peacefully between the NPP and the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC).

But this year, the country's economic situation has dominated the campaign, with Ghana slowly pulling out of a crisis that

prompted a \$3 billion bailout deal with the International Monetary Fund.

Inflation has steadily slowed, but it is still at around 23 percent, with the cost of living triggering scattered protests in the capital Accra this year.

Several analysts and pollsters have forecast Mahama may win the election because of lingering frustration over what many see as the government's mismanagement of the economy.

– IMF and blackouts –

For Mahama, who was president from 2012-2017 but unsuccessful in 2016 and 2020 bids, that is an opportunity to paint Akufo-Addo's government as a failure.

He has touted his presidential experience as what is needed to guide Ghana. Analysts say many, though, will remember the power blackouts that marked his presidency.

"If we go to war, and we encounter difficulties, we go back to call the retired general to come back and lead us," Mahama said during the campaign.

"I am a retired general and I went to rest, but it is time to come back for we are in a difficult period."

A former central bank official and UK-educated economist, Bawumia has tried to distance himself from criticism over the economic leadership of Akufo-Addo.

He says the economy is recovering from the crisis and is performing better than under Mahama's own administration, attacking the power cuts, known locally as dumsor, Ghana suffered then.

"He said we are a failed government. I want to tell him that we have rather failed to do 4 years of dumsor," he told supporters.

“Ghanaians rejected Mahama in 2016 and 2020. What is he coming to do again?”

Bawumia is also the first northern Muslim candidate to lead the NPP, which is an ethnic Akan and southern-dominated party by tradition.

Bawumia’s selection of a vice presidential running mate from the southern Ashanti region aims to bolster his support in the party’s stronghold there.

But with both top candidates – Bawumia and Mahama – coming from the north, which was traditionally an NDC stronghold, the region is set to be a key battleground.

“The appearance of, particularly, Vice-President Bawumia, seemed to be helping the NPP with gaining ground in the North,” Fred Oduro, a governance expert, told AFP.

Insecurity may also be a major worry for Ghana which like its neighbours Ivory Coast, Togo and Benin, faces violent spillover across its northern border from jihadist insurgencies in Burkina Faso and Niger.

Illegal gold mining that has polluted rivers and damaged land used for cocoa production has also been a concern for some Ghanaians.

But those worries appear far from the minds of most voters.

“The economy is too hard, so if he can do something about it,” said Accra cloth trader Rita Obaapa, talking about the next president.

“He will release more money and jobs for we the youths, we will appreciate it.”

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