

Election of MMDCs: A panacea for all local governance challenges?

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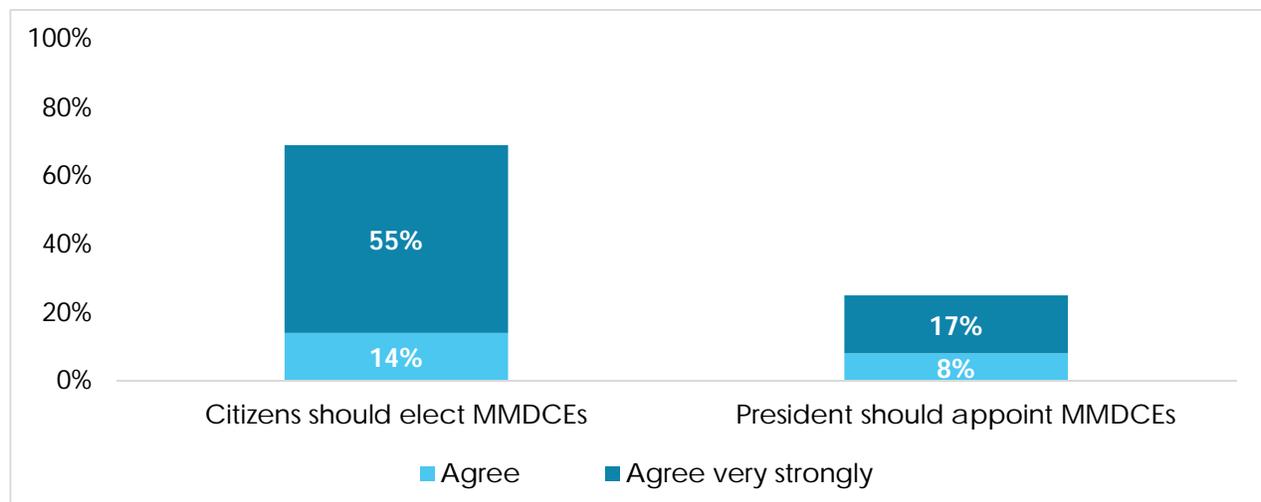
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The agenda of deepening decentralized local government has seen considerable advancement under successive administrations of the 4th Republic of Ghana. Progress has been relatively impressive in the areas of administrative and fiscal decentralization, though significant challenges remain. But far less progress has been made in the area of political decentralization.

Two proposed constitutional amendments hold the prospect of breaking this longstanding stagnation in effective political decentralization. One seeks to allow for the election of metropolitan, municipal, and district chief executives (MMDCs) by citizens (amending Article 243(1) of the 1992 Ghana Constitution). The other would introduce multi-party competition in local government elections (amending Article 55(3) of the 1992 Ghana Constitution).

Both proposed amendments seem to positively respond to long-standing advocacy by many local government experts. Most important, they are consistent with the preferences of a clear majority of Ghanaians, according to Afrobarometer's Round 7 survey conducted in 2017. More than two-thirds (69%) of Ghanaians say MMDCs should be elected by voters (Figure 1). This includes 55% who "agree very strongly" with this option. One-quarter (25%) support the current system of presidential appointment with local government council approval.

Figure 1: Election vs. appointment of MMDCs | Ghana | 2017



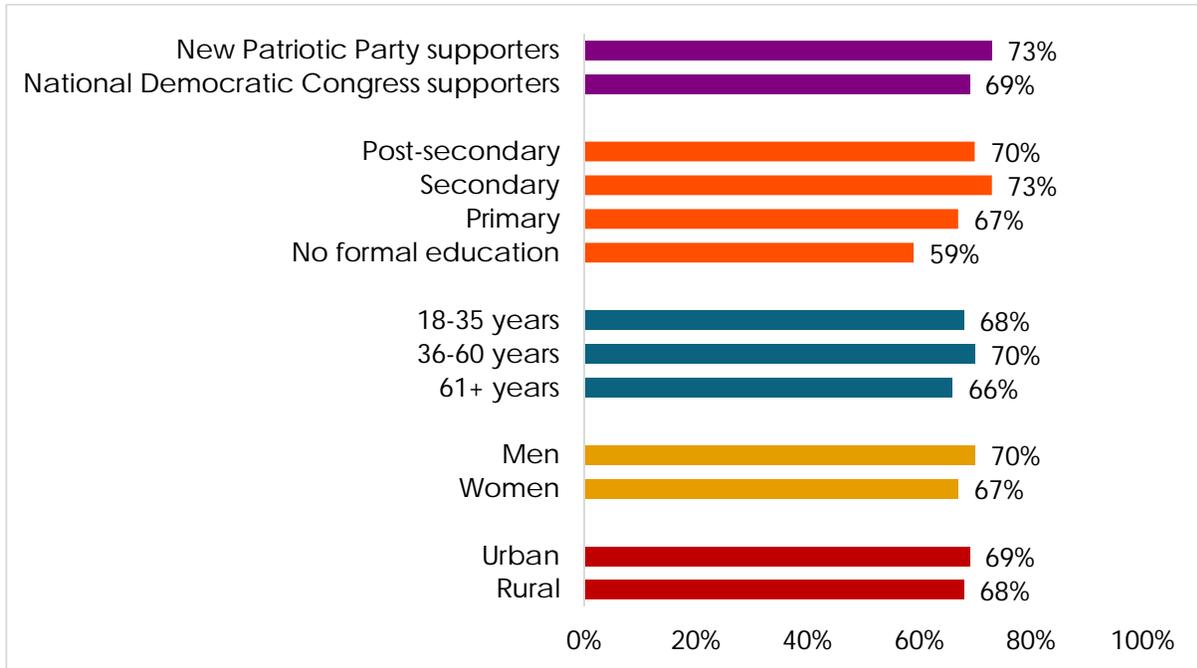
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The metropolitan, municipal, and district chief executives or MMDCs should be elected by voters in the local authority area.

Statement 2: The metropolitan, municipal, and district chief executives or MMDCs should be appointed by the president with approval by assembly members.

Support for electing MMDCEs does not vary significantly by respondents' political-party affiliation, age, gender, or urban vs. rural settlement location, but is higher among better-educated citizens, ranging from 59% of those without formal schooling to 73% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Election vs. appointment of MMDCEs | by political-party affiliation, education, age, gender, and settlement location | Ghana | 2017



(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that MMDCEs should be elected)

However, support for elective MMDCEs or partisan local government elections is far from unanimous. In fact, there are significant constitutional and legislative hurdles to overcome to achieve passage of the amendments. Amending Article 243(1), which is a non-entrenched provision, requires the approval of a two-thirds majority of all members of Parliament. And amendment of Article 55(3), which is an entrenched provision in the Constitution, requires a national referendum in which 40% of all qualified voters do vote and not less than 75% of the votes cast go in favor of the referendum question. There is thus a need to build nonpartisan/bipartisan across-the-board support for the proposed constitutional amendments, and to educate the public on what constitute essential pillars in the construction of firm foundations for effective, accountable, and inclusive decentralized local government. It is therefore fortuitous that the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Centre for Local Governance Advocacy (CLGA), and the Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG) have formed a coalition to mobilize public support for the process.

Finally, though I am philosophically and professionally supportive of the two amendments, it is necessary to throw in a note of caution and offer some friendly advice. Electing MMDCEs would not necessarily address huge technocratic gaps; woefully inadequate funding, aggravated by the low ratio of Internally Generated Fund to District Assembly Common Fund; an entrenched



culture of corruption, self-dealing, and elite self-service; and political apathy in our local communities. Therefore, those leading the advocacy for passage of the constitutional amendments must also forcefully push these related consequential reforms to ensure the achievement of effective, responsive, and inclusive local governance.