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Politics, Religion, and the Churches: The 2002 Election in Papua New Guinea

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Introduction

In Papua New Guinea in the immediate aftermath of the 2002 national election, many of more than two million potential voters looked for ways to express their feelings of anger, disappointment, and frustration. With 43 political parties and 2785 candidates vying for 109 seats in parliament, some hitches were predictable. However, no one expected the extent of the chaos and intimidation that was experienced in many parts of Papua New Guinea during June and July 2002. After having spent 29 years in Papua New Guinea, I am well aware of how foolhardy it is to try to generalize about the situation in that country but on this occasion there was a pervasive sense that something had gone terribly wrong.

On the first day of polling, the Prime Minister, Sir Mekere Morauta, having had to wait for nearly five hours to cast his vote, was reported as saying, “This is more than a bungle. Someone should be hung for this” (*Post-Courier*, 18 June:1). That was on 17 June and the situation subsequently deteriorated. The Prime Minister was fortunate. Bishop Arnold Orowae, Catholic bishop in Enga Province, lined up in Wabag to cast his vote only to find that his name did not appear on the electoral roll. He left without voting and with a feeling of having been disenfranchised. In Port Moresby, 90 students at the Don Bosco Technical College were registered so that their names would be on the Common Roll but on voting day only five of their names appeared. The other 85 students were left disappointed and angry. This was a common experience. In the Highlands, what Bill Standish has called “gunpoint” democracy was rife with presiding officers being forced to sign ballot papers while facing down the barrel of a gun (Standish 1996).¹ The police were outnumbered and outgunned and the army had to be called in to try to bring about a semblance of order in some provinces such as Southern Highlands and Enga Provinces.

This paper discusses the present-day political significance of Christianity and the churches in Papua New Guinea against the background of political unrest and confusion in which the 2002 election was conducted.

The conception of religion in Papua New Guinea

The *National* newspaper of 10 July 2002 contained a headline in large bold print: “Use of magical powers alleged”. The article told how the ex-Prime Minister and re-elected Kokopo MP, Sir Rabbie Namaliu, had rejected calls from nine losing candidates for him to resign on the grounds that his victory was due to the use of magic. They alleged that invisible objects tampered with the ballot papers in favour of Namaliu while the votes were being counted. It is striking that the losing candidates in this electorate chose to highlight a “religious” cause – magic or sorcery – in attacking the winner.

¹ A headline on the front page of the *Post-Courier* of 21 June 2002 proclaimed “Ballot hijack: officers forced to sign papers by armed men”.

People accustomed to the rational empiricism of the West may find this example bizarre but it is not necessarily so for Papua New Guineans, most of whom have a holistic world view within which empirical and non-empirical, sacred and secular, are distinguished but not separated. Thus dreams and visions, rituals and spells, blessings and misfortune, and public professions of faith are all considered quite compatible with power and politics in this professedly Christian state.² In the recent 2000 census, 96% of Papua New Guineans declared that they were Christian whereas in the 2001 Australian census only 67% did so (Basic Community Profile, Table B10.)

“Religious” language in political discourse

The integration of the sacred and the secular in Papua New Guinean thinking is very often reflected in political discourse laced with Biblical references and religious narrative. Politicians and intending candidates go out of their way to create the impression that they are “God-fearing” and therefore to be trusted. A number of candidates in the recent election campaign compared themselves to Moses leading the people out of the desert into the promised land. Supporters also creatively utilize such themes. For example, in the Moresby North-East Open electorate, supporters of Caspar Wollom publicly sang church hymns in which the terms “God” or “Lord” were replaced with the name of their candidate. Here, in English translation, is an example of another hymn heard recently around the 9-mile settlement in Port Moresby in support of the same candidate: “God made Moses leader of the nation to lead the people of God to the promised land. Father and mother, brother and sister, let us get together and place our future in the hands of Caspar K. Wollom”.³ That such songs might be seen to make a mockery of a church hymn appears not to be an issue for those crowded on vehicles, singing in support their candidate. Indeed, perhaps the song is appropriate if he is seen as a saviour figure.

Many candidates in the election used language portraying themselves as “saviour” figures. For example, the former Speaker and deputy Prime Minister, John Pundari, has been campaigning as “Mr Clean” who attends his SDA church on the Sabbath and who will clean up the mess in government. In Wabag, the capital of Enga Province, on 17 May 2002 he told the people: “No one is going to save us from these things. I assure you that only Pundari will clean and save Enga”. Paradoxically, his arch-rival, Governor Peter Ipatas, claims that he is governor only because “God Almighty who is up above has given this power to me” (Yampu, 29 April 2002). Such claims are a not-so-subtle search for legitimacy by appealing to people’s religious sentiments and at worst amount to claiming political leadership by divine right.

Christian disunity and intolerance in Papua New Guinea.

It is misleading to refer to “the Church” in Papua New Guinea today as “the Church” is quite sharply divided into four separate blocks. The so-called mainline church block comprises the long-established former missionary churches – Lutheran, Catholic, United, and Anglican – together with others that make up the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches. Second, the Evangelical Alliance comprises churches like the Apostolic, Baptist, and Nazarene Churches and the Salvation Army. Third, there is a growing number of recently-established Pentecostal churches, such as the Assemblies of God and the Christian Revival Crusade, which are not yet organized into a formal block. Fourth, is the Seventh-day Adventist Church which forms

² The Preamble to the Papua New Guinea Constitution pledges to “guard and pass on to those who come after us our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now”.

³ “God i makim Moses lida bilong nesen, lidim pipel bilong God i go, i go long promis len. Papa na mama – a, brata na susa, yumi kam na bung wantaim. Autim fiutsa bilong yumi long Casper K. Wollom. Bamo maie, Tura maie, Aoma aita me hebou, eda rait man ladana be Casper K. Wollom”.

a separate block of its own with considerable political influence in Papua New Guinea. It is no doubt quite frustrating for the national government to have to try to deal with these very different church groups which are in many ways quite independent of each other and often opposed on core issues.

At provincial and local levels, there is greater pressure for religious and government institutions to cooperate because the churches, particularly the mainline ones, still provide 45% of the Papua New Guinea health services and a large proportion of the educational services. Church agencies are responsible for a majority of primary schools but they also run two of the five universities in the country. Tensions arise when promised government subsidies do not materialize or when Provincial Education Boards overrule church agencies in the appointment of teachers.

Currently attempts are being made in some political circles to declare Christianity the official state religion of Papua New Guinea. The mainline churches in the PNG Council of Churches generally oppose any move to amend section 45 of the constitution, on freedom of religion, but many of the Evangelical Alliance and Pentecostal churches are in favour. Two main reasons are given: first, to counter the perceived threat from Islam (according to the recent census there are now 756 Muslims in the country, an increase of 71% over the past 10 years); second, supporters believe that declaring the nation for God will lead God to bless the nation and help it prosper. The perceived threat from Islam was debated in Parliament during 2000 and 2001. Some members claimed that section 45 of the constitution applies only to religions which worship “God” and that a religion that worships “Allah” therefore does not come under the freedom of religion clause.⁴ The attempt to declare Christianity as the state religion of Papua New Guinea is thus a political attempt to set up “spiritual parameters” for citizens in their choice of religion.

The churches in politics

In taking a public stance on political questions, the mainline churches have focused on the issue of corruption in politics and promoted political education campaigns, appealing to values such as personal freedom, individual choice, and the responsibility of every citizen to be politically informed. There was a dramatic episode at Easter 1999 when the Catholic Archbishop of Port Moresby, Brian Barnes, publicly warned that the future of Papua New Guinea as a free democratic country was threatened. In later interviews the Archbishop was quoted as saying that the personal conduct of many Papua New Guinea leaders was shameful and that there was a need for a change of government (*Post Courier*, 1 April 1999:3). The Archbishop's statement acted as a catalyst for change and three months later Prime Minister Bill Skate was forced to resign (Gibbs 2000:159-61).

Many of the other churches tend to be ambivalent towards politics. On the one hand, having prayed for God to give them a good government, some claim that God must have heard their prayer and therefore they have the duty to respect and support the government of the day. This is backed up by biblical texts such as Romans 13, about being “subject to government authorities”. On the other hand, many see political realities in terms of “spiritual warfare” against the power of Satan and other evil influences. Hence, there have been campaigns involving the use of government aircraft and navy boats to circumnavigate the borders of the

⁴ See, for example, Hansard for the debate on 8 August 2000.

country while praying so as to erect a *prea banis*, “prayer wall” or “spiritual wall”, to keep satanic forces from entering the nation (Gibbs 2000:162-3).⁵

“Who is not for us is against us”

Electoral politics in Papua New Guinea today is a system in which polling booths and ballot papers have little to do with freedom and democracy and where the trappings of Parliament are for the most part about survival through getting your own slice of the cake and part of someone else's too if you can get away with it. In a recent edition of the *Independent*, columnist Sabina commented as follows:

When the rule of law is replaced by the law of the jungle, there is no longer present the essential ingredient for a free society. What we now have for democracy in Papua New Guinea is a farce. The governing principle now is survival of the fittest, hence the rule of engagement commences with threatening behaviour, blackmail, extortion and where that fails to work it moves into the terror mode where assaults, rape, and murder are meted out to those at the receiving end (*Independent*, 11 July 2002:5).

Many people in the Highlands decided not to vote because they felt it was too dangerous to do so. There was no secret vote and to be seen voting for one candidate would automatically be taken as a vote against another, thus risking the ire and the possible violent recriminations to follow.

With a priest, Fr Robert Lak, standing again in the Western Highlands, the Bishops in the Catholic Diocese of Mount Hagen tried every means to show their neutrality. For example, Fr Lak was suspended from the ministry. Churches and church grounds, facilities, musical instruments, and celebrations, were not to be used for campaigning. Church workers and Catholic communities were forbidden to accept donations or handouts that had any form of political ties.⁶ However, in the tense setting of the electoral contest between Robert Lak and Pius Wingti, the Church's declared neutrality was perceived by each as support for the other party. On one occasion, several priests had lunch with Pius Wingti and shortly afterwards the rumour machine sent word went around that Wingti had the support of eight Catholic priests. This, of course, was a slap in the face for Robert Lak. A pro-Wingti rally which was claimed on television to have been organized by Catholics did include Thomas Ulg, a member of the Catholic charismatic service team, but no priests appeared. In a recent interim assessment of the election, the Catholic Bishops in Mount Hagen gave priority to a restatement of their neutrality, an appeal for calm in a potentially highly volatile situation, and a commitment to be in solidarity with the victims of what had to that point been a very unjust electoral process.

⁵ There was considerable controversy in 2000 when the Speaker of Parliament, Bernard Narokobi, erected a cross on the roof of the House of Assembly. Some parliamentarians did not support Narokobi's point that Parliament makes decisions that are sacred and for the common good of the people. Eventually it was removed (Gibbs 2002:4-5).

⁶ Other churches also took a strongly neutral stance. Bishop Wesley Kigasung of the Evangelical Lutheran Church said that the church was seriously concerned about ordained clergy leaving their divine calling and going into politics: “Win or lose he must stay outside of active ministry. He should resign altogether from active ministry and be a layman” (*Post-Courier*, 22 May 2002:4; see also *National*, 22 May 2002:6). There were other reports, though, of churches' receiving “election handouts” like the report on a handout of K27,000 to the Assemblies of God New Life Family Church (*National*, 17 June 2002:6).

The churches, the nation, and ethnic rivalries

According to Bernard Narokobi, a sense of national purpose, national ethic, or national morality was not present at the time of independence in Papua New Guinea except among a few politicians and civil servants (1980:75). Michael Jacobsen identified resistance to a “national” culture in Papua New Guinea and Jeffrey Clark argued that national consciousness is virtually nonexistent in Southern Highlands Province (Clark 1997; Jacobsen 1995). What national unity does exist is often attributed to the work of the churches (Trompf 1991:254). Michael Young noted:

Notably in PNG today the state is actually on the retreat in many parts of the country, providing few services and making fewer demands on its citizens than did the colonial state. In such circumstances of weak state penetration the Church (and to a lesser degree other non-governmental organizations) remains dominant in everyday matters of village life. To a corresponding degree, the entrenched doctrines of Christianity as unifying forces are more salient than the newer ideologies of nationalism (Young 1997:125).⁷

In recent times Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern argued that capitalism, democracy as patronage, and a weak state have led to a critical situation for the Hagen people, leading to an upsurge in religious and ritual activity, especially of a “born-again” variety. That was before the year 2000. After the dire millennial predictions about the year 2000, many people felt let down by their pastors. One sees an upsurge in tribal rivalries and even greater fragmentation among the churches. The Apostolic Nuncio, the late Archbishop Hans Schwemmer, declared in 2001 at the funeral of a murdered priest that Papua New Guinea's claim to being a Christian country “is getting weaker every day”.⁸

Electoral politics as an anti-state “cult”

The election campaign period in 2002 was noticeably different from that of 1997. There were no large-scale church-led campaigns such as the “Operation Brukim Skru” prayer campaign of the last election (Gibbs 1998:33-5).⁹ The “religious” factor, in terms of open courting of the Church vote, was less obvious, possibly because candidates could no longer play on the highly emotional theme of the approach of the year 2000 and the end of the millennium. The focus in 2002 was on the seemingly more pragmatic and materialist goal of how to gain five years in power, along with the benefits of access to that power.

⁷ Young prefaced this remark as follows:

It is a common observation that the colonial state did not penetrate as deeply and as effectively into the villages of the Western Pacific as the missions and Churches, whose successes, generally speaking, have far exceeded those of any government agency. The missions were able to govern and to provide the services – of health and education in particular – in a manner which assured their prominence after independence. The successor states of the colonial era have inherited this incomplete penetration into rural, provincial or peripheral areas (1997:125).⁸ Editorial opinion in the press during the following week was even more scathing, as in the following:

The violence currently exhibited towards mainly Catholic clergy and lay workers cannot be viewed in isolation from the chaos and turmoil that categorises contemporary Christian religious practice in this country. Indeed there is a tragic possibility that the Christian spiritual life of PNG, driven into fragments by disunity and self-aggrandisement, will very soon parallel the corrupt, cynical and barren secular society that plagues our daily lives. Bishop Schweimer (sic) speaks the truth. PNG's claims to being a 'Christian country' diminish daily (*National*, 4 2001:14).

⁹ “Operation Joshua” was promoted by the same people who had led “Operation Brukim Skru” five years previously but it did not receive the same popular support.

During the 2002 electoral campaign, more clearly in the Highlands, there was evidence of the emergence of a localized, anti-state political cult which threatened to make the institution of the state redundant, bring government services to a standstill, and make the high national ideals of the country irrelevant. This was why the government had to send the army into some provinces to try to subdue the war lords who were holding public servants and election officials to ransom.

I do not mean to revive the term “cargo cult”. Rather, I deliberately link the term “political” with “cult” in order to underline the “religious” connotations of this mindset and associated activities. Contemporary Papua New Guinea politics displays all the trappings of an enthusiastic religious movement, with its recruitment campaigns, its quest for power over the minds and emotions of members, its creeds, and its rituals. The rituals are predictable, with candidates' images on posters and revival-style meetings at which they are presented with signs of honour like flowers or are carried on people's shoulders. A pastor is invited to open the meeting with a prayer, there are songs, sometimes led by the local church youth choir whose musical instruments have perhaps been provided by the candidate, and there is a feast for the supporters. Diviners are present watching for the least sign of the outcome of the election, like, for example, a gust of wind blowing feathers in a particular direction. Many candidates build “campaign houses”. Around Wabag in Enga Province, these were commonly called “animal” houses. Why? “Because animals don't think,” I was told. “People can do anything they like in such houses and the normal rules do not apply. They don't think or act like people with intelligence.”

While I avoid the term “cargo” cult, some forms of “cargo” thinking featured in this political cult. But perhaps it is better labelled economic pragmatism. A governor of Enga reputedly said, “God creates miracles – men create miracles with money”. Everything, including moral principles and personal integrity, had a price tag. In the short-term, many groups bartered their votes to the highest bidder. In the long term, to be the supporter of a winning candidate means “life” in terms of having access to jobs and economic development over the next five years, while to end up as the supporter of a losing candidate means economic and social “death”. In recent times, Rural Development Funds (commonly known as “slush funds”) amounting to one and a half million kina (AU\$750,000) a year have been given to parliamentarians: K1.25 million as “project funds”, and K250,000 to use at their own discretion. Not surprisingly, I heard one candidate tell his supporters that the campaign was a contest to see who would get the “key to the safe”.

Selfish pragmatism notwithstanding, a cause for even more concern was the totally unrealistic campaign policies of some political parties. For example, the People's Labour Party led by Peter Yama had a tithing policy whereby 10% from the total earnings of the country would go to the Home Affairs Department to be distributed to the churches. Mr Yama was reported to have said: “I will ensure that 10% of the annual national budget is given to God” (*Post-Courier*, 3 December 2001:5). Realists like the Lae MP Bart Philemon pointed out the impossibility of carrying out such promises (*Post-Courier*, 29 May 2002:8). Assuming a national budget of K4 billion, 10% would mean that K400 million would be given to the churches.¹⁰ Even more fantastic claims were made by the National Vision for Humanity Party which promised a monthly “social security grant” of K10,000 (AU\$4,500) to

¹⁰ In Germany the “church tax” is 9% of income tax. People who “leave” the Church can keep that 9% for themselves.

every family. Given an average family unit of five people, the monthly social security grant bill would be K10 billion! Such policies could easily be written off as the work of “nuts” except that they received support in newspaper articles written by such prominent men as Sir Paulias Matane (*National*, 4 April 2002:13). The recent involvement of some leaders, including church leaders and even the Ombudsman, in pyramid “fast-money” schemes such as U-Vistract make one hesitate to dismiss such ideas as merely the fantasies of a lunatic fringe.¹¹ There is also a link between such schemes and some of the neo-pentecostal, born-again churches.

A notable feature of the modern political cult is the use of dependent clients, notably young people. The majority of the youth of Papua New Guinea is unemployed and so it is not difficult for candidates offering money and food to recruit them to their campaigns. This has resulted in the loss of many young people to the churches. In Highlands areas during the election, youths bearing modern firearms often took over polling areas and forced people to vote for their candidate.

Conclusion

In the immediate aftermath of the election, with four large Highlands provinces in a state of anarchy, the situation was one of political cult versus the state. The four provinces comprise one and a half million people, 30% of the total population of Papua New Guinea. Moreover, these provinces are the principal sources of overseas income: from the production of coffee in Simbu and Western Highlands, gold in Enga, and gas and oil in Southern Highlands. During the 2002 election, the value of the Papua New Guinea currency, the kina, fell steadily. The ultimate fallout from the elections in these provinces will be crucial for the economic and social future of the entire country.

There is reason to fear that Papua New Guinea might have come to the point where, as Livy said of ancient Rome, “we can neither endure our vices nor face the remedies needed to cure them”. The vices are readily apparent and have been detailed in this paper. The remedies are less obvious but clearly difficult. The history of Europe and the emergence of modern religious fanaticism show that religion and religious institutions can be used for good or evil. With politics itself taking on a “cultic” role in Papua New Guinea, serious questions arise as to the effects on the society as a whole in both the short and long terms. Does the political cult have the power to redeem itself or will it plunge the nation deeper into crisis, with a widening of internal anarchy and heightened pressure from external global processes?

There are some positive aspects to the present situation. First, while electoral chaos, violence, and chicanery were widespread during the 2002 election, especially in the Highlands, they were not universal. My own perspective is particularly jaundiced from having spent most of the electoral period in the Highlands. A second reason to temper gloom is, paradoxically, that the situation is so undeniably bad. People in Papua New Guinea are not fools and have proved time and again that they are amazingly resourceful. Perhaps this election will shock them into making greater, more concerted efforts to achieve positive changes after such a bitter experience. It will take time and this is where the institutional churches can have an important educational and defining role, given their considerable actual and potential

¹¹ An indication of U-Vistract's fantasy world can be gauged from the opening words of the director of the scheme, Noah Musingku, at a meeting held at Sir John Guise stadium on Good Friday 2000: “Welcome to the Independent state of U-Vistract and the Independent state of the Kingdom of Papala. Today marks a very important day in the history of the U-Vistract system, Bougainville and Papua New Guinea, and indeed the universe as a whole” (*National*, 25 April 2000:18).

influence throughout the country. First, the churches will have to put aside some of their own differences and, following the principle of unity in diversity, form a workable inter-church group to undertake dialogue with the government. Second, NGOs and churches must work together to facilitate the formation of a high level ongoing forum to discuss issues such as: how to develop workable democratic processes to enculturate political democracy in Papua New Guinea; and, how to transform political practices so that politics is seen as an honourable profession informed by Christian and humanitarian values. Third, the churches will have to put more effort into pastoral outreach to civil leadership and engage in a prophetic ministry that offers alternatives to what has become a power-hungry, dysfunctional cult. Fourth, the churches must help bring the disempowered casualties of the present system together for dialogue. What is good governance and for whom? Are there communal models of shared responsibility that can be salvaged from traditional Melanesian values? The solution to an abused system is not necessarily another system but rather the transformation of the present system in ways that ensure liberation for a majority of the frustrated and disenfranchised people. If the churches can find ways to work with the state on the four points outlined above, they will fulfil an important role in helping to define the future of Papua New Guinea politics.

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