

# CDD-GHANA POLICY BRIEF

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## The Illusion of Choice

Why Government's Proposed Reform of  
MMDCE Selection Still Falls Short

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Special Issue on Decentralization and  
Local Governance



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## AT A GLANCE

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- Government's proposal: MMDCEs would be “elected” — but only from a field the President and a government-appointed committee have already narrowed: 5 presidential nominees per seat, shortlisted to 3, before voters see a ballot.
- No comparable African democracy filters candidates this way. Kenya, Sierra Leone, Zambia, The Gambia and Senegal, among others, elect local executives from an open field, without any loss of national policy coherence.
- The proposal preserves single-party control of every district, entrenches winner-take-all politics, ties MMDCE tenure to the President's term rather than to MMDCE performance, disrupts local governance for several months after each general election, and imposes the full cost of a nationwide election for a fraction of its democratic value.
- CDD-Ghana's recommendation: remove the President's nomination and vetting role entirely; hold open, non-partisan MMDCE elections on the District Assembly election cycle.

## 1.0 The Issue

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- **Current system** — Under Article 243(1) of the 1992 Constitution, the President directly appoints each MMDCE, subject to confirmation by a two-thirds majority of the District Assembly. Up to 30% of the Assembly's membership is also appointed by the President, so even the confirming body is not fully independent of the appointing authority. The result is a self-referential loop of executive patronage: MMDCEs answer upward to the Presidency, not downward to their local community.
- **Proposed reform** — The Government's Position Paper accepts the principle of election but curates candidacy beforehand: the President nominates 5 candidates per seat; a government-appointed vetting committee shortlists 3; only those 3 go before voters. This replaces presidential appointment with local ratification — not with an open, competitive election.

## 2.0 Comparative Practice

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Approaches to decentralization vary across Africa, but virtually all functioning systems share one principle: the candidate pool for mayoral elections is drawn from parties (where elections are partisan) or from duly registered independent candidates, without political filtering by the national executive. Ghana's current system has no elections at all, and its proposed reform would remain a continental outlier.

| Model                                                      | Countries                                                                                                                    | How it works                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Direct election, open candidacy                            | Kenya (county governors); Sierra Leone (Freetown); Senegal (since 2022); Nigeria (LGA chairmen); The Gambia (Banjul); Zambia | Voters elect the executive directly; candidates qualify through party nomination or independent registration, with eligibility governed by electoral law rather than by central pre-selection. |
| Local council elects the mayor.                            | South Africa; Ethiopia (Addis Ababa); Malawi; Botswana                                                                       | Voters elect the full council; councilors then choose the mayor from among themselves.                                                                                                         |
| Elected office, power held by centrally appointed official | Uganda (Kampala)                                                                                                             | The Lord Mayor is directly and openly elected, but a presidentially appointed Executive Director holds the real budget and administrative power.                                               |
| Ghana's proposed reform                                    | Ghana                                                                                                                        | President nominates 5 candidates per seat; a central government vetting committee shortlists 3; voters choose one of the 3.                                                                    |

### 3.0 Why the "Unitary State" Defense Does Not Hold

Defenders of presidential appointment or political pre-selection of MMDCEs argue that central executive control is necessary to ensure faithful implementation of national policy in a unitary state. This argument does not withstand scrutiny:

- **Unitary status does not require it** — Kenya, Sierra Leone, Zambia, The Gambia, and Senegal are unitary states and electoral democracies like Ghana; yet all elect their local chief executives directly. Not uncommonly, there are cases where opposition-aligned county governors (Kenya) and mayors (Sierra Leone) run major cities under a different ruling party at the center — with no loss or erosion of national policy coherence. Unitary status defines where constitutional sovereignty lies within the state; it does not dictate or imply that the person exercising delegated or devolved authority at the local level must be centrally selected.
- **Policy implementation is a civil-service function** — professional District Coordinating Directors and career civil servants at the district and regional levels already carry out technical implementation and bear administrative responsibility for it. They remain answerable to central standards and policy frameworks regardless of who holds the elected political office at the district level. The primary focus and responsibility of an elected MMDCE is local development and service delivery, not the implementation of national policy.
- **Better policy alignment and compliance tools exist** — conditional fiscal grants, statutory or administrative minimum service standards, sectoral regulation, central auditing and, where necessary, judicial review are the conventional instruments for securing national policy coherence without suppressing local democracy.
- **Pre-selection undermines the accountability it claims to protect** — a directly elected MMDCE faces a recurring incentive to perform for local voters that an MMDCE who must still answer upward to the President (to secure re-selection) does not. Independently administered, statutorily prescribed meritocratic qualification criteria better secure competence than by a politically curated shortlist.

## 4.0 Six Reasons the Restricted Election Still Fails

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1. **Preserves single-party control** — because both the nomination (by the President) and the shortlisting (by a government-appointed committee) are political filters, every MMDCE nationwide will continue to owe their office to the patronage of the President and the ruling party rather than to an independent local mandate — the opposite of the non-partisan system most Ghanaians say they prefer in survey after survey.
2. **Entrenches winner-take-all politics** — a single presidential victory still automatically delivers the winning party and the President control of local executive authority in all districts across the country, regardless of how any individual district actually voted, thereby extending rather than checking executive dominance.
3. **Ties MMDCE tenure to presidential fortune** — a change of president triggers a nationwide MMDCE turnover regardless of local performance, and even a re-elected President must repeat the entire nomination-and-vetting cycle at the start of each new term. Directly elected mayors with fixed terms that do not run concurrently with the President's provide stability and focus on local development goals without disruption from national electoral dynamics.
4. **Political incentives weaken downward accountability** — where the central government defaults on its statutory obligations to the district, an MMDCE who owes his office (and future re-selection) to presidential or party patronage is politically constrained from pressing or defending the district's interests and prerogatives.
5. **Cannot be completed within a reasonable timeframe** — nomination, vetting, campaigning, election and installation across every district could take the better part of a year, leaving many districts without an empowered MMDCE for much of that period.
6. **Imposes election costs without a matching benefit** — held outside the District Assembly election calendar, the exercise asks the country to bear the full logistical and financial cost of a nationwide poll. At the same time, candidates have already been narrowed twice before voters cast a ballot.

## 5.0 Recommendations

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1. Remove the President's power to nominate and the vetting committee's power to shortlist MMDCE candidates.
2. Adopt open, non-partisan candidacy for MMDCE elections, with candidates prequalified based on residency, meritocratic (education, professional experience, "fitness") and other registration criteria prescribed in national law.
3. Fix the MMDCE tenure to a term independent of the presidential election cycle, so a change of president does not automatically trigger nationwide MMDCE turnover.
4. Align MMDCE elections with the existing District Assembly election calendar to avoid the cost and disruption of a standalone nationwide poll.
5. Secure national policy coherence through existing unitary-state instruments — conditional grants, minimum service and performance standards, sectoral regulation, central auditing, and judicial review — rather than through candidate pre-selection. The kind of Devolution Commission recommended by the CRC (but rejected by the Government) could play a critical role in standards-setting, enforcement, and oversight in this regard. It should, therefore, be considered a crucial companion reform.

Nearly 70 years after independence, Ghana's local government system and practices reflect features of top-down, colonial-style paternalism, lagging behind those of its African peers. Half-hearted decentralization continues to stymie accountable and participatory local democracy, service delivery, and development in communities across the country. The Government's proposed alternative to the changes proposed by the CRC will leave Ghana's local government exactly where it has long been: formally decentralized, but substantively centralized.

### 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.



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