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Published online: 14 Apr 2025.

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An examination of delegitimation in the activist discourse of Ghana's #FixTheCountry lead convener Oliver Barker-Vormawor

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the delegitimation strategies used by Oliver Barker-Vormawor, political activist and the lead convener of Ghana's #FixTheCountry movement. The analysis of Barker-Vormawor's Facebook posts reveals that he employed three main delegitimation strategies to formulate a conviction rhetoric aimed at discrediting Ghana's governance under the presidency of Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo and validating his activism and the goals of his #FixTheCountry movement. These strategies are authorization, rationalization, and moral evaluation and they help Barker-Vormawor to construct himself as a patriot, a noble revolutionary, and a selfless leader who has the welfare of the Ghanaian people at heart. The study extends research on the construction of online activist discourses and demonstrates that research on the (de)legitimation mechanisms of "unconstitutional authorities" is necessary to enhance our understanding of (online) activist discourse and how contentious politics is conceptualized and performed.

Introduction

Research on online activist discourses that contest oppression, examine privilege, and oppose dominant power structures has garnered much attention in the last decade. This literature affirms Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark's (2016) view on the significant role of digital platforms in contemporary social movements. Online activism has been found to be marked by ideological constructions of group identity, the formulation of solidarity and the expression of dissent and has been used by campaigners to confront what they consider to be undesirable systems and demand sociopolitical change (Awopetu and Chiluwa 2023; Nartey 2022a, 2022b). Such activism is evident in varied media, including internet memes, Facebook messages, online petitions, YouTube videos and comments, tweets, hashtags, and blogs. Generally, the scholarship on online activism has focused

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on marginalized groups and has discussed discourses of oppression, discrimination, integration, migration, and exclusion as well as how marginalized groups foreground their voice and agency, negotiate and construct their identity, and articulate emancipatory discourses. Given the context of the present paper, we first highlight studies in Africa before presenting research in other settings.

Nartey (2021) examines women's voice, agency, and resistance in Ghanaian feminist blogs and concludes that the discursive practices enacted in the blogposts can be construed as an essential aspect of the continuous striving for social justice for Ghanaian and African women. In his article on advocacy and civic engagement in protest discourse on X, Nartey (2022a) illustrates how Occupy Ghana used their #OccupyFlagstaffHouse and #RedFriday campaigns as a persuasive communicative practice and an emancipatory discourse intended to empower the masses and hold the Ghanaian government accountable. He argues that social media campaigns and digital activism can be more impactful if they are followed up by practical offline actions. Nartey and Yu (2023) also conduct a discourse analytic study of #FixTheCountry and demonstrate how linguistic choices in online activism can be informed by local politics, sociocultural context, and spatiotemporal factors. In their paper on stance and evaluation in #BringBackOurGirls campaign discourse on X and Facebook, Chiluwa and Ifukor (2015) examine the discursive features of online discourses surrounding the kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls by Boko Haram, a terrorist group, and found that most of the evaluations of the incident reflected negative valence. They contend that digital activism risks being mere slacktivism if deliberate actions in the "real world" are not taken.

Chiluwa (2012) analyzes the importance of social media networks in resistance discourse in Nigeria. Based on the online discourse of the Indigenous People of Biafra, a Nigerian separatist/secessionist group, the study investigates how sociolinguistic variables like identity, virtual community, language variation, and social interaction are deployed in the construction of a resistance discourse aimed at self-determination. Similar to Chiluwa (2012), Aminu (2024) examines digital resistance in Oduduwa secessionists' social media discourse in Nigeria and his findings reveal that the discursive strategies employed by the members of the movement constitute a form of polarization and otherness. In another study on the Oduduwa secessionist movement, Aminu and Chiluwa (2023) discuss the movement's reinvention of their identity and resistance ideology to champion their cause and amplify their voice. Awopetu and Chiluwa (2023) adopt a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach to deconstruct the visual narratives of the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. Their findings show that the protesters emphasize the credibility and reality of the protests by combining the verbal and visual modes. The verbal mode enabled them to vocalize their grievances and the visual mode helped them to describe themselves, their objectives, and the scenes of events. Apart from research in Ghana and Nigeria, other studies on online activism in Africa include Mutsvairo's (2016) paper on the #FeesMustFall protest in South Africa, Dwyer and Molony's (2019) study on the sociopolitical and historical context of social networking sites in Tanzania, Somalia, Zimbabwe and Kenya, Adeiza and Howard's (2016) article on social media soft power in Kenya, Mpofu and Mare's (2020) research on cyber-protests in Zimbabwe and Zaghlami's (2020) work on the value of new media as a source of empowerment in Algeria. Outside Africa, Childs (2022) discusses how Black women in the US use Instagram and YouTube to resist anti-Blackness in the makeup industry, Cervi and Divon (2023) investigate the resistance strategies of Palestinian TikTokers, Lev-On

(2019) analyzes the social media framing of the tent protest in Israel and Li et al. (2021) put the spotlight on feminist activism on social media communities.

The scholarship on online activist discourses demonstrates the instrumentality of social media for advocacy, mobilization, organization, civic engagement, and citizen journalism. This body of work also illustrates that social media technologies have decentralized access to discursive power (KhosraviNik 2022) and new media has revolutionized the activities of social movements and pressure groups. Notwithstanding the value of this literature, it has not adequately addressed (de)legitimation even though (de)legitimation is central to online activist discourses, especially since such discourses constitute a form of political communication. Also, studies on (de)legitimation in political communication have traditionally focused on constituted authorities and prominent politicians. Some of these studies have examined (de)legitimation in war discourse (Oddo 2011), revolutionary discourse (Ganaah, Nartey, and Bhatia 2023), presidential discourse (Reyes 2011), government social media communication (Hansson and Page 2023), and internet memes (Ross and Rivers 2017). Given the focus on constituted authorities and mainstream politicians, the exploitation of (de)legitimation by "unconstitutional authorities" like political activists, (self-appointed) secessionist leaders, and citizen vigilantes has received little attention in the literature, a notable exception being Igwebuike and Akoh's (2022) paper on the speeches of Nnamdi Kanu, the "supreme leader" of the Indigenous People of Biafra. Our study addresses this gap in the literature and argues that research on the (de)legitimation mechanisms of "unconstitutional authorities" is necessary to enhance our understanding of (online) activist discourse and (digital) resistance as well as demonstrate the value of interdisciplinary discourse analysis in terms of the relationship between social movement studies and social media critical discourse studies.

Our paper examines the discursive strategies used by Oliver Barker-Vormawor, the lead convener of Ghana's #FixTheCountry movement, to delegitimize governance in Ghana, particularly under the government of Nana Akufo-Addo who was president of Ghana from 7 December 2017–2016 January 2025. We illustrate how Barker-Vormawor resists what he perceives to be misgovernance, injustice, and illegality via his delegitimation mechanisms while simultaneously justifying his activism and the goals of his #FixThe-Country movement.

Context: Oliver Barker-Vormawor and the #FixTheCountry movement in Ghana

Ghana returned to multiparty democratic rule on January 7, 1993, after several years of intermittent changeovers between civilian and military regimes. The new 1992 constitution provided the legal framework under which the country held its first fourth republican democratic elections on 7 December 1992 to elect a president and members of parliament. Since then, Ghana's democracy has steadily grown and five other elections have been successfully held, electing presidents from the country's two main political parties – the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP). Many scholars and observers have often argued that while Ghana's democracy has made admirable electoral successes over the last 32 or so years since the country's 1992 constitution, it has failed to provide the much-needed economic transformation for its people. For instance, Resnick (2019) argues that Ghana's story is one of a strong

democracy with weak state institutions that have facilitated the stalling of its economic transformation. Also, survey work by Gyimah-Boadi and Mensah (2003, v) conclude that despite Ghana's democracy gaining ground, there is "a disturbingly high incidence of genuine poverty and extreme deprivation, and a widespread sense of economic alienation and exclusion" which can be attributed to poor leadership.

The state of Ghana's political and economic affairs has, on the one hand, generally led to a growing sense of political apathy, despondency, and disengagement by most Ghanaian youth, but it has also, on the other hand, resulted in the rise of political activism against political authority and leadership who are deemed to be the principal agents of change. It is within this context of Ghana's governance challenges that Oliver Barker-Vormawor and his "fix the country" movement began in May 2021. Acknowledged as the lead convener of the #FixTheCountry movement, Barker-Vormawor is a Ghanaian lawyer and political activist. He has also been a registered PhD student of the Faculty of Law at the University of Cambridge in the UK since 2021, a program that has been on hold due to his activism in Ghana. Before he began his political activism with #FixTheCountry, Barker-Vormawor had worked in various capacities in Ghana and abroad, either as a legal advisor, a lawyer, or a diplomat. Notably, he has worked as an adviser for multilateral and international organizations like the World Bank, UNDP, and DFID among others. He also served as a diplomat for the Ghana Foreign Service in the capacity of a policy and legal officer in the office of the president.

The establishment of #FixTheCountry was a direct response to what Barker-Vormawor and his followers considered to be gross misgovernance and socioeconomic injustice by the NPP government during former president Akufo-Addo's tenure. Since its establishment in 2021, the group has steadily grown to become a fully-fledged activist movement whose offline and online resistance activities have gained both national and international recognition. In fact, several international media platforms, including the BBC, Aljazeera and the Guardian newspaper, have reported and amplified some of the activities of #FixTheCountry in Ghana,[1] contributing to the movement's legitimacy and general acceptance.

The movement has been critical of Ghana's 1992 constitution and maintains that this constitution is the main cause of the failure of Ghana's fourth republican governments. However, their most critical activism has been directed at Akufo-Addo and his government whom they believe did not only neglect the socio-economic aspirations of Ghanaians but also undermined Ghana's democratic values such as the freedom of speech. On the #FixTheCountry website one gets to read the aims of the group, including that it "is a non-partisan and non-political civic movement by Ghanaian youths for Ghana" and that "[they] are demanding a new society founded on justice".

When in 2021 the Akufo-Addo government decided to introduce the Electronic Transaction Levy or the E-Levy, it was opposed in different ways by many Ghanaians who perceived it as a tool to further worsen the economic plight of Ghanaians. Barker-Vormawor was a major protesting voice and he wrote two Facebook posts in disapproval of the bill to introduce the Levy. On February 9, 2021, he wrote: "If this E-Levy passes after this Cake bullshit, I will do the coup myself. Useless Army!". The following day, he posted again:

Okay, let's try again. If this E-Levy still passes after this Cake bullshit, then may God … . Help us to resist oppressor's rule, With all our will and might for evermore (2x). Useless Army. Anaa, the value is the same?

On February 11, 2021 when Barker-Vormawor arrived at the airport in Accra from the UK, security personnel arrested and detained him. He was charged with treason for saying that he would stage a coup, but he was subsequently granted bail after several appearances in court.

Barker-Vormawor's arrest and treason charges did not only increase his popularity and media coverage in Ghana and beyond, but also intensified his political activism against the Akufo-Addo government, especially through his posts and updates on social media. In April 2022, after he was granted bail, he wrote that "Not even Treason, Bigamy or Sodomy charges will slow down our convictions to hold our democracy to account". Barker-Vormawor's Facebook posts, since the time of his arrest, constitute a rich textual resource that can enhance our understanding of how political activism by an individual can be discursively performed to delegitimize and resist state governance. While this textual resource may not represent all the protest and activist groups in the country, it offers a window into how the social and political activism of individuals might challenge and resist government policies and practices that the people of a country believe do not serve their needs, interests, and aspirations.

Conceptual framework: (de)legitimation in discourse

(De)legitimation is an important concept in political communication (see Reyes 2011; Van Dijk 1997; Van Leeuwen 2007). Legitimacy is obtained by aligning one's communicative practices and actions with dominant social values in a given period. Suchman (1995, 574) affirms this view and defines legitimation as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions". Legitimation can be seen as a social act that uses the normative order to assign acceptability to social actors, social actions, and social relations (Rojo and van Dijk 1997); hence, it involves "the creation of a sense of positive, beneficial, ethical, understandable, necessary or otherwise acceptable action in a specific setting" (Vaara 2014, 503). This can be seen in how various institutions and authorities try to establish credibility in contentious issues like defense and security, law and governance, policy strategy, environmental sustainability, and immigration. Not surprisingly, legitimation and delegitimation are not mutually exclusive, so it is often the case that discourses of legitimation and discourses of delegitimation can be enacted simultaneously. While discursive legitimation can be construed as creating and projecting a positive image of the "self," discursive delegitimation, in contrast, can be viewed as creating and projecting a negative image of the "other" (Screti 2013). That is, delegitimation suggests a non-alignment with dominant social values in a given period, the ascription of a judgement of unacceptability to social actors, social actions, and social relations and the absence of positive, beneficial, ethical, understandable action. In politics, the delegitimation of institutions manifests when policies, programs, interventions, structures, etc. are critiqued, challenged, and opposed or when the representatives of political institutions (e.g. politicians and government officials) are resisted (Steffek 2003).

Van Leeuwen (2007, 2008) discusses four categories of (de)legitimation in public communication and everyday interaction: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization and mythopoesis. Authorization refers to the process of using authority to validate or discredit actions, situations, or worldviews. The sources of authority include individuals or public figures with institutional authority (i.e. personal authority), custom, tradition, or habit (i.e. authority of tradition), laws, rules, and regulations (i.e. impersonal authority) and experts, specialists, or professionals (i.e. expert authority). Moral evaluation refers to (de)legitimation by referring to specific norms or moral value systems. This can be done by direct moral evaluations of behaviors, linking events or behaviors to discourses of moral values, or using comparisons and/or analogies. Rationalization refers to the use of truth claims to approve or disapprove specific actions or social practices. It relies on knowledge, claims, and logic and can be realized theoretically (i.e. by providing definition, explanation, and prediction) or instrumentally (i.e. based on the goal, means, and/or effect of an action/event). Mythopoesis refers to (de)legitimation via narratives or short stories whose outcomes reward acceptable actions and punish unacceptable practices. These narratives can take the form of cautionary or moral tales to judge past or future actions.

Building on van Leeuwen's work, Reyes (2011) submits that (de)legitimation is rooted in argumentation since social actors provide arguments to explain social actions, ideas, thoughts, declarations, etc. He proposes five strategies of (de)legitimation that can be used individually or in combination with others: emotions (particularly fear), a hypothetical future, rationality, voices of expertise, and altruism. With specific reference to (de)legitimation in revolutionary discourse, Ganaah, Nartey, and Bhatia (2023) argue that in addition to van Leeuwen's categories, historicization and the claim of sacrifice are relevant. While (de)legitimation can be context-dependent and culture-specific, we find van Leeuwen's framework useful for this paper given its robustness and wide applicability in discussing the moral, logical, and ideological appraisals sociopolitical actors make about specific actions and people. As already mentioned, research on (de)legitimation in political discourse has mainly concentrated on discourses produced by constituted authorities and political figures (see Ganaah, Nartey, and Bhatia 2023; Reyes 2011; Rojo and van Dijk 1997) rather than discourses of "unconstitutional authorities" like political activists, (self-appointed) secessionist leaders and citizen vigilantes. We agree with Abulof (2015) that research on political (de)legitimation must not be limited to politicians but must include the communicative practices of all social actors whether official or unofficial and whether expressed in the media or spoken publicly by elites or "ordinary" citizens. This is essential to extend work on (de)legitimation in media/communication studies and political discourse analysis as demonstrated in this paper.

The (de)legitimation framework adopted in this paper is complemented by Wodak's (2015) discursive strategies, especially argumentation/the notion of topos. Topoi are argumentative schemes that are used to persuade listeners of the legitimacy of claims or assertions and they are expressed in discourse via conditional or causal paraphrases. The relevant topoi used in this study include the topos of history, of comparison, and of contrast/difference. The other discursive strategies identified by Wodak include nomination (how social actors are named), predication (the characteristics, qualities, and features attributed to social actors), perspectivization (the perspectives from which arguments are made), and intensification/mitigation (how utterances, views, or judgments are intensified or mitigated).

Data and analytical procedure

The Facebook posts of Barker-Vormawor constitute the dataset for our study.[2] We collected his first set of updates in 2022 that led to his arrest through to the end of 2023, resulting in 74 posts from February 2022 to December 2023. We purposively sampled posts that critique Akufo-Addo's governance and the activities of state institutions in Ghana. Social media sites like Facebook have become important avenues for individual or group activists to counter dominant ideologies, injustice, inequality, and other forms of discrimination (Castells 2012). Through social media, activists, who often lack access to and control of traditional media institutions and other formal platforms, can build and garner public support for their activisms and share materials and information that they have control over to their followers and the public. Hence, the Facebook posts of Barker-Vormawor provided us with a rich textual resource to examine how political activism by an individual to oppose state governance sheds light on (de)legitimation by "unconstitutional authorities".

Regarding analytical procedure, we adopted a qualitative critical discourse analysis approach, a method for examining the way language can be used to reinforce or resist power relations in sociopolitical contexts (Fairclough 2010). We identified the strategies of delegitimation drawing on van Leeuwen's (2008) framework. Each of the two authors did so separately and we met to discuss any discrepancies and decide the final categories. Having identified the delegitimation strategies in Barker-Vormawor's discourse, we interpreted them with recourse to socio-cultural practice or the social and cultural goings-on of his communicative event, including the immediate situational context or the circumstances surrounding the posts, the wider context of institutional practices that Barker-Vormawor's discourse is embedded within, and the wider frame of Ghanaian society/culture which Barker-Vormawor's discourse is part of. Finally, we explained the possible impact of Barker-Vormawor's discursive positioning on social relations, especially its attempt to disrupt dominant ideologies and condemn (perceived) injustice, as well as its potential influence on his followers and the Ghanaian populace in general.

Findings and discussion

The analysis revealed that the delegitimation strategies Barker-Vormawor employed enabled him to construct himself as a patriot who is interested in the welfare of Ghanaians. That is, he casts himself in the mold of a "man of the people" on a mission to rescue the people of Ghana from politicians he believes are selfish and incompetent. Each of his delegitimation strategies has been discussed below.

Delegitimation by authorization

Barker-Vormawor delegitimizes Akufo-Addo's government by referring to the authority he believes Ghanaians have given him as the lead convener of the #FixTheCountry movement and by drawing on the authority he thinks emanates from his position as a former diplomat for the Ghana Foreign Service. Extracts 1–5 demonstrate Barker-Vormawor's use of authorization to delegitimize Akufo-Addo's government.

1. Nana Addo communicated a picture of a politician that contrasted Rawlings, whom I did not like nor cared for. I wanted his self-assured vision of politics that seemed driven by

intellect rather than Jama songs. ***Today, I fight the politics he stands for and for his hand in the moral decay of our democracy. I stand against his tyranny and the many ways he is worse than Rawlings. At least Rawlings was moved by virtue and ideology. This man is just a disappointment who schemed and scammed himself into a position he debases every day***.

2. *It is them who are the real enemies of our democracy*. These are not people who believe in our democracy. *Our democracy is only convenient for them to enrich themselves through gargantuan corruption. May we never forget that in this Republic's life it is the corrupt and wicked politicians who have ruined Ghana*. We must remind ourselves that we are the patriotic ones. They cannot claim to love our country and the citizens they impoverish and oppress.

3. Good morning! *In my ongoing treason prosecution, I want to say here for all to know that I am guilty as charged! For, I make it no secret that I intend to intellectually lead a revolt against the political class that calls us brethren in public and plots our demise in private*. The class solidarity that stretches beyond parties and cronies and impoverishes us with their greed that knows no limits.

4. But I do not care about all that. *My support will always be for unarmed protestors. My advocacy will always support young people irrespective of their political sentiments*. This won't change irrespective of which government is in power. Protest is the only tool citizens have in a democracy where all institutions have been captured and the judges are an extension of the executive and the police machinery. *A protest culture is the only defence against a culture of silence and tyranny*.

5. ***We*** condemn the continuous criminalization of the freedom of assembly and the pervasive use of police powers to persecute activists. ***We*** consider the unlawful arrest and detention of Mr Williams as further evidence of a shrinking space for democratic dissent and the deliberate culture of silencing. ***We*** demand that Mr Williams be released immediately and that his constitutional rights be respected.

As already mentioned, Barker-Vormawor served as a diplomat for the Ghana Foreign Service in the capacity of a policy and legal officer in the office of the president. As this office is created and legitimized by Ghanaian law, we argue that Barker-Vormawor is emboldened by his former position to express his views with some form of authority and communicate in a way that other Ghanaians may not want to or be able to as shown in the extracts above. We also submit that as the lead convener of the #FixTheCountry movement, Barker-Vormawor is legitimized by popular will and acceptance given the popularity of the movement. Consequently, he constructs himself as one in whom the Ghanaian people have vested some authority to act on their behalf and protect their interests. Based on this positionality (i.e. a former diplomat for the Ghana Foreign Service and the lead convener of the #FixTheCountry movement), Barker-Vormawor authorizes his delegitimation of Akufo-Addo's government by suggesting that his defiant posture has the backing of the Ghanaian people and is supported by law (especially his legal knowledge).

In extracts 1–5 above, Barker-Vormawor presents himself as a credible person who has the knowledge and authority of the people to call out what he considers Akufo-Addo's poor leadership. Conversely, he portrays himself as a patriot with noble intentions who has the welfare of the Ghanaian people at heart. His authorization mechanism can thus be analyzed as a form of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation

intended to resist Akufo-Addo's governance and justify his (Barker-Vormawor) activism and his #FixTheCountry movement (see Igwebuike and Akoh 2022). Utilizing the topos of comparison (Wodak 2015), Barker-Vormawor contrasts Akufo-Addo with a former president (Jerry John Rawlings) and passes a damning verdict on Akufo-Addo's leadership – "This man is just a disappointment who schemed and scammed himself into a position he debases every day" (1). The comparison he makes between Akufo-Addo and Rawlings, especially when he adds that he neither liked nor cared about Rawlings, can be viewed as an intensification strategy aimed at foregrounding his anger at Akufo-Addo and his government. This juxtaposition enables him to depict Akufo-Addo as a deceiver, a tyrant, and a disgrace (1). That is, he arrogates to himself the authority to evaluate the character and leadership of Akufo-Addo and declare him an unfit politician. He then suggests that his evaluation resonates with the feeling of the masses (note the use of "we" in Extract 5), thereby exploiting the notion of conformity by referring to the authority of the majority (Van Leeuwen 2007).

Lexicalization is essential to (de)legitimation as lexical items can be used to do ideological work (Ganaah, Nartey, and Bhatia 2023; Mwinlaaru and Nartey 2022). In this regard, Barker-Vormawor uses phrases like "the real enemies of our democracy," "wicked politicians," "his tyranny," and "a culture of silence and tyranny" in the extracts above to describe Akufo-Addo and his government. These expressions can be said to constitute a referential strategy (Wodak 2015) that underscores the delegitimation of Akufo-Addo's government and the insensitivity of his leadership. These descriptors can also be analyzed as a membership categorization mechanism (i.e. how people are categorized in social interaction) used to evaluate people's intentions and actions (Jayyusi 1984). In other words, the descriptors used by Barker-Vormawor to qualify Akufo-Addo and other politicians in his government can be said to achieve an ascription function that discredits the government and validates Barker-Vormawor's activist discourse. It is instructive that Barker-Vormawor uses the "enemy" metaphor as Bhatia (2008) explains that the identification of an enemy defines a threat that must be nullified and emphasizes the need for collective action. The threat posed by the "enemy" is underlined by verb phrases like "enrich themselves through gargantuan corruption," "have ruined Ghana," "impoverish and oppress', "plots our demise in private," and "impoverishes us with their greed that knows no limits". These verb phrases function as a predicational strategy (Wodak 2015) that offers a negative appraisal of the government by calling them out for various misdeeds. Such language also amplifies the resistance posture of Barker-Vormawor and echoes the view that activist discourses express discontent, reveal social disagreements or grievances, and stimulate public sentiments (Hart and Kelsey 2019).

In addition to delegitimizing Akufo-Addo's government, Barker-Vormawor uses an authorization mechanism to project himself as the voice of the people and a noble revolutionary who will deliver Ghanaians from the oppressive leadership he has described. This positive self-presentation is evident in assertions such as "Today, I fight the politics [Akufo-Addo] stands for and for his hand in the moral decay of our democracy," "I stand against [Akufo-Addo's] tyranny," "My support will always be for unarmed protestors," "My advocacy will always support young people irrespective of their political sentiments," and "I make it no secret that I intend to intellectually lead a revolt against the political class that calls us brethren in public and plots our demise in private". These declarations help Barker-Vormawor to underscore his boldness and courage, especially

given his use of the war metaphor "fight," as well as his authenticity, integrity, and personal commitment to a worthy cause given his use of the first-person singular pronouns "I" and "My".

Nartey (2023) asserts that the construction of a noble revolutionary personality entails an opposition to and/or the overthrow of governments, systems, ideologies, practices, policies, etc. that the revolutionary perceives to be detrimental to the welfare of a group of people. Tudor (1972, 114) also writes that

> the revolutionary regards his world as one riven by a conflict so fundamental that it brooks of no compromise, and he sees the revolution, not merely as altering a particular aspect or part of his world, but as changing that world as a whole.

Hence, by casting himself in the mold of "a man of the people" on a mission to rescue Ghanaians from politicians he considers corrupt and selfish, Barker-Vormawor legitimizes his activism and his #FixTheCountry movement and he is empowered to enlist the support of the populace in his pursuit by making a clarion call to action. That is, he presents himself to Ghanaians as a valiant leader who can take daring risks to subdue the forces (i.e. politicians like Akufo-Addo whom he perceives to be corrupt and selfish) he has identified to be working against Ghana's progress. His pronouncement "I make it no secret that I intend to intellectually lead a revolt against the political class" reinforces the revolutionary image he carves for himself and further serves to license his activism against Akufo-Addo's leadership. When this pronouncement is analyzed in conjunction with his clarion call "The next phase of the liberation will require that you to pick up your weapon of choice and play to its strength," Barker-Vormawor can be said to position himself as a decisive, forward-looking activist-leader who embodies and articulates the essence of what the Ghanaian public wants and expects. That is, he appears to be "having the right intentions," "thinking right," "sounding right," and "telling the right story" (Charteris-Black 2014, 94).

Delegitimation by rationalization

Barker-Vormawor rationalizes his delegitimation of the Akufo-Addo government by providing logical arguments and truth claims to support his reasoning. Extracts 6–9 illustrate this point.

6. Neho! Let this be my last post on the IMF fiasco. Folks, the whole circumstances under which the IMF decision was made and communicated shows the very little regard this government has for us Ghanaians. Akufo-Addo does not have the leadership skills to lift this country towards a prosperous democracy. He has neither the humility to apologize for his mistakes nor the sensitivity to treat us as humans … What a sad sad democracy!

7. If America had our lithium, will it make the deal we just made? If they had our mines, will they give them to foreigners? If the opposition to the lithium deal remains just a fight between Ransford Gyampo, Bright Simons, and IEA, on one side and the government (and its shadow investors), they will lose. This is the people's lithium! The People must reject these deals. The people! Not Ransford alone! Or Bright alone. Wake up!

8. Cecilia Dapaah, a minister of State, has been a "public servant" since 2001. She has no known businesses. Yet has 1 million dollars and 300,000 euros stolen by house helps

from her house. Out of how much? Remember when Victoria Hammah was dismissed because she said she wanted to make 1 million dollars before she leaves politics?

9. 203,439 party delegates. Assume that only 200,000 received the bribes. Bawumia paid 400 cedis. That's 80 million Ghana cedis only on Election Day (roughly 8 million dollars). Ken Agyepong paid 300 cedis. That's GHS 60 million (roughly 6 million dollars) only on party primary bribes. How is this democracy? A system that doesn't elevate our best talents but the most corrupt.

In extracts 6–9, Barker-Vormawor adduces evidence to rationalize his delegitimation of Akufo-Addo's government. Exploiting an exemplification strategy, he references Ghana's borrowing from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)[3] as an instance of Akufo-Addo's failed leadership (Extract 6). Against the backdrop of Akufo-Addo's Ghana Beyond Aid Charter Strategy which expresses an intention to build a wealthy, inclusive, sustainable, empowered, and resilient Ghana by 2028 (Ghana Beyond Aid 2019), Barker-Vormawor argues that the circumstances surrounding Akufo-Addo's IMF decision and how it was communicated to Ghanaians leaves a lot to be desired. He submits that Akufo-Addo should have first apologized for the economic mess his governance has caused, admitted his mistakes, asked for forgiveness from Ghanaians, and explained why the IMF decision, though difficult, was necessary. He claims instead that Ghanaians were not involved in the decision-making process and the IMF announcement was first made on X by a non-government official who is the cousin of Akufo-Addo and a prominent member of their party. Consequently, he describes the IMF situation as a fiasco under the watch of Akufo-Addo and perceives him to be proud, arrogant, and insensitive. By stating that Akufo-Addo has presided over an economic fiasco and yet "He has neither the humility to apologize for his mistakes nor the sensitivity to treat [Ghanaians] as humans" (6), Barker-Vormawor provides a rational argument to validate his activism by suggesting that his activism is a fight against poor governance. He uses the IMF situation to adduce evidence to support his view that Akufo-Addo is unfit to lead Ghana as "[he] does not have the leadership skills to lift [Ghana] towards a prosperous democracy" (6). A Ghana Beyond Aid, according to Akufo-Addo,

> is a prosperous and self-confident Ghana that is in charge of her economic destiny; a transformed Ghana that is prosperous enough to be beyond needing aid, and that engages competitively with the rest of the world through trade and investment (www.presidency.gov.gh).

Based on Barker-Vormawor's rationalization mechanism using the IMF situation, he contends that Akufo-Addo is incapable of achieving the Ghana Beyond Aid vision.

To further strengthen his argument, Barker-Vormawor insists that Akufo-Addo presides over a corrupt government and cites examples to back his supposition. In Extract 8, he refers to Cecilia Dapaah who resigned as a minister on allegations of corruption. According to a court charge sheet, Cecilia Dapaah reported a theft incident in her house to the police, including a cash sum of one million dollars, 300, 000 euros, and 350, 000 Ghana cedis. Although she disputes the figures quoted in the court document, the news outraged many Ghanaians, including Barker-Vormawor. Against the backdrop that Ghana's currency has been losing value rapidly in recent times, with government officials in charge of the struggling economy blaming dollar hoarders for the currency decline, it was shocking for many Ghanaians to hear that a minister was probably hoarding foreign currencies. To bolster his corruption case against Cecilia Dapaah, Barker-

Vormawor uses the adversarial construction "She has no known businesses. Yet has 1 million dollars and 300,000 euros stolen by house helps from her house" and the rhetorical question "Out of how much"? (8) These constructions can be interpreted as an argumentation strategy intended to highlight corruption in Akufo-Addo's government and subsequently delegitimize his governance. It is also noteworthy that Barker-Vormawor refers to Victoria Hammah, a former deputy minister who was sacked for saying in a leaked recording that she would not leave politics until she made one million dollars. This reference can be analyzed as the use of the topos of history and the topos of comparison (Wodak 2015) to establish the corollary that Cecilia Dapaah and by extension other politicians in Akufo-Addo's government are corrupt.

Barker-Vormawor provides another example of corruption in Extract 9 using the delegates conference of Akufo-Addo's party. He alleges that approximately 14 million dollars is reported to have been given as bribes. Based on this claim, he makes the inference that if such an amount can be used for bribes during party primaries, we can imagine how much more Akufo-Addo's party will spend on bribes during the main elections. Based on this premise, he concludes – via the rhetorical question "How is this democracy"? – that Akufo-Addo is not leading a democratic party since he is overseeing "a system that doesn't elevate our best talents but the most corrupt". The undesirable discourse prosody Barker-Vormawor associates with Akufo-Addo and his government as part of his (Barker-Vormawor) rationalization mechanism is reinforced by the rhetorical questions in Extract 7 – "If America had our lithium, will it make the deal we just made? If they had our mines, will they give them to foreigners?" These rhetorical questions constitute a topos of comparison that hypothetically compares Ghana with the United States to make the point that Akufo-Addo's policies to maximize Ghana's natural resources are terrible. The argumentative strategies Barker-Vormawor employs in his activist discourse, including exemplification, truth claims, rhetorical questions, and topoi of history and comparison, are aimed at persuading his followers of the legitimacy of his views about Akufo-Addo and the need for Akufo-Addo's government to be opposed. These techniques function as a theoretical rationalization procedure rooted in the formula "I do Y because of X or X gives rise to Y" (Van Leeuwen 2007). Hence, Barker-Vormawor implies that Akufo-Addo's poor governance, evidenced by corruption, failed leadership, and terrible policies (situation/action A), justifies his (Barker-Vormawor) activism and his #FixTheCountry movement (situation/action B).

Delegitimation by moral evaluation

Barker-Vomawor uses a moral evaluation strategy to expose what he deems to be the undesirability of Akufo-Addo's governance and the violation of the standards of democracy by individuals or institutions in his government. Extracts 10–12 exemplify this view.

10. On Thursday, Nana Akufo-Addo launched an anti-corruption plan at **the Julorbi House**. Don't Laugh!

11. Kwame Nkrumah (**Osagyefo**); Nana Akufo-Addo (**Ogyegyefo**)

12. Today, I fight the politics he [Akufo-Addo] stands for and for **his hand in the moral decay of our democracy**. I stand against **his tyranny and the many ways he is**

> **worse than Rawlings**. At least Rawlings was moved by virtue and ideology. **This man is just a disappointment who schemed and scammed himself into a position he debases every day**.

Extracts 10–12 draw on lexicalization to delegitimize Akufo-Addo's moral credibility and represent him as one whose leadership has failed the people's expectations. Ghana's seat of government became known as *The Jubilee House* because the edifice was completed just when Ghana turned 50 years, after its independence from colonial rule. In Extract 10, the adjectival use of "Julorbi," which literally means "child of a thief" in Gã (a Ghanaian language), can be analyzed as the use of sarcasm to foreground Akufo-Addo's lack of morals as the expression partially rhymes with "Jubilee". Barker-Vormawor uses the expression to strategically convey a message of a presidency that has been corrupted by its own occupant. He thus suggests that the thought of launching "an anti-corruption plan" from the "Julorbi House" is both preposterous and disingenuous. Although "Julorbi" is a derogatory expression, we argue that in the context of Barker-Vormawor's activist discourse, it functions as a conviction rhetoric (Charteris-Black 2014) used to express strong disapproval and contempt for Akufo-Addo's government, while shedding light on how activist discourse can exploit local linguistic resources to intensify their persuasiveness (Nartey 2022a).

Akufo-Addo's leadership is also delegitimized through negative moral evaluation captured by lexical choices and syntactic expressions in Extracts 11 and 12 such as "moral decay," "his tyranny," "worse than Rawlings," "a disappointment," "schemed," "scammed," and "Ogyegyefo" (which means "troublemaker" in Akan, a Ghanaian language). These value-laden choices not only critique Akufo-Addo's values as falling short of expected standards, but they also compare him with two former presidents of Ghana, Jerry Rawlings and Kwame Nkrumah, to do ideological work. The structuring of the information in Extract 11 which makes use of the term "Osagyefo" (i.e. "saviour") to describe Kwame Nkrumah and "Ogyegyefo" ("troublemaker") to describe Akufo-Addo aligns with typical information flow in English, i.e. Old Information begins, and New Information follows (Biber et al. 1999). Aside from the lexical style and rhyming pattern that characterize these two words, the information flow stresses the need to focus on the New Information, i.e. the use of "Ogyegyefo" to describe Akufo-Addo.

Historically, "Osagyefo" has been the title attached to Kwame Nkrumah's name and to emphasize his exemplary leadership, not only as the person who led Ghana to independence, but also as an individual widely celebrated as an iconic African leader. Nkrumah's vision and ideologies about Africa's place in world affairs earned him many accolades, and in December 1999 the BBC World Service named him as Africa's "Man of the Millenium," many years after his death (Ahlman 2021). Thus, Nkrumah earned the title "Osagyefo," and it is a name Ghanaians proudly associate with him. It is in this context that the New Information, the description of Akufo-Addo as "Ogyegyefo" (a troublemaker), gains its delegitimating relevance. While sounding almost the same, the two expressions mark an evaluative contrast in which Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah is represented as a leader who upheld positive moral values and Ogyegyefo Akufo-Addo is portrayed as a leader who does not uphold such values but instead abuses them. We contend that the pun is intended by Barker-Vormawor as it capitalizes on the knowledge and sentiments of his local audience to discredit Akufo-Addo's governance and license his activism.

To further delegitimize Akufo-Addo's leadership, Barker-Vormawor utilizes moral evaluation to highlight the violation of the standards of democracy by individuals or institutions as exemplified in Extracts 13–15.

13. ***The only democratic thing in Ghana is malaria***. Rich or poor. Everyone gets their fair share.

14. *The only reason why corruption is able to fight back is because the corrupt own the republic*. So is it that we have conceded that our elections are so monetized that there is no point fighting back? *Not a single institution seems to care about what is happening*.

15. So … . Yesterday, Alan Cash's team organized a well-attended campaign event. The "It's my turn" health walk. They brought and bused in thousands of party supporters. ***What I did not see was the exaggerated police presence, I did not see riot vehicles; assault rifles nor hot water cannons … How are the same Ghanaians trusted to walk peacefully, yet even if just 100 Ghanaians were to walk with me and other FixTheCountry conveners from point A to point B we are swamped and intimidated with heavy police machinery?***

Extracts 13–15 employ a moral evaluation mechanism to delegitimize Ghana's democracy under Akufo-Addo's presidency by claiming that Ghana's democracy is characterized by corruption, the monetization of the electoral system, and discrimination by state institutions like the police. Extract 13 underscores the violation of democratic standards by exploiting an illness metaphor. It suggests via an exaggerated language that Ghana's democracy has woefully failed the people, so much so that the only democratic thing in the country is malaria. Such hyperbolic language presents Ghana's democracy as a façade and hence the need for radical changes or, perhaps, a complete overhaul of the system. Extract 14 uses a war metaphor to highlight another aspect of a failed democratic system by suggesting that in Ghana, corruption is winning the battle against integrity because "the corrupt own the republic". This enunciation seeks to underscore the view that until corrupt are removed from office (Barker-Vormawor implies that this includes Akufo-Addo), the efforts of state institutions to address corruption issues will prove futile.

In other words, Barker-Vormawor suggests that if a few powerful individuals "own the country," they will have control over it and abuse their power. This likely results in what Van Leeuwen (2018, 149) has termed the "immoral use of power by the elite". Extract 15 exemplifies how the police under Akufo-Addo's governance violate standards and disregard social justice and equal treatment. Here, Barker-Vormawor highlights the different attitudes of the police to public crowds organized by politicians like Alan Kyerematen (a former minister under Akufo-Addo's government) and those organized by activist groups like the #FixTheCountry movement. By stating that the #FixTheCountry conveners are likely to be swamped and intimidated by the police even if they were to walk with 100 Ghanaians from point A to B, Barker-Vormawor makes value judgments on the moral behavior of the police to reinforce his delegitimation of Akufo-Addo's leadership. That is, he suggests that nearly all aspects of the country under Akufo-Addo's governance, including state institutions, have failed.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined delegitimation in the activist discourse of Ghana's #FixTheCountry lead convener, Oliver Barker-Vormawor. We analyzed the discursive

strategies deployed by Barker-Vormawor to delegitimize Ghana's governance under the presidency of Akufo-Addo, enabling him to condemn what he perceives to be misgovernance, injustice, and illegality and to simultaneously justify his activism and the goals of his #FixTheCountry movement. Our analysis revealed that Barker-Vormawor employed three main delegitimation strategies to formulate a conviction rhetoric intended to expose the transgressions of Akufo-Addo's government and his poor leadership as well as galvanize his (Barker-Vormawor) followers and by extension the people of Ghana, and recruit their support for sociopolitical action. These strategies are authorization, rationalization, and moral evaluation. They were linguistically realized by processes like positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, membership categorization, lexicalization, topoi, and metaphor. They helped Barker-Vormawor to construct himself as a patriot, a nationalist, a noble revolutionary, and a selfless leader who has the welfare of the Ghanaian people at heart. That is, he is represented via his activist discourse as one sanctioned by the Ghanaian people to champion their cause, protect their interests, and deliver them from corrupt politicians.

Our paper extends research on the construction of online activist discourses by focusing on the mechanism of delegitimation which has received little attention in the literature. By shedding light on how Barker-Vormawor's activist discourse draws on local linguistic resources and capitalizes on the knowledge and sentiments of his local audience, our paper further explicates the essential role of language and discourse to digital activism. We thus demonstrate the need to investigate digital activism as a dynamic discursive event that can be properly understood by accounting for the interrelationship between people, society or culture, and digital technology. Traditionally, research on (de)legitimation in political communication has focused attention on discourses produced by constituted authorities and mainstream politicians. By departing from this convention and examining delegitimation in the discourse of the lead convener of a protest movement, our paper shows that research on the (de)legitimation mechanisms of "unconstitutional authorities" is necessary to enhance our understanding of (online) activist discourse and how (contentious) politics is conceptualized and performed. Currently, the #FixTheCountry movement exerts considerable influence in the Ghanaian sociopolitical space and their activism is contributing to greater consciousness for accountable leadership and democratic governance. For instance, it is now commonplace for Ghanaians on X to use the hashtag #FixTheCountry when discussing sociopolitical issues and other "fix" hashtags (e.g. #FixGhanaSports, #FixGhanaEconomy, #FixGhanaEducation) have emerged. Our paper thus demonstrates that the (de)legitimation mechanisms of "unconstitutional authorities" holds implications for political participation, civic engagement, and social change.

Notes

1. https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-57983924, https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/8/4/in-pictures-ghanas-fixthecountry-protesters-take-to-streets, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/14/ghana-activist-oliver-barker-vormawor-lawsuit-arrest-detention
2. https://www.facebook.com/barkervogues
3. A country typically goes to the IMF as a last resort when its economic situation is dire. When a country borrows from the IMF, the government agrees to adjust its economic policies to overcome the problems that led it to seek financial assistance.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

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