

Akwasi Afrifa: An Appraisal of Ghana's One Time Military Ruler

By [Adeyinka Makinde](#)

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Akwasi Afrifa, military officer and political leader of Ghana, is a man whose legacy still polarises his countrymen to this day. Should he be remembered as a principled believer in democratic values who helped rescue Ghana from a "dictator" leading his nation to ruin? Or was he an unscrupulous and ambitious opportunist whose participation in Ghana's first military coup set a precedent for political instability and corruption?

Akwasi Amankwa Afrifa was born into humble origins in the Ashanti region to a cobbler father he referred to as "a cowardly man" who was "short, bulky and ugly", and a mother he remembered as a "tall, black and extremely beautiful woman." He often wondered why his mother had married his father. A bright student, he received a scholarship to attend Adisadel College, an Anglican boys boarding school in the Cape Coast. He excelled academically, and in 1955, collected seven prizes in Latin, Greek, Religious Knowledge, History, English Language and Geography. On hand to present the tall, gangling 19-year-old with his prizes was none other than Kwame Nkrumah, the Prime Minister of the then Gold Coast (as pre-independent Ghana was named), the man who he would help overthrow in a military coup eleven years later.

Afrifa's choice of a career in the military was not his first. He had intended to be trained in the law, but his expulsion from Adisadel put paid to those aspirations. In *The Ghana Coup: 24th February 1966*, a part memoir that served as his justification for the anti-Nkrumah coup, Afrifa claimed that his expulsion was for failing to take Religious Knowledge among the minimum six academic subjects in his final examinations. But the true reason was that Afrifa had led a student protest which had led to riotous acts including vandalism.

Afrifa entered the military and received training at Sandhurst Military Academy in England where the Adisadel website records that "he was listed among the best three of those cadets (drawn from various parts of the Commonwealth and other countries) who graduated and passed out as Second-Lieutenant(s) after the course."

Afrifa was undoubtedly a bright and engaging individual, but at Sandhurst, as had occurred at Adisadel, there was a dark side to his personality; one which revealed his tendency to arrogance and resistance to authority. In *The Ghana Coup*, he candidly revealed his time at Sandhurst was consistently punctuated by punishment drills for various disciplinary infractions. He wrote:

I was always in trouble for breach of discipline. Almost every Wednesday I had an extra drill. Because I had so many punishment drills, I made my study timetable larger than usual in order to enter my defaulter drills into blank spaces. My punishment parades thus became a normal routine every morning.

His last punishment drill as a senior cadet was, he admitted “a very unusual occurrence.”

These brief glimpses into his formative years provide clues as to how Afrifa was able to rise to the pinnacle of political power, as well as offer some explanation as to why his life was prematurely ended on a military firing range.

A brief summary of his life and career after Sandhurst goes like this: As a young officer, he served several tours of duty as part of the Ghanaian Army’s peacekeeping contribution to the Congo. He grew disenchanted with the left-wing policies of the Nkrumah government, which he posited as being antithetical to the (British) values with which he had been inculcated.

As a major, he was a key participant in the anti-Nkrumah putsch of 1966 which was led by Colonel Emmanuel Kotoka. He consolidated his positions in both the military and the National Liberation Council (NLC) as the ruling junta styled itself, after the assassination of Kotoka in April 1967 during an abortive coup, and after the resignation of Lt. General Joseph Ankrah in April 1969, he became the Head of State.

He completed the NLC’s programme of transferring power to an elected civilian government led by Dr. Kofi Busia, during which for about a year, he served as one of a three-man Presidential Commission in lieu of a civilian president before the commission’s dissolution and his retirement from the military a year later. On his retirement he received the title of *Okatakyie*, a rarely bestowed award to a member of the Ashanti people who has demonstrated an exceptional level of bravery from the Ashantehene, Opoku Ware II.

In the days following Busia’s overthrow in January 1972 by Lt. Colonel Ignatius Acheampong, Afrifa attempted to mount a counter-coup to restore Busia, but was foiled and jailed by Acheampong.

Afrifa was subsequently released by Acheampong in December 1972, but appears to have been restricted to the vicinity of his hometown of Mampong-Ashanti where he farmed and involved himself in rural development projects. At some point his army pension appears to have been suspended by the Acheampong regime and in an article in the *Tampa Bay Times* of July 1st 1979, his brother-in-law, John Addaquay, claimed that Afrifa, together with his family, had gone into exile in London. Afrifa, Addaquay continued, returned after Acheampong’s overthrow in July 1978 by a palace coup led by Lt. General Frederick Akuffo. Afrifa contested a seat and won it in parliamentary elections held in June 1979, but was executed along with two other Heads of State, Acheampong and Akuffo that month by edict of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) which had come to power after an uprising by junior personnel within the Ghanaian military. Each had been found guilty of “corruption, embezzlement and using their positions to amass wealth.”

In a letter written to Acheampong while Acheampong was campaigning for UNIGOV, a form of government involving a combination of military and civilian rule, Afrifa had prophesied his own demise when in a letter to Acheampong, he had remarked on the levels of indiscipline and corruption among Ghana’s military rulers, and expressed a fear that he and other military rulers would be lined up and shot as a warning to others not to stage coups. “I feel greatly disturbed about the future,” Afrifa wrote. “In order to discourage the military from staging coups in the future, how about if they line all of us up and shot us one by one?”

What then to make of the legacy of this man whose life and eventual fate serves as a point

of polarising contention?

After his death, the *New York Times* reported that he was “highly regarded among Western diplomats for his dynamism, his political skills, and his democratic views”. A good case can be made for Afrifa as a “democrat”, if one is prepared to accept his argument that he only helped to overthrow the government led by Kwame Nkrumah as a last resort. Here Afrifa could point to a drift towards authoritarianism by Dr. Nkrumah by referring to a series of developments such as the passage of the Preventative Detention Act, the One-Party State referendum, the dismissal of Ghana’s Chief Justice and other judges, as well as the apparent interference with judicial decisions. There were also issues to do with academic freedom in the universities.

Moreover, Afrifa presided over the return to civilian rule after spearheading a nationwide campaign to inform Ghanaians of their rights as citizens. Even the failed counter-coup he mounted against Acheampong could be interpreted as a measure attempting to restore democratic rule and not to usurp power for himself.

But the negative side is worth noting. To some he appears to have been an inveterate schemer from his youth and a manipulator whose machinations came to haunt him. He was undoubtedly an ambitious man, although some are keen to invest him with Machiavellian-like powers for intrigue that lack proof in a number of events. For instance, the frequently bandied allegation that he was the author of the abortive coup led by Lt. Samuel Arthur deliberately set up to fail after the elimination of his NLC colleagues, Kotoka and Ankrah seems rather fanciful. While Kotoka was assassinated by Lt. Moses Yeboah, Ankrah succeeded in escaping death at Castle Osu by jumping into the Atlantic Ocean. But even if the case can be made that Afrifa consolidated his power base and profited from Kotoka’s death and Ankrah’s later resignation, hard evidence available in the public domain is lacking which points to his having engineered both outcomes.

The contention that Afrifa was personally corrupt is not conclusive. He was after all cleared by the Sowah Assets Commission which reported in April 1979 prior to the parliamentary elections in which he was a contestant. But uncertainty as to whether he enriched himself while in power does not diminish what Afrifa’s critics claim to be his cardinal sin; that of participating in the overthrow of the constitutional government of Ghana, an action which established a dangerous precedent which was followed by other coups including those that led to an extended period of incompetent military rule in the 1970s which created unbearable living conditions for many Ghanaians.

John Stockwell, the CIA Station Chief in Accra at the time of the anti-Nkrumah coup specifically stated that the leaders of the coup were not only given “encouragement” once their plot was discovered by the Americans, but that they were paid in compensation for their efforts.

While his execution may have had much to do with the fear or apprehension junior officers had of him, Afrifa’s detractors hold that it was legally justified on the grounds that overthrowing a government, an act of high treason, was a capital offence by virtue of the [Ghana Criminal Code of 1960](#). The Armed Forces Act of 1962, which was in operation at the time of the coup, also provided the basis for punishing by death those who acted treasonably. In his aforementioned book on the coup, Afrifa acknowledged this by writing

that he would have been prepared to hang by the neck if the putsch had failed.

Apart from this legal rationale, Afrifa's execution, some contend, was also morally justifiable because it served as a precedent for establishing or attempting to establish illegal, unconstitutional regimes. The abortive coup led by Lt. Arthur, who resented the profligacy of the senior officers after they overthrew Nkrumah, was an enterprise of emulation backed by the rationale of "If it is proper for you to seize power by the gun, why is it wrong for me, with my gun to overthrow you?" Afrifa was certainly conscious of the precedent that he had helped set when in the chapter of his book entitled "The Ghana Condition", he asserted that "a corporal with the necessary courage and belief and love of his country can topple corrupt leaders and lead a coup in a just cause." But he failed to acknowledge or even comprehend that corporals, subalterns and officers could have amoral reasons for staging a coup. Arthur's coup, which Arthur dubbed "Operation Guitar Boy" appears to have been bereft of any ideological motivation, (it did not aim to bring Dr. Nkrumah back to power or establish a particular form of governance) instead it was an ego-driven enterprise that aimed not only to settle his grievance against the senior officers, but also to earn the accolade of being the first subaltern to successfully lead a coup.

And even where the soldier with a gun perceives his moral right to seize power, there is an inherent contradiction. Thus, Afrifa's simultaneous acknowledgement of the coup d'état as a bad thing, while considering it as an effective mechanism for restoring the constitutional rights of citizens can be viewed as fundamentally flawed.

While Afrifa's role in steering Ghana back to a constitutional democracy is rightly lauded, the argument that the NLC put the country back on a solid economic footing is a hugely contentious one. A key aspect toward remedying what they asserted was the economic mess into which Nkrumah had plunged Ghana was to seek closer relations with the United States and the rest of the Western world.

Afrifa was key to this strategy. His book, which the journalist R.Y. Adu-Asare claimed was ghost-written by Kofi Awoonor, the author, who started it, and Kofi Busia who completed it, was an exercise in unrestrained pro-Western sentiment. Afrifa's strategy of consistently waxing lyrical about his love of British values alongside his constant ridiculing and demonising of Nkrumah, for whom the West had no love, arguably strays into the obsequious.

While it is understandable that a person like Afrifa by virtue of his Anglican education, British military training and circumstances of living in a British colony would, for better or for worse, be inculcated with a good measure of British culture (his love of Magna Carta and British notions of "fair play"), his assertion that he and other Ghanaians would be minded to fight alongside Britain "as Canadians and Australians have" is striking. One of the grievances members of the Ghanaian Army had against Nkrumah was claimed to be his decision to put them on standby to fight in Rhodesia. Afrifa expressed this view, but conveniently ignored the fact that Britain was operating a "Kith and Kin" policy in relation to the white minority in that country. UDI (Unilateral Declaration of Independence) was after all a rebellion against the authority of the crown. Instead, Afrifa naively expressed his confidence that Britain would find a solution to the issue.

The pivot towards the West thus appeared to be as extreme as Nkrumah's detractors claimed was his gravitation towards China and the Eastern Communist bloc of nations. As early as March 1966, Robert W. Komer of the United States National Security Council

informed President Lyndon Johnson that the NLC was “extremely pro-Western”. This was of course no surprise given the fact that the anti-Nkrumah conspirators who included Afrifa had given the CIA Station in Accra regular updates as to the progress of their enterprise.

But this treasonous conduct (as their critics often point out) and the close relations pursued after their assumption of power, paid little dividend. The NLC slavishly backed the United States in the United Nations over unpopular adventures such as the Vietnam war and received some aid and [loans](#), but was disappointed at the scope of aid requested, particularly that to do with military assistance. Relations with the United States deteriorated because of the differences that materialised over the issue of decolonisation in Portuguese Africa and policy towards Apartheid South Africa and Rhodesia. Further, it failed to reach a cocoa agreement with Ghana. Ever dependent on the volatile cocoa market, the Ghanaian economy continued in its parlous state at the time Afrifa handed power over to the civilian government headed by Kofi Busia. Thus, Afrifa and his colleagues arguably only made themselves as subservient to the United States and the West as they claimed Nkrumah made himself subservient to the communist world with little reward.

Afrifa, who pronounced himself as a man committed to social order and who submitted himself to a career that mandated obedience to authority, was also a man with a capacity for rebellion. His expulsion from college, his disciplinary issues at Sandhurst, his facing a court-martial at the time of the February coup, his participation in that coup and his involvement in the attempted counter-coup of 1972 all attest to this. A bright and charismatic man, he also accommodated a healthy ego. Were his rapid promotions from major to colonel and then brigadier merely maintaining a rank in proportion to his burgeoning responsibilities? Or were they an exercise in hubris? He appears to have been a brigadier at the time of the hand over to civilian power, but in retirement was referred to as a lieutenant general – all before he had reached his 35th birthday.

The swiftness by which Afrifa and the others were executed suggests that he was not granted natural justice, albeit that military commissions even when properly constituted are inherently weighted against the defendant. His relative Addaquay recalled in 1979 that he “was arrested on Friday, jailed and shot at dawn on Tuesday morning.”

It has also been suggested that the legal justification for Afrifa’s execution trumpeted by Major Kofi Boakye-Gyan at the National Reconciliation hearings in the early 2000s were merely an afterthought, given that the bulletins issued to the press by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council in 1979 made no explicit references to the Criminal Code (1960), the [Armed Forces Act](#)(1962) and the Superior Order Rule attendant to the Armed Forces regulation which Boakye-Gyan insisted were brought to his attention at the time after consulting widely with figures such as Colonel Peter Agbeko, the head of the Armed Forces Legal Services Directorate; Justice Mills Odoi, the Advocate-General of the Armed Forces; and Justice Austin Amissah, an eminent jurist.

Among his admirers, and the critics of the AFRC’s decision to execute him, are those who suspect a tribal motive in targeting Afrifa. Aside from considering Afrifa’s elimination as an insult to the Ashanti nation which had given him one of its highest titles, they see the half-Ewe Jerry Rawlings as being the instrument of vengeance for periodic episodes in Ghana’s history where Ewe power and influence has ebbed. Although Afrifa did not strike many as a man who was overtly tribally motivated -an accusation often leveled at the late Kotoka who was an Ewe- the aftermath of Kotoka’s death during which time Afrifa expanded his power base is perceived by many Ewes as a time when Ewe influence diminished. There had been

a resurgence of Ewe's within the corridors of power while Kotoka was alive after complaints of their marginalisation during the Nkrumah era.

Divisions among the members of the NLC during the transition to civilian government was noted by analysts who observed that Afrifa's favoured politician was Kofi Busia, like him an Ashanti, while John Harlley, the NLC's Vice Chairman favoured Komla Gbedemah, a fellow Ewe. The hand of Afrifa in helping engineer the decision to disqualify Gbedemah cannot be dismissed given the assessment of objective analysts that the use of the clause to effect the disqualification (on the grounds that he had misused public funds) was a device employed to neutralise a potential rival to Busia, Afrifa's preferred candidate.

Akwasi Afrifa died a villain's death, executed like a common criminal at a firing range and buried unceremoniously in a prison cemetery. But while his detractors view him with disdain as a consummate operator in the dark arts of political subterfuge and manipulation, he was clearly not a bloodthirsty Machiavellian who insisted on preserving his power as a head of state by murder and instituting a reign of terror as did Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia and Moussa Traore of Mali.

Claims that Afrifa was a coup-plotter who was essentially a democrat do not ring as hollow as those made by the widow of the Chilean Air Force General, [Gustavo Leigh Guzman](#) who was a member of the junta which staged the violent overthrow of the Marxist-orientated government of Salvador Allende before inaugurating an era of widespread human rights abuse. But Afrifa did not have 'clean hands' in so far as the abuse of human rights is concerned: evidence was given at the National Reconciliation hearings of his supervision of the torture of members of President Nkrumah's Presidential Detail Department (PDD). Afrifa "could not have been my hero" wrote R.Y. Adu-Asare in 2002 because, Adu-Asare charged, he had sanctioned the killing of one Brigadier Bawah, the commander of Nkrumah's presidential guard, and, allegedly, members of Bawah's household.

Moreover, the background to Afrifa's execution, dominated by a groundswell of public anger and disgust at Ghana's military rulers cannot be ignored. The executions, which were part of what the AFRC termed a 'House Cleaning' operation, were met with popular approval by the media, public organisations and individuals. For instance, the June 24th editorial of the *Catholic Standard*, which was titled "The Great Lesson" approved of the first batch of executions which it applauded as "a means of instilling discipline and justice" in the country.

Earlier, an editorial in the June 4th edition of the *Ghanaian Times* urged the AFRC not to limit the scope of its House Cleaning to 1972, the year in which Colonel Acheampong seized power, but to hold to account what it described as "the many rogues who have committed economic crimes against the nation" to an earlier time frame. The editorial made it clear that "in looking behind 1972, we are not interested in picking on any individual or group."

The AFRC did cast its net further back, and as a compromise between the opposing views of whether civilian collaborators (and police personnel) should be included among those against whom serious measures should be taken, those senior members who served in Ghana's first military government came into its crosshairs. Kotoka was dead, General Albert Ocran had fled into exile and Ankrah was excused for not having been a participant in the 1966 coup (he had been invited to head the government before being forced to resign), so Afrifa alone from that era was made to pay the price.

Afrifa's participation in the coup against Dr. Nkrumah had opened up a can of worms, and

his justifications, no matter how well-meaning and seemingly well-reasoned, essentially posited a counter-intuitive logic that treason could prosper by ceasing to be treason.

It is worth bearing all of this in mind when assessing the legacy of Akwasi Amankwa Afrifa. The truth, as in most cases, lies somewhere in-between the extreme narratives of demonisation and hagiography.

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Adeyinka Makinde is based in London, England. He has a keen interest in history and geopolitics and writes on his blog, [Adeyinka Makinde](#).

Featured image: Brigadier Akwasi Afrifa (1936-1979), Chairman of the National Liberation Council (NLC) of Ghana, seated in Osu Castle, Accra, during the swearing-in ceremony of government ministers of the in-coming civilian administration headed by Dr. Kofi Busia on Friday, September 12th 1969. Source of Photo Still: Reuters News.

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