

Policy Brief

From Appointment to Election: Reforming Ghana's Local Government System

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Executive Summary

District Chief Executives (DCEs), the chief executive officers of each of Ghana's 261 district assemblies, are currently appointed by the President with the approval of the Assembly. There is a strong national consensus for the local election of DCEs. However, critical questions of phasing, qualifications, partisanship, term limits, and gender representation must still be resolved to avoid compounding existing structural weaknesses. The Constitution Review Committee 2025 recommends a phased, asymmetrical approach under which districts would be classified either as Voting Districts, entitled to direct popular DCE elections, or Non-Voting Districts, where DCEs are elected indirectly by Assembly members, based on objective criteria of population size and economic viability. Unresolved issues requiring constitutional amendment and enabling legislation include: the graduation pathway from non-voting to voting status, candidate qualification thresholds, term limits, enforcement of non-partisanship, and guaranteed gender representation.

1.0 Background and Policy Context

The District Chief Executive is the most powerful official in local governance, responsible for the District Assembly's day-to-day executive and administrative functions. The Constitution describes him as both the head of the Assembly's executive committee and the chief representative of the Central Government in the district. This dual role – accountable upward to a national appointing authority rather than downward to the local electorate – is widely regarded as the most significant structural tension in Ghana's decentralization framework. Following the CRC's submission of its Final Report in January 2026, the government is reviewing the proposed amendments. The recommendations in this brief are drawn from that report and are relevant to ongoing deliberations.

No local community in Ghana, dating back to the colonial period, has ever elected its political or administrative head. In consultations across all 16 regions of the country, the 2025 Constitutional Review Committee, tasked by the Mahama administration to review the 1992 Constitution, confirmed a broad national consensus that this should change: Ghana's democracy is widely regarded as incomplete until communities can elect not only their Assembly representatives but also their DCEs.

The absence of elected local executives is a conspicuous anomaly by regional standards. Across West Africa, locally elected chief executives are the norm: Nigeria elects Local Government Chairmen; Liberia elects District Superintendents; Sierra Leone elects District Councils with executive mayors; Senegal elects Mayors of Communes; and Côte d'Ivoire elects Municipal Mayors. The election of DCEs would align Ghana with the prevailing regional democratic standard and fulfill the longstanding expectation of Ghanaian citizens that genuine devolution must mean accountability to the people, not to the appointing authority.

However, the CRC emphasizes that consensus on the desirability of DCE elections does not resolve the many complex issues that arise, particularly because current districts vary widely in population, economic viability, and administrative capacity. A "revolutionary" or "one-size-fits-all" approach is explicitly rejected in favor of a principled, phased, and asymmetrical approach consistent with Article 240(2) (e) of the Constitution, which requires that local communities be afforded the opportunity "as far as practicable" to participate effectively in their governance.

2.0 Key Policy Challenges Identified

In fulfilling its mandate, the 2025 Constitution Review Committee (CRC), tasked by the Mahama administration with comprehensively reviewing Ghana's 1992 Constitution to identify constitutional gaps, weaknesses, and design features that undermine effective governance, accountability, inclusion, and national development, made the following observations:

Upward Accountability, Downward Deficit

The current practice of presidential appointment means DCEs are primarily accountable to the appointing authority rather than to local communities. Political affiliation with the ruling party, rather than local performance or popular support, has historically determined appointments and tenure in office. This structural arrangement limits local autonomy and blurs lines of responsibility between the local executive and central government representation.

WHY IT MATTERS

Electing DCEs should strengthen accountability to local citizens rather than to the appointing authority. Addressing this structural imbalance is essential for deepening democratic participation, improving local responsiveness, and enhancing public confidence in district governance.

District Inequality and Uneven Viability

The 261 districts in Ghana are profoundly unequal. Many districts created over the past two decades lack the population size, economic base, or administrative capacity to sustain elected governance and its attendant financial obligations. The CRC notes that automatically conferring voting rights on all existing districts would “compound the effect of past mistakes” stemming from politically motivated district creation.

WHY IT MATTERS

Not all districts currently possess the population, economic base, or administrative capacity to sustain direct elections. A phased approach helps ensure that decentralization strengthens local governance rather than reinforcing existing institutional weaknesses.

Partisanship in a Non-Partisan System

Although Article 248(1) of the 1992 Constitution mandates non-partisan local government elections, the party affiliations of elected Assembly members are widely known. Survey data consistently show that a significant majority of Ghanaians nonetheless prefer local government elections to remain formally non-partisan, valuing a less tense, less costly electoral atmosphere and prioritizing local over national political concerns. A critical structural gap, however, is that the current law provides no meaningful enforcement mechanism to prevent parties from sponsoring or financing DCE candidates in what is nominally a non-partisan election. There is no mechanism to sanction party interference in Assembly elections or to disqualify a party-backed candidate running on an ostensibly non-partisan ticket. This is precisely the gap that the CRC's proposed Independent Political Party and Campaigns Regulator (IPPCR) is expected to address through binding campaign regulations specific to DCE elections.

WHY IT MATTERS

Without effective safeguards, political parties could dominate elections that are constitutionally intended to be non-partisan. Clear rules and independent oversight are necessary to preserve the local character of DCE elections and maintain public trust in the process.

Gender Representation Gaps

The current appointive system has not delivered meaningful gender representation in local governance. The transition to an elected system presents both a risk – further marginalizing women if unaddressed – and an opportunity to institutionalize gender balance through structural design. As of the most recent appointment cycle, women account for fewer than 10% of DCEs across Ghana’s 261 districts, and they constitute approximately 7–8% of elected Assembly members. These figures are far below the sub-Saharan African average for women in local governance bodies, which UN Women data puts at 26.05%. They underscore why structural design — rather than aspiration — is necessary to achieve meaningful representation. The CRC’s proposals for a mandatory Deputy DCE of a different sex and for the reallocation of 20% of appointive Assembly seats to local women leaders directly address these documented gaps.

WHY IT MATTERS

Transitioning to elected DCEs presents an opportunity to embed gender inclusion into the design of local governance. Structural measures are needed to ensure women have equitable opportunities to participate in and lead district-level decision-making.

Proposed Reform Framework

To facilitate broader representation and participation in local governance, the CRC proposed the following reforms. Several of the reforms below rely on the proposed Independent Devolution Commission (IDC), a new institution whose establishment requires constitutional amendment and enabling legislation. The IDC is a proposed new institution whose creation requires constitutional and legislative action; it does not yet exist. The CRC recommends that its establishment be enacted prior to or concurrently with the DCE election reforms.

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Phased and Asymmetrical Implementation

The CRC proposes dividing all districts into Voting Districts (VDs) and Non-Voting Districts (NVDs). The Independent Devolution Commission (IDC) is responsible for classifying districts based on objective criteria. The IDC is a proposed new institution whose creation requires constitutional and legislative action; it does not yet exist. The CRC recommends that its establishment be enacted prior to or concurrently with the DCE election reforms.

- **Voting Districts:** Districts that are, or form part of, a regional capital; or districts meeting a prescribed population threshold, set such that the aggregate population of all VDs constitutes at least 70% of the total national population.
- **Non-Voting Districts:** Districts that do not meet the threshold but may graduate to VD status upon meeting the population ratio. Alternatively, adjoining NVDs may apply to merge or consolidate to achieve VD status – a bottom-up, organic pathway to full democratic participation.

In all cases, the DCE shall be elected. In VDs, this means a direct popular election by universal adult suffrage. In NVDs, the DCE is elected indirectly by a two-thirds majority of all Assembly members from a list of pre-qualified candidates, with oversight by the IDC and assistance from the Public Services Commission.

Qualifications for DCE Candidates

Given the substantial managerial responsibility of the office, the CRC recommends prescribing minimum merit-based qualifications beyond those required for parliamentary candidates, while ensuring inclusivity:

- Bachelor's degree or professional qualification with at least 8 years of post-qualification experience, including at least 3 years in a leadership or management role in the public, private, or civil society/community development sector; OR
- Advanced degree with at least 3 years of leadership or management experience in the public, private, or civil society sectors; OR
- At least a high school/post-secondary qualification with at least 12 years' experience in business or community development.

Parliament should prescribe these qualifications through enabling legislation, guided by the principles outlined below:

Non-Partisan Elections

The CRC recommends retaining the non-partisan basis for DCE elections, whether direct or indirect. DCE elections must have a substantively different focus from parliamentary or presidential elections. Allowing all three to be partisan would deprive local communities of at least one competitive election focused on everyday district needs and concerns. The Independent Political Party and Campaigns Regulator (IPPCR) should publish regulations governing DCE campaign conduct, while the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) should provide voter engagement platforms.

Term Limits

The CRC recommends limiting elected DCEs to no more than two five-year terms, whether consecutive or not, by amending Article 246(b). This prevents incumbency entrenchment and creates space for new talent in the local political sphere.

The Deputy DCE and Gender Representation

A Deputy DCE position is proposed to ensure continuity of office in the event of resignation, death, incapacity, or removal. The Deputy DCE must be of a different sex than the DCE, must run on the same ticket as the DCE, and must meet the same qualifications, thereby institutionalizing gender balance at the highest level of district executive leadership.

The same-ticket requirement serves two purposes beyond gender: first, it ensures that the Deputy DCE has a democratic mandate from the same electorate as the DCE, thereby avoiding legitimacy disputes if the Deputy assumes office; and second, it prevents the DCE from appointing a Deputy of their choosing after the election, which would undermine the gender balance requirement. Running on the same ticket also provides continuity of governance during removal proceedings, as the Deputy DCE would automatically assume the functions of the office pending the outcome of any impeachment process.

Appointive Assembly Seats Reform

The current 30% of Presidential appointive seats, which have been captured by ruling-party partisans and have failed to deliver meaningful representation for traditional authorities and other groups, are proposed to be reallocated as follows:

• Traditional Authorities	–	25%
• Local Women Leaders	–	20%
• Local Small Business Owners	–	20%
• Persons with disabilities and persons under 35 years	–	20%
• Community-based non-governmental organizations	–	15%

The IDC would develop selection modalities. Representation of Chiefs would be managed by Paramount Chiefs within the district, with the Regional House of Chiefs adjudicating disputes.

Presiding Member Electoral Threshold

The current requirement that Presiding Members be elected by a two-thirds majority of all Assembly members has led to prolonged vacancies in multiple districts. The CRC recommends amending Article 244(2) to require only a simple majority of all elected Assembly members, thereby enabling functional Assembly governance.

Grounds for Removal of Elected DCEs

An elected DCE may be removed by: (a) the President upon criminal conviction; or (b) impeachment by the District Assembly for gross misconduct, which requires a 75% vote of all Assembly members following sustained allegations. Parliament or the IDC may prescribe additional grounds. During any removal proceedings, the Deputy DCE (see Section 3.5) shall assume the functions of the office until the proceedings are concluded, ensuring continuity of district governance.

Recommendations

In summary, the CRC made the following recommendations:

- Enact constitutional and legislative provisions establishing the Independent Devolution Commission (IDC) prior to or concurrently with the implementation of DCE election reforms, as the IDC is the institutional backbone of the proposed framework. Without the IDC, the classification of Voting and Non-Voting Districts, oversight of indirect elections, management of graduation criteria, and coordination of IGF capacity-building cannot be carried out.
- Amend Chapter Twenty to enable the election of DCEs and to establish the distinction between Voting Districts and Non-Voting Districts, to be administered by the Independent Devolution Commission based on objective population and viability criteria.
- Prescribe minimum meritocratic qualifications for DCE candidates, as specified above, through legislation, balancing managerial competence with inclusive access.
- Retain the non-partisan basis for all DCE elections (direct and indirect), with the IPPCR issuing specific campaign regulations.
- Amend Article 246(b) to impose a two-term limit of five years per term on elected DCEs.
- Create the position of Deputy DCE, elected on the same ticket, who must be of a different sex than the DCE and have equivalent qualifications.

- Amend Article 242 to reallocate the 30% of Assembly seats appointed by the Assembly to traditional authorities, women leaders, small business owners, youth and disability groups, and NGOs.
- Amend Article 244(2) to require only a simple majority of elected Assembly members to elect the Presiding Member.
- Direct Voting Districts to assume full financial responsibility for the emoluments of the DCE and Assembly staff from Internally Generated Funds (IGF) upon the introduction of DCE elections.

5.0 References and Further Reading

1. [Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, 1992, Articles 240–256 \(Chapter Twenty\), 248\(1\), 242, 244\(2\), 246\(b\).](#)
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3. Constitution Review Committee of Ghana, Final Report, 29 January 2026, Chapter VII, paras. 7.52–7.98
4. Constitution of Liberia (1986) <https://judiciary.gov.lr/constitution-of-liberia-2/>
5. Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, 1992, Chapter Twenty (Articles 240–256). <https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/Ghana%20Constitution.pdf>
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7. Local Governance Act, 2016 (Act 936), Parliament of Ghana. <https://lgs.gov.gh/local-governance-act-of-2016-act-936/>
8. UN Women – Women in Local Government (2024) <https://localgov.unwomen.org/sdg-551b-ranking>

About this series

This special issue of the CDD-Ghana Policy Brief series offers accessible, evidence-based analysis of selected constitutional reform proposals and their implications for governance and democratic development in Ghana. The briefs aim to inform public discussion and policy engagement by examining the issues, trade-offs, and potential impacts of key reform recommendations.



Ghana Center for Democratic Development



www.cddgh.org

info@cddgh.org

Accra, Ghana