4 Ghana: Political Structures, Civil Society and Democracy

Political and social structures have the capacity to strengthen or weaken moves towards stable democracy. They may eventually become strong enough to regulate the various pressures on the political system, and to limit the powers of governments and their leaders. But each structure may also have a perception of its own role and interests that will lead to destabilisation. What happens if the state bureaucracy lacks the will or ability to implement the policies for which people have voted? Or if soldiers decide that it is their prerogative, and not that of the electorate, to remove governments? Or if non-democratic forces in the wider society carry more weight than democratically-chosen political parties? Or if parties which came to power with democratic intentions find that the checks and balances provided by the legislature and judiciary are weak, and that parties are not punished if they stray from the democratic path?

In the case of Ghana, I have already suggested that the lines of party conflict since 1992 have not, on the whole, been conducive to pluralist democracy. The need for other political and social structures to establish and consolidate the democratic process is therefore especially important. In this chapter we shall explore the evolution of state–society relations, and then look at the working of specific state structures.

THE STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Even before the recent wave of literature on ‘civil society’, it was widely accepted that democracy functioned more effectively if there were adequate autonomous institutions in society which could bridge the gap between government and
governed. The absence or inadequacy of such institutions might be the result of deliberate policy, as in totalitarian countries where groups autonomous from the state were not permitted, or a reflection of a situation in which there is incongruence between the values and beliefs of government and governed. This was generally the case under colonial rule, where the colonial power sought to exploit the territory's resources, and possibly impose new beliefs such as Christianity or loyalty to the imperial throne, in the face of resistance or indifference from the indigenous population. In contrast, there are countries in which government and governed, or at least government and elites outside the government, share common values, so that much 'political' participation can be left to institutions in the wider society, whether they be trade unions co-operating in wage restraint, charities supplementing welfare provision or doctors contributing to the administration of a health service. Recent literature highlights the distinction between society in general and the area designated 'civil' society which, according to Harbeson 'is confined to associations to the extent that they take part in rule-setting activities' (Harbeson in Harbeson, Rothchild and Chazan 1994: 4), though traditional writers might prefer the word 'convention' to 'rule', to emphasise that much political activity is based on accepted norms rather than legally-enforceable directives. If it is generally agreed that democracy fares better if there is a flourishing civil society, there are still three questions which produce less clear-cut answers:

1. Does democracy require a strong state as well as a strong civil society?
2. Are the strengthening of the state and the strengthening of civil society complementary to, or competitive with, one another?
3. How have the state and society fared in relation to one another in Ghana, and with what implications for democracy?

On the first question, one has to cut through many of the myths current in Western democracies about the desire of governments to 'roll back the state', or their achievements in doing so. There are few votes to be won by openly advocating a stronger state. But the reality is often different from the