



**3rd October, 2024**

## **The anti-Galamsey Struggle and the Construction of a National Popular Movement**

The struggle over illegal gold mining (“galamsey”) may be the Fourth Republic’s most significant social confrontation yet. It involves popular forces on the one hand and the NPP government, which, by inaction, is effectively protecting galamsey. SMG would like to contribute to popular mobilisation and a sustainable solution to galamsey and many other social ills we believe this movement can address.

### **What is the Galamsey Crisis?**

The galamsey crisis has been building since the early 2000s, driven by increasing international gold prices and technologies that make medium-scale alluvial mining super profitable (*as long as the industry can externalise the environmental and social production costs*). Galamsey is not the centuries-old, scattered, small-scale, low-tech, low-impact, artisanal shallow-water (“panning”) industry. It is a heavily mechanised process. It involves diverting rivers and dredging their basins, clearing the topsoil of historical floodplains, and applying toxic chemicals to separate gold ore from surrounding rock. It involves hundreds of thousands of labourers, technicians, and “investors” from the subregion and beyond. Galamsey appears to be creating employment and circulation of cash in job-starved rural areas. However, as in all capitalist production, the miners are intensely exploited. The surplus generated by the industry goes mainly to the capitalists who organise the industry and who fund the dredgers, motorised sampans, excavators, backhoes, jigs, chemicals, explosives, weapons, and political protection that sustain it.

Galamsey externalises environmental, economic, and social production costs. The immediate ecological impact is increased riverine turbidity and deforestation, killing off plants and animals. The stripping of topsoil destroys crops and can render large tracts of land barren for decades. The copious reckless use of mercury, cyanide, sulphuric and other acids poison the surface water and groundwater that ultimately enter the human food chain. This means higher (often imported) food and water for the wealthy, better-informed elite. For the poor, this means disease, suffering, and premature death. Galamsey also drives violence as miners (like the political parties) employ armed militias to “defend” their “operations” against each other and against attempts by socially minded traditional, local, and central government officials to shut them down. These militias have shown a willingness to take on armed state security services. All these processes and their adverse effects are now happening on a massive scale that we cannot ignore. Galamsey in Ghana is also polluting at least the coastline of Cote d’Ivoire, which could lead to legal action against Ghana.

### **What is the Underlying Political Economy of Galamsey?**

Social media characterises galamsey as a moral or law and order problem – bad individuals who must be stopped and punished. This is superficial and cannot lead to solutions. Galamsey is a product of an exploitative and repressive socio-economic system which denies West African youth dignified and productive livelihoods. Imperialism has plunged our communities into poverty and despair. Imperialism has created an army of desperately impoverished, alienated, and increasingly desensitised people ready to commit anti-social, predatory, and self-destructive acts to survive. Over the last 500 years, Imperialism has:

- disrupted previously integrated economic and social systems and subordinated them to heartless global supply chains through slavery and colonialism;
- smashed leadership that tried to unify and develop our society while preserving communal solidarity (i.e. socialism)
- imposed their anti-community co-conspirators in power;
- promoted liberal and neoliberal ideologies that place individual “self-realisation” and money-making above communal well-being; and
- progressively weakened our state institutions to facilitate (foreign) corporate exploitation.

What appears as galamsey in Ghana because of the high level of gold mineralisation takes the form of illegal oil “bunkering” in Nigeria, producing the same anti-social effects in the country's sensitive Southeast. galamsey is, in essence, also no different from the illicit narcotics trade polluting our communities and destroying our youth or the piracy breeding off our shores with increasing offshore oil production in West Africa. It has the same roots as other criminal enterprises – kidnapping for ransom, organ harvesting and trade, prostitution, and private militia (from Boko Haram to “Invincible Forces”) also operating across West Africa today.

### **What are the Current Politics of galamsey?**

Galamsey is only possible because many political “leaders” (elected, appointed, and traditional) support and benefit from it. Our political establishment lacks the political will, integrity, and credibility to protect society against this threat. President Akufo-Addo established a high-profile “Inter-Ministerial Committee on Illegal Mining” (IMCIM) and launched an “Operation Vanguard” in 2017. Apart from destruction of hundreds excavators and an upswing in violence the main outcome of this intervention was ruling party players’ industry penetration. After the initial fanfare, IMCIM and Task. Force collapsed in scandal, recriminations, and criminal investigations. Our president has since fallen silent on galamsey. In 2017, Akufo-Addo claimed willingness to sacrifice his political future in the fight against galamsey. In 2024, his party’s electoral manifesto extols “*small-scale mining*” as the “*economic engine of mining communities*”. It promises to structure, incentivise, finance, and support “*small-scale mining*” with technical expertise “... ***to usher in a Golden Age for Ghanaian-Owned Small-Scale Mining for Wealth and Jobs***”. The manifesto says nothing about the exploding nationwide environmental and public health crisis. The NDC manifesto is also silent on the galamsey crisis. With an election in 2 months, the parties prefer not to antagonise the galamsey industry, an important source of campaign funding and “enforcers” for polling day operations. This shows how our real political and electoral systems (as distinct from the written fantasies we celebrate) incentivise our politicians to undermine the national interest. As one MP describing the anti-galamsey movement on a campaign platform in the Ashanti Region said recently, “You can only make those kinds of noises in Accra, not here”.

The Akufo-Addo administration has instead attempted to silence dissent, for example, in the case of the 20-22 September “Democracy Hub” protests. We are critical of some of the actions of frontline demonstrators during that protest. However, we consider the State response excessive. The Ghana Police Service (GPS) is a highly professional police organisation. It could have easily controlled the relatively small crowd participating in those demonstrations and prevented the harassment of innocent citizens. It could have acted in ways that strengthen democracy. Instead, GPS arrested and incarcerated frontline demonstrators and known associates of Democracy Hub. GPS hauled demonstrators before compliant judges on charges of “conspiracy to commit unlawful assembly”, “unlawful assembly”, “causing unlawful damage”, “defacement of public notice”, “offensive conduct”, and “stealing”. The courts quickly denied arrestees bail and remanded them to police custody for two weeks pending trial. GPS, acting on “orders from above”, has since moved the arrestees frequently, obstructing their access

to lawyers and family support. The irony that these protestors, rather than the perpetrators of galamsey, are now facing trial is not lost on anybody. Rather than quelling protests, the treatment of Democracy Hub demonstrators has inspired more citizens to mount protests against what is seen as a State vendetta. SMG rejects this attack on the space for citizens' democratic action and freedom of expression. Tensions in our society are high. We call on all State players to exercise maximum restraint to avoid turning a necessary social confrontation into an explosion.

### **What can a Popular National Movement achieve for us?**

The galamsey crisis illustrates the failure of our national politics. The money and energy expended towards the December elections will not "fix" galamsey or Ghana's other critical problems. Our political system has failed and must be reworked if the Fourth Republic is to survive. We must move beyond the elite gamesmanship and corrupt electoralism currently masquerading as democracy.

Any peaceful democratic reworking of the political system requires mass public engagement. The anti-galamsey movement offers us a unique opportunity to develop just that. Public outrage has created a rare non-partisan national movement calling for substantive government action against galamsey. From individual online protests, this mobilisation is now on the ground. It is a potentially powerful network of organisations of working people, students, religious groups, traditional leaders, environmentalists, culturists, gender activists, media practitioners, and community activists coalescing behind the leadership of Organised Labour. SMG fully supports this growing popular movement and its leadership. And we call on it to recognise the historical moment we are in now. SMG believes that If we act now as people of thought and think as people of action, we can achieve historic societal changes.

It is not enough to confront the government and demonstrate citizens' power, though confrontation seems unavoidable now. Our popular movement must organise, develop, and table practical, broad-based, and lasting solutions to the galamsey problem. We must press for their adoption now. We cannot, however, withdraw at that point. We must sustain our collaboration into 2025 and beyond to ensure that whichever Party forms the next government implements these (or better) solutions and that the public is willing to bear the sacrifices that systemic change requires of us. And we cannot stop with galamsey either. Galamsey, terrible as it is, is only one facet of systemic problems that we as citizens must address now and not leave for our children.

We face a monumental task. To confront it, we need clarity and alignment. We call on Organised Labour to commence town hall meetings and other public engagements. SMG will fully support this popular movement with all our political, intellectual, and material resources.



**Kwesi Pratt, Jr.  
General Secretary**