

Emergence of “People Power” as a Threat to the Security and Stability of Democracy in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Human societies created systems of governance through the social contract, where citizens give up some freedoms in exchange for protection and accountable leadership. However, abuses of power such as constitutional manipulation and prolonged rule have sparked public resistance and uprisings, sometimes becoming violent and leading to the overthrow of governments. These events or movements reflect “people power”, which is defined as grassroots-driven resistance against established political authority and organized power structures. The phenomenon, if not addressed, could have serious implications for the democratic governance and security of nations, including Ghana. It is for this reason that the research on the “Emergence of “people power” as a Threat to the Security and Stability of Democracy in Ghana” sets its objective to unravel the causes, how it affects Ghana's security, as well as the requirements and expectations of the security agencies in combating it. The study also examined the implications of “people power” for the stability of Ghana’s democracy and proposed various measures to address the menace. The study examined different interpretations of “people power” and its relationship with security and democratic governance. It was situated within the Social Movement, Resource Mobilization, and Framing theories. Data from 100 respondents showed that “people power” is driven by political, economic, and social factors, and that solutions lie in good governance, anti-corruption measures, job creation, effective communication, respect for the rule of law, fair justice, neutral security agencies, and greater citizen participation in governance.

Keywords: “people power”, Security, Democracy, Good governance

INTRODUCTION

Human societies have historically developed systems of governance to maintain order, security, and collective welfare. Under the social contract, citizens exchange some freedoms for protection, while leaders are expected to govern responsibly and remain accountable through mechanisms such as elections. However, abuses such as constitutional manipulation and extended rule (e.g., Uganda under Museveni) have fuelled public resistance and protests, as seen in movements like the Philippines (1986), Iran (1979), and the Arab Spring (2011), where citizens overthrew governments in countries such as Egypt and Libya (Mugisha, 2004; Nishino, 2011). These events illustrate what is commonly referred to as “people power”, which is grassroots resistance against entrenched authority, although it can sometimes lead to instability or ineffective governance. In another vein, “people power” is a political term denoting the populist driving force of any social movement that invokes the authority of grassroots opinion and willpower, usually in opposition to that of conventionally organised corporate or political forces (Educalingo, 2022).

The phenomenon is increasingly evident in developing countries, including Ghana, where it manifests through citizens' disobedience of laws, labour unrest, defiance of court orders, and resistance to state institutions. Kodah (2020) argues that many citizens perceive multiparty democracy as an externally imposed system that does not

fully align with local realities or the interests of ordinary people. He further contends that the disconnect between political elites and citizens fuels agitation and distrust toward state institutions (Kodah, 2020). Weak law enforcement has also emboldened citizens to challenge authorities, including security agencies, thereby creating risks for governance and national stability.

Constitutions generally provide peaceful mechanisms for leadership change through elections. For example, the Constitution of the United States mandates presidential elections every four years (Coleman et al., 2000). However, constitutional manipulation by leaders seeking to prolong their rule often generates frustration and conflict. In Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni altered constitutional provisions to extend his tenure (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2018). Such actions can lead to protests, violent confrontations with security agencies, destruction of property, arrests, and the emergence of resistance groups that challenge state authority.

In Ghana, “people power” is particularly visible in illegal mining (“galamsey”), where miners openly defy institutions such as the Forestry Commission, police, and military. Armed illegal mining groups have occupied forest reserves, destroyed large tracts of land, and polluted major rivers, affecting water treatment systems (Bondah, 2020). According to the Minister of Lands and Natural Resources, Emmanuel Armah-Kofi Buah, the withdrawal of military operations against illegal mining in November 2022 significantly weakened the state’s ability to combat “galamsey”, especially because illegal mining syndicates were using sophisticated weapons in forest reserves and along water bodies to protect their mining activities (Myjoyonline, 2017). In some instances, illegal miners have even threatened negative political consequences when governments attempted to curb their activities. For instance, when President Nana Akufo-Addo threatened to stop mining activities along water bodies, miners warned that such actions could negatively affect the electoral fortunes of the New Patriotic Party (Myjoyonline, 2017).

The study also linked “people power” to electoral violence and institutional interference. Ahead of Ghana’s 2016 elections, the Electoral Commission of Ghana warned that nearly 30% of constituencies could experience violence, while the Ghana Police Service identified more than 5,000 potential conflict hotspots (Adetula, 2016). Another example is the Ayawaso West Wuogon by-election violence, in which individuals claiming to be National Security operatives confronted police officers assigned to maintain order, resulting in injuries, property damage, and public mistrust in the electoral process (Ijon, 2020). These developments demonstrate that widespread defiance of authority threatens democracy, weakens state institutions, undermines national security, and could lead to instability if not properly addressed.

This study, therefore, aims to examine the root causes of public anger and declining trust in state institutions, assess the effects of “people power” on governance and democracy in Ghana, and recommend measures to rebuild confidence, strengthen institutions, and preserve national stability.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The review focuses on works pertinent to the phenomenon and incidents of people's power across various countries. It will analyse the various angles and interpretations espoused by other researchers.

2.1 Various Interpretations and Meanings of the “People Power” Concept

The phenomenon of “people power” has been interpreted in diverse ways across political theory, democratic thought, and liberation movements. According to the Activists Handbook on People Power, 2013), “people power” refers to the ability of grassroots communities to collectively determine the changes they desire and work together to achieve them. The handbook emphasizes collective action, arguing that the strength of a movement increases as more people unite to challenge oppression and injustice (Activists Handbook on “people power”, 2013).

In South Africa, for instance, black communities created people’s committees and forums as informal systems of self-government to challenge apartheid and provide local services. After peaceful efforts achieved limited results, the ANC adopted a more militant approach following the 1976 Soweto uprising, developing the concept

of “people’s war” that combined armed struggle with mass political mobilization and active public participation (ANC, 1979).

The United Democratic Front (UDF) broadened the idea of “people power” by linking local struggles to the national liberation movement and later joining with civic groups, trade unions, and ANC-aligned organizations to form the Mass Democratic Movement (UDF, 1987). It also promoted “pre-figurative democracy,” encouraging the creation of local committees and councils as early foundations for a future democratic society and self-governance (UDF, 1985–1986; ANC NEC, 1985; ANC, 1986).

Other scholars added other dimensions to the concept. For example, Claude Ake (1992) viewed “people power” in Africa as participatory democracy grounded in grassroots involvement, social justice, accountability, and economic rights. He argued that true democracy requires active citizen participation and equitable development, while rejecting authoritarianism, military rule, and one-party systems as obstacles to democratic governance.

In another vein, Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi interpreted “people power” from a liberal democratic perspective, emphasizing free elections, political rights, and citizen participation in governance (Gyimah-Boadi et al., 2003). He argued that citizens desire democratic freedoms and participation in governance despite dissatisfaction with economic conditions, but warned that unmet public expectations can lead to growing frustration with governments (Gyimah-Boadi, et al 2003).

Other scholars also broadened the concept. Alex Boraine (1987) argued that “people power” extends beyond representative democracy to include direct and participatory forms of governance. The ANC (1986) also emphasized community participation as essential to democracy, while Mahmood Mamdani (1988) defined true democracy as citizens having control over decisions affecting their daily lives. Together, these views highlight “people power” as active public participation in political, social, and economic decision-making.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that “people power” is a dynamic and evolving concept. It may involve peaceful collective action, participatory democracy, grassroots mobilization, resistance against oppression, or even militant struggle, depending on the political and historical context. Across these interpretations, however, a common theme emerges: “people power” centres on the active participation of ordinary citizens in shaping governance, challenging oppression, and asserting popular sovereignty.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theories that are relevant to the “people power” concept will be analysed. Theories considered here are the Social Movement Theory, Resource Mobilization Theory, and the Framing Theory.

3.1 Social Movement Theory and “People Power”

Social Movement Theory explains how and why people organize collective action to achieve social or political change. According to Jeff Flynn (2023), the theory focuses on how movements mobilize resources, exploit political opportunities, and create persuasive narratives to gain public support. A central aspect of the theory is the use of communication and framing to influence public opinion. John Noakes and Hank Johnston (2005) explain that movements use “frames” to define problems in persuasive ways, while Robert Entman (1993) argues that framing simplifies complex realities by emphasizing selected issues and linking them into emotionally meaningful narratives. In “people power” movements, such framing helps mobilize public sympathy, encourage participation, and strengthen collective action.

3.2 Resource Mobilization Theory and “People Power”

Resource Mobilization Theory argues that social and “people power” movements succeed when they effectively mobilize resources such as money, leadership, networks, and media support. However, the theory also stresses that resources alone are not enough. Movements must present convincing narratives that persuade people that social, political, or economic grievances require urgent action. According to Bert Klandermans and Jacquelin

van Stekelenburg (1997), the theory is built around three main concepts: framing, identity, and emotions. Protests occur when people emotionally identify with grievances and become convinced that collective action is necessary. Through persuasive communication, movements can reshape public understanding of social realities and mobilize support for protests, reforms, or even regime change.

3.3 Framing Theory and “People Power”

Framing Theory is a theory that explains how information is presented (“framed”) to audiences in ways that influence interpretation, opinion, and decision-making. The theory that describes how media and communicators shape audience perceptions by emphasizing certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others. Framing Theory examines how social movements package messages to appeal to policymakers, the media, activists, and the broader public. Robert Benford and David Snow (2000) explain that the success of framing depends on political opportunities, cultural acceptance, and audience response. They argue further that messages that resonate with public values and experiences are more likely to gain support. Within “people power” movements, framing theory shows how grievances are transformed into collective action by defining problems, identifying causes, making moral judgments, and proposing solutions. Through emotionally compelling and relatable narratives, movements can influence public discourse, mobilize citizens, and challenge existing political or social systems.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

This section will cover concepts espoused by other researchers on the topic. It will address the concepts of “people power”, security, and democracy.

4.1 The Concept of “People Power”

The concept of “people power” is understood as the collective action of grassroots communities working together to achieve social change. The Activists Handbook on “people power” (2013) emphasizes that the strength of such movements increases as more people unite to resist oppression and injustice.

Rodney Barker (2022) situates “people power” within democracy, sovereignty, liberalism, republicanism, and populism, arguing that political legitimacy comes from the people rather than divine right, birth, or force. He adds that modern governance reflects the principle of “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” with “people power” being reinforced through institutions, civil society, and religion.

Heidi Brooks (2018) explains that the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa reshaped the idea of “people power”, showing it as a form of collective resistance driven by grassroots groups, civic organizations, and local committees. She notes that even after the ANC was banned, these community-led efforts continued, demonstrating that “people power” evolves through widespread collective action rather than a single organization or ideology.

In essence, “people power” is a flexible and evolving concept shaped by different contexts, ranging from grassroots activism and participatory democracy to civil resistance and even armed struggle. Despite these variations, it consistently highlights the role of ordinary citizens in influencing governance, resisting oppression, and asserting popular sovereignty.

4.2 The Concept of Security

The concept of security has been widely debated by scholars, resulting in diverse interpretations and definitions. According to Crawford and Hutchinson (2016), security is a highly contested concept with no universally accepted meaning. In its simplest form, the 2015 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary defines security as “a state of being free from danger or threat.” However, this broad understanding allows the term to be applied in many contexts, ranging from physical safety and national defence to economic stability and psychological well-being.

Security is understood in multiple ways across the literature. Meerts (2018) describes it as protection from threats such as war, unemployment, illness, and accidents, while Schuilenburg and Van Steden (2014) emphasize that security studies often focus on insecurity—fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability. In another vein, Crawford and Hutchinson (2016) distinguished between the phrases “security from” (protection from harm) and “security to” (freedom to pursue goals) in their analysis of the context. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary gave it a different dimension and defined security broadly as freedom from danger, fear, or risk, as well as measures ensuring safety. Yet, Collins (2007) expands the concept beyond military threats to include issues like pandemics, environmental degradation, and organized crime. Similarly, Barry Buzan (1983) and John Baylis (2001) define security as freedom from threats to core values, noting that its meaning depends on the referent object, whether individual, national, or international security

Traditional security studies take a state-centred approach, focusing on protecting the state from threats such as aggression and military attack (Ullman, 1983; Luciani, 1989; Bellamy, 1981). Rooted in realist theory, this view sees the state as the main actor in international relations, with thinkers like Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Rousseau emphasizing that states prioritize their own security, sometimes at the expense of others (Baylis, 2001). In this framework, national security is mainly about defending territorial sovereignty, maintaining military power, and safeguarding state interests.

Critical security scholars, particularly the Welsh School led by Ken Booth and Richard Wyn Jones, shifted the focus of security from the state to the individual, arguing that people—not states—should be at the centre of security studies (Booth, 1991). This approach emphasizes emancipation, social justice, and freedom from structural oppression (Alley-Young, 2018), noting that states can sometimes be sources of insecurity, especially for marginalized groups. The Welsh School, therefore promotes reducing inequality, exclusion, and injustice as essential for achieving lasting peace.

Booth (1991, 2007) argues that security and emancipation are closely linked, meaning real security involves freeing people from threats and constraints so they can live with dignity, freedom, and opportunity. He criticizes the realist view that the state is the main provider of security, noting that states can also create insecurity. Instead, he promotes a human-centred approach where security focuses on individuals’ well-being and self-development, a view that aligns with “people power” movements that challenge state actions seen as harmful to citizens (Booth, 2007).

The concept of security has expanded from a traditional focus on national defence, territorial protection, and state sovereignty to a broader understanding shaped by globalization. It now includes international security, which addresses global systems like trade, energy, and digital networks, as well as multiple dimensions such as human, environmental, economic, societal, cyber, and psychological security. It could be deduced from the above that the shift away from the old and traditional concept of security reflects a growing recognition that security involves not only protecting states but also safeguarding the well-being, rights, and freedoms of individuals and societies.

4.3 The Concept of Democracy

Democracy, from the Greek *dēmos* (people) and *kratos* (rule), means “rule by the people” and refers to a system where political power is held by citizens (Schwartzberg, 2014). Its legitimacy comes from the collective will of the people through elections, participation, and the protection of rights, including freedoms such as speech, assembly, religion, voting, and protection from unjust rule (Dahl et al., 2003).

The concept of democracy has been interpreted differently by various political ideologies and thinkers. According to David Held (2006), liberals, conservatives, socialists, communists, anarchists, and even fascists have all claimed democratic legitimacy in different ways. This demonstrates that there is no single universally accepted form of democracy. Instead, democracy is practiced differently across societies depending on political systems, cultural contexts, and governance structures.

Democratic participation varies depending on a country's governance structure, with systems like monarchies concentrating power in royal families, while more maximalist democracies involve broader citizen participation. As a result, democracy is not a single fixed system but a diverse and evolving concept shaped by different political and social contexts (Held, 2006). It is commonly understood through three main forms—direct, representative, and liberal democracy—which help explain how citizens participate in governance and “people power”.

4.3.1 Direct Democracy

Direct democracy is a system where citizens directly take part in decision-making on laws and policies rather than through representatives (Caves, 2004). Originating from ancient Athens, it relies on majority rule and tools such as referendums, initiatives, and town hall meetings (Budge, 2001). Smith (2009) adds that citizens can propose and vote on laws, amend constitutions, and even remove officials from office. Overall, it strongly reflects “people power” by placing political authority directly in the hands of the people.

4.3.2 Representative Democracy

Representative democracy (or indirect/electoral democracy) is a system where citizens elect representatives to make laws and govern on their behalf (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025). These representatives operate within constitutional and legal frameworks (Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee, 2005), and are held accountable through elections, where voters can remove them if necessary. While decision-making is delegated, the system still reflects “people power” because political legitimacy comes from the electorate and combines majority rule with minority protections (Victorian Electronic Democracy, 2005).

4.3.3 Liberal Democracy

Liberal democracy, also called constitutional or Western-style democracy, combines elected government with strong legal protections for individual rights (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025). It guarantees freedoms such as speech, religion, and assembly, while limiting government power through constitutions, checks and balances, and separation of powers (He, 2022). It also supports pluralism by allowing multiple political parties and diverse viewpoints to coexist (Cusack & Ball, 2009). Although it reflects “people power” through elections, citizens delegate authority to representatives, which can sometimes lead to tensions when leaders do not fully reflect public interests.

PRESENTATION OF DATA, ANALYSIS, AND FINDINGS

5.1 Presentation of Data and Analysis

The objective of the study was to examine the root causes of public anger and declining trust in state institutions, assess the effects of “people power” on security and democratic governance in Ghana, and recommend measures to rebuild confidence, strengthen institutions, and preserve national stability. About 100 respondents were surveyed. The study used the Qualitative Approach.

There were certain major areas where the opinions of respondents were sought. These are:

- a. The economic, political, and social causes of the “people power” phenomenon.
- b. Ways through which “people power” manifests in Ghana.
- c. Circumstances that can make “people power” escalate into a wider public order or security problem.
- d. Circumstances that can calm down “people power” events.

The responses to the issues raised above were grouped under various factors. The impacts of these factors were ranked as “High”, “Medium,” or “Low”. The details are as displayed in the following tables

Table 1: Causes of “People Power” Phenomenon in Ghana

Ser	Area	Cause
1.	Economic	Rising Cost of Living, Unemployment, Persistent Poverty, and Lack of Equal Opportunities
2.	Political	Electoral Fraud (Rigged elections, voter suppression, etc), Government failure to deliver on campaign promises, corruption, and Misuse of State Resources for personal gain
3.	Social	Social inequality, Loss of trust in state institutions and officials

Source: Collected Data (2026)

Table 2: Ways through which “people power” manifests in Ghana

Ser	Prevalence	Cause
1.	High	Street protests & demonstrations, Social media activism Electoral pressure (citizens threaten to vote out the incumbent government),
2.	Medium	Civil society organizations & pressure groups' actions
3.	Low	Legal activism (petitions, lawsuits, to challenge unconstitutional actions or corruption, etc.

Source: Collected Data (2026)

Table 3: Circumstances that can make “people power” escalate into a wider public order or security problem

Ser	Prevalence	Cause
1.	High	Use excessive force by security forces, politically biased security services posture
2.	Medium	Prolonged protests with economic disruption, uneven application of the law
3.	Low	Breakdown of communication and trust

Source: Collected Data (2026)

Table 4: Circumstances that can calm down “people power” event

Ser	Prevalence	Cause
1.	High	Clear, timely communication and transparency Avoid the use of excessive force
2.	Medium	Neutrality and fairness in the application of the law
3.	Low	Accountability of security services members (prompt investigations and visible consequences)

Source: Collected Data (2026)

5.2 Findings

It was discovered that there are three main categories of causes of “people power” protests and frustrations: economic, political, and social causes. Regarding the economic causes, unemployment, persistent poverty, and the rising cost of living were the factors that mostly triggered “people power” anger towards the government. The general lack of employment opportunities, coupled with the high cost of living, makes people poor and thereby identifies the government as not doing enough to meet people’s expectations.

Regarding the political causes, the factors that rank highest are Electoral Fraud (Rigged elections, voter suppression, etc), Government failure to deliver on campaign promises, corruption, and Misuse of State Resources for personal gain. There is a general discontent with governments over the years because the people see the promises of the political parties as a way of getting votes during elections, and that the parties renege on their promises after coming into office. Even though not prevalent, one cause of violent “people power” events is electoral fraud.

Social factors are also major causes of “people power” events. Among the major causes are social inequality, loss of trust in state institutions and officials. The general prevalence of non-performance by state officials has led to the loss of trust by the public in them. Social inequality, whereby certain categories of people get job opportunities, access to amenities like electricity, water, roads, etc, and availability of schools and hospitals in certain communities, are factors that trigger people's power manifestation.

“People Power” manifestations in Ghana, circumstances that can make it escalate into a wider public order or security problem, and situations that can calm down these events are as displayed in the tables above. The study also received responses that can be used to address the menace of “people power”. These include combating corruption by state officials, creating employment opportunities, transparency, accountability of state officials, free and fair elections, a fair and timely judicial system, security agencies handling protesters humanely without the excessive use of force, timely communication of government plans and policies to the citizens, engagement of the citizens in the affairs of the state, and not only during elections, etc.

CONCLUSION

The concept of “people power” refers to the collective ability of ordinary people to work together for social and political change. It is rooted in democratic ideals that political authority and legitimacy come from the people, with collective action serving as a powerful tool against injustice and oppression. The objective of the study was to investigate the causes and forms of “people power” events and the responses of the state to such episodes. The study also aimed to identify the causes of public anger and declining trust in state institutions, and also to examine the impact of “people power” on security and democracy in Ghana. It then proposed solutions that would strengthen institutions, restore public confidence, and maintain national stability. The study discovered that “people power” usually manifests in Ghana through street demonstrations, social media activism, and citizens threatening to vote against the government during elections. The study found that “people power” protests are mainly driven by political, economic, and social reasons. Economic causes comprise unemployment, poverty, and the high cost of living, while the prevalent social causes include inequality, poor public services, and loss of trust in state institutions and officials. It was discovered that the political causes include corruption, electoral fraud, misuse of state resources, and failure to fulfil campaign promises. It also revealed that the “people power” events can either help to strengthen or weaken security and democracy in Ghana. Clear, timely communication and transparency, use of proportionate force by security agencies during protests, and neutrality and fairness in the application of the law were some of the prevalent positive factors that enhance security and democracy. Conversely, other factors could make a “people power” events violent, leading to negative impacts on security and democracy. These factors include the use of excessive force by security bodies, a politically biased security services posture, prolonged protests with economic disruption, uneven application of the law, etc. Various approaches to address the menace of “people power” were recommended.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings, the researcher made the following recommendations:

- a. State security agencies should remain neutral, professional, and free from political bias in handling “people power” events. They should protect protesters and property, avoid excessive force, and fairly enforce the law by arresting and prosecuting individuals who engage in violence or disorder.
- b. The state should ensure fairness in the judicial system and timely adjudication of cases. Applying the law equally while rewarding integrity and punishing abuse of power promotes accountability, fairness, and public trust in leadership.

- c. The state should address issues at an early stage to prevent “people power” demonstrations. Engaging in early dialogue with community leaders and the people helps authorities to get a better understanding of citizens’ concerns, thereby building trust and resolving issues before they escalate into protests.
- d. Governments should promote transparent and timely communication, guarantee citizens’ right to information, and protect fundamental freedoms such as speech and association. Combined with neutral and professional security and judicial systems, these measures strengthen public trust, fairness, and democratic accountability.
- e. The state should address the various triggers to the issues that lead to people power incidents. Issues like poverty, unemployment, electoral fraud, corruption by state officials, etc should be resolved early and continuously to prevent escalation of tensions in the society.
- f. The government should involve citizens in decision-making and ensure inclusive governance. Political exclusion, social inequality, and misuse of public funds for personal gain by state officials lead to loss of trust in state institutions, which should be resolved early.
- g. The state should ensure good governance and hold state officials and institutions accountable. The state should prosecute political officers who go against what their official posts oblige them to do.
- h. The government should create a feedback mechanism and platform to enable the assemblies to report back on projects carried out in their areas, and how funds were spent. That feedback will help an effective checks and balances system rather than ad-hoc town halls or radio call-ins.

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