

Setting higher expectations

INTERVIEW WITH **HE PROFESSOR JOHN EVANS ATTA MILLS**

PRESIDENT OF GHANA



PROF. JOHN EVANS ATTA MILLS

was sworn into office as Executive President of the Republic of Ghana on January 7, 2009. After studying law at the University of Ghana, and earning a PhD in Oriental and African Studies from the University of London, he was selected as a Fulbright Scholar at Stanford Law School (USA). He returned to the University of Ghana as a lecturer and professor. He Atta Mills became the Commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service of Ghana in September 1996. In 1997, he was appointed Vice President of the Republic of Ghana and served in that capacity with former President J.J. Rawlings until 2000.

What is your perspective on the role and the value of the Commonwealth as a global institution and Ghana's place within it?

To me, the Commonwealth is a very important institution. All the member states of the Commonwealth have one thing in common: we all have an attachment and common historical ties with Great Britain, so all of us speak English and Great Britain has played a very important role in the development of each Commonwealth country. I can only speak for Ghana, but Great Britain was a colonial master and therefore they laid the foundation for our current development and educational system and I believe that the same can be said for the other countries. Therefore, our umbilical cord to Great Britain, and, as a result, to the Commonwealth is very strong and it is something that we take pride in. Whatever we can do to strengthen the Commonwealth is one of our objectives, something that we will always strive to attain.

Over the years the Commonwealth has had many successes. One can talk about the United Nations but I would say that the members of the Commonwealth are even closer because there's so much more that unites them than the members of the United Nations and, because of this unity, the synergy is very strong among the Commonwealth nations.

Ghana has achieved a lot since our independence in 1957, but we are still on the path to development and we need to learn from the experiences of other members of the Commonwealth, especially from the developed countries. The world is dynamic, new ideas and solutions are always emerging, but we cannot re-invent the wheel. So when we interact with countries which have passed through similar developmental stages and have rich experiences to impart, I think that listening to them can only benefit Ghana and the other developing members of the Commonwealth.

In terms of Ghana's contribution, we believe that development should be the major goal of every country and Ghana is a strong supporter of democracy. But you cannot achieve peaceful democracy without justice and without peace there can be no development. One thing that Ghana wants to do is to hold itself out as an example for those of our unfortunate brothers and sisters whose lives are torn apart by conflict. We want to help chart a course which would raise the standard of living for them. I believe this is the main reason

why we are in politics and Ghana is trying very hard to show leadership.

It is nine months since you assumed office as President. What do you see as the main achievements of your government to date, and what are your priorities going forward?

Firstly, we have had to face the serious challenge of the global economic crisis; it has been a difficult time but I believe that over the past nine months we've responded very well. I think that everybody would say that we still have peace and stability and we are working very hard to make people aware that you can only rely on foreign aid to certain extent and that development can only be achieved through hard work and self-reliance. So, we are trying to urge our people to work hard and to forge closer links with one another. We welcome assistance from our development partners but we only see this as a temporary measure. Latterly, God has blessed us with oil, something which we want to be a blessing to our country. But we are not going to say that because we've discovered oil and gas we are going to abandon our current plans for a more resilient economy, instead we are going to use the oil revenue to help build a stronger economy and to ensure equitable development within our country.

Your government, and you yourself in particular, appear to be setting higher expectations for good governance in Ghana. What actions are you taking to effect implementation?

I believe that the problems confronting many developing nations are well known: lack of skilled manpower, lack of resources, corruption, a lack of due process, conflict etc. These are all things that we want to tackle. Ensuring the correct due process of law is essential. I have just sworn in three new Justices of the Supreme Court and I assured them of our fullest co-operation and our determination to ensure they remain independent.

Good governance is very important because you let the people know that they are partners in development. It's important that everyone knows that there is justice for all. It's important that everyone knows that we have strong institutions which will act as checks and balances in our development agenda. It's important that we do not encourage any dictatorial tendencies because they

have not helped us in the past and they will not help us in the future.

Moving on to the perceptions of the international investment community in Ghana: what assurances can investors have, in regards to the investigation of major government-sanctioned contracts, that this will not undermine the long-term validity of existing or future contracts?

We have to walk a very fine line with this issue. It is true that as a government you inherit the liabilities and assets of the previous government and that the obligations incurred by the previous government are obligations which you must satisfy. But I think it's also important that you ensure that the assets of the previous government have been properly utilised and if you think that some of the contracts they negotiated were tainted by fraud or corruption then it is important that the air is cleared on this. Some people may not see it this way, but it's important that investors operate in an atmosphere free from suspicion. Transparency is very important. This is not a witch-hunt, but we do want to make sure that we clear the air so that we can set a benchmark for others to follow. We want everybody to know that when a government has come and gone there's a likelihood of succeeding governments going through the previous contracts, and, if there was any wrong-doing, making the perpetrators feel the full recourse of the law.

What specific actions are you taking that will enable future transitions of government to be carried out in an open, transparent and effective way?

I must confess that our recent transition has not been as smooth as I had expected. The previous government was considering the passage of a transitional act but they couldn't do it before they

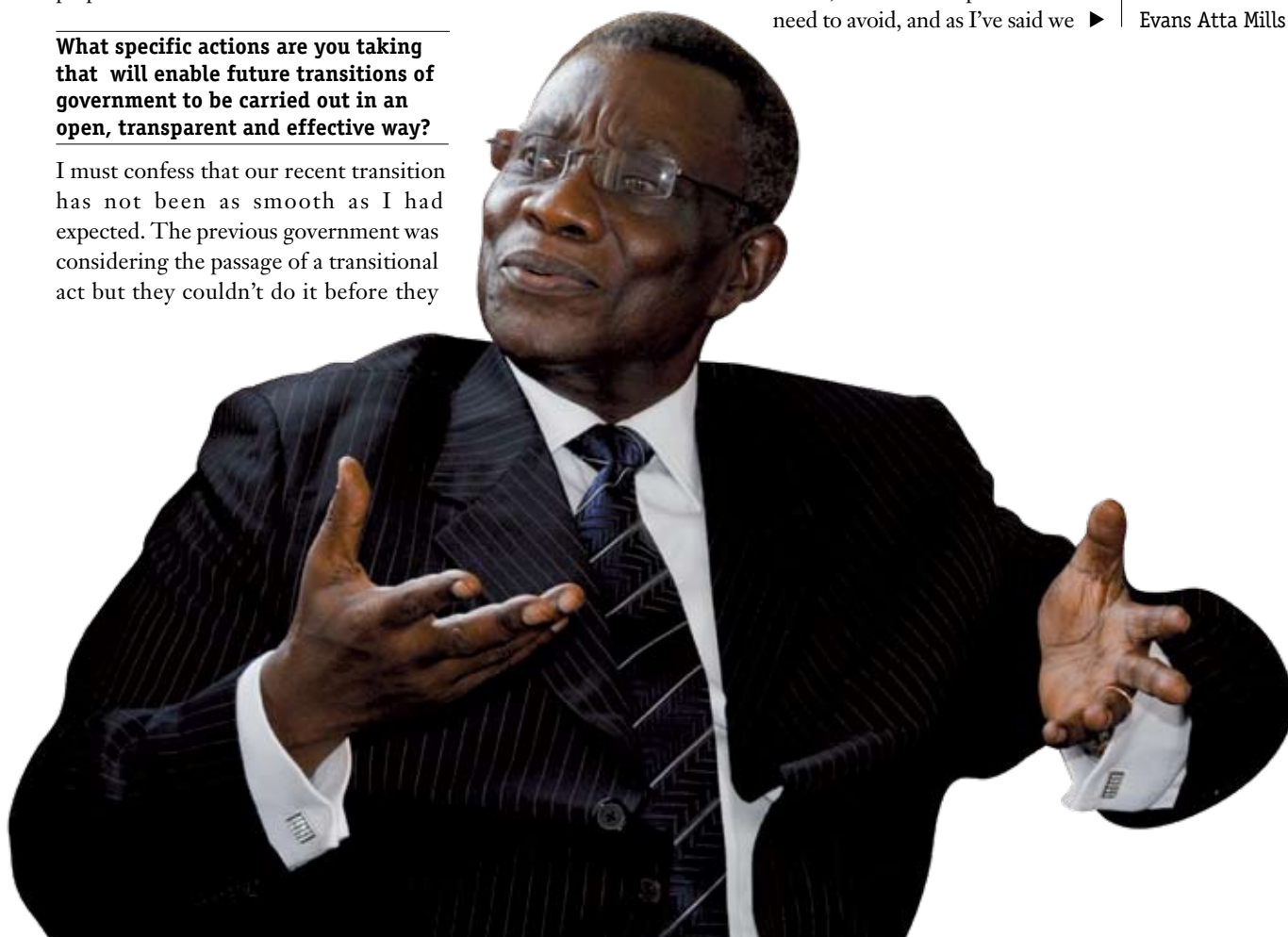
stepped down so we have had to find our own way. I believe that if we had sat at a table and compared notes we could have avoided many of the problems which came up but I think what we have to do is to make sure that there are clear rules and guidelines about transition. Once we have accomplished that, and it will be in place before the next election, I believe we will be able to allay the fears of international investors and Ghanaians alike who would know exactly which direction a new government is going.

Coming back to the opportunities for Ghana as a new and significant petroleum producer: what do you see as the main challenges ahead and what lessons can Ghana learn from other countries, which have been 'blessed' or as the case may be 'cursed' by the exploitation of such resources?

I believe that the experiences of other countries are there for all to see. Firstly, there is a tendency when you discover oil and gas to forget about the other sectors of the economy and depend completely on oil and gas, which is wasting an asset. Secondly, oil and gas discovery can lead to high levels of corruption. Thirdly, you would also find that sometimes oil revenues are not used for the benefit of the people. People can see oil and gas, they can see pockets of wealth, but they feel that they have been left out and this can give rise to discontent and conflict. So, these are the pitfalls that we need to avoid, and as I've said we ►

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Professor John Evans Atta Mills



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Ghanaians
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want to use the oil revenues for the benefit of our people and avoid the mistakes that others have made.

We will have an independent group responsible for the oil revenues. The oil revenues must be accounted for to Parliament on a regular basis. We are going to have transparency embedded in our petroleum laws to ensure that all the stakeholders know exactly what is happening, and of course petroleum contracts will have to be approved by Parliament. So, the emphasis is on transparency and accountability.

At the moment we are drafting petroleum management laws which the government are going to consider before they are presented to Parliament. These laws will specify how the oil revenues are to be accounted for and how they are to be utilised. These laws should come into effect within the next few months.

Even though Ghana has good investment laws in place, there is a general perception that the efficiency of doing business in Ghana could be improved. What practical measures you are taking to address that issue?

I think that the first step towards the solution of the problem is the admission that a problem exists. We are aware of some of the problems associated with investment including cumbersome procedures, corruption and a lack of transparency and we are addressing these. For example, we think that sometimes it takes too long to get the necessary approvals so we are revamping some of the institutions to allow for a one stop approval mechanism. We also want to make sure that we cut out corruption. Government involvement is negligible in this regard but sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between genuine investors and opportunists, especially when you discover oil and gas, and I think it's important that you take the time to find out whether you are dealing with genuine investors

or people who just want to rip off the government. We know that taxes are a problem, but personal security is also a problem, and infrastructure is also a problem. Many people don't have the basic necessities of life. So the emphasis now is on building infrastructure, making sure that the investors have the necessary input, cutting down on unnecessary demands for licensing etc.

We have identified the problems and we realise that our ability to attract investment will depend on the extent to which we are able to solve these problems.

In order to analyse the quality of investments, and particularly in the oil and gas industry these can be very sophisticated arrangements, the government's side will need a large pool of expertise. Are you co-operating internationally for instance with bodies like the Commonwealth to acquire the necessary expertise?

We are lucky in that respect because over the years, and particularly now, we've been able to attract so much expertise, especially in oil and gas. Let me also say that one thing that we have been blessed with is the rich human resource in Ghana, so there are people from all over the country who for patriotic reasons are approaching us and we now have the benefit of their expertise. We are also being approached by people from across Africa. So we are getting a lot of good people coming in to help us and I think in that respect we've been very lucky.

If you look at my own Economic Advisory Council, I have somebody who was Secretary General of the Economic Commission for Africa, somebody who was Vice President of the World Bank in charge of Africa, about three or four people who were senior officers of the World Bank. There are so many. With Ghanaians you can be sure that you will never run out of very capable people. E

Eamonn Daly,
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