

Election Audit by the Catholic Church in the PNG Highlands

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At the initiative of the Commission for Social Concerns of the Catholic Bishops Conference and the Bishops of the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Highlands, representatives from the Region met at Good Shepherd Seminary Banz from 3-7 December 2012, to audit the 2012 National General Elections. Four participants were invited from each of the seven Highlands Provinces representing the wider communities including the two new provinces of Hela and Jiwaka. There were 21 participants present including lay people, a religious sister, priests, Caritas coordinators, a representative from the Oxfam Highlands Project and Transparency International PNG, researchers from the Melanesian Institute, and four Bishops.

The reason for this audit was to evaluate the 2012 PNG General Election, to see what the Church can learn from the experiences of its people and to help prepare for future elections. Participants presented topics they had prepared, and each presentation was followed by group discussion and a plenary session.

This paper addresses the rationale behind the project and then gives a summary of the eight principal topics discussed at the audit, followed by a total of 25 recommendations.¹⁰⁵

Elections in the PNG Highlands

Political strategising is a part of everyday reality in the Highlands. However, elections usher in a period of heightened excitement and tension over many months. The 2002 general election was particularly chaotic and violent, with many lives lost in election-related fighting (Gelu 2003; May 2003). Six Southern Highlands constituencies could not be declared because of sabotage and destruction of ballot boxes (Commonwealth Observer Group 2012, p. 4).

¹⁰⁵ There are a number of Christian Churches in Papua New Guinea, all playing a part in relations between “Church” and State. References to Church in this paper refer to the Catholic Church, unless the name of another Church is added to qualify the term. The term Churches in this paper refers to all Christian Churches.

The 2007 election in the Highlands saw less overt violence mainly due to control by a large force of police and PNG defence force personnel. There was a rolling election over several weeks through the Highlands Region, in order to concentrate on different highland provinces separately and to allow greater number of security personnel on the ground during voting. Caritas PNG, an agency of the Catholic Church, was one of principal agents for delivering awareness on the new electoral roll and the new Limited Preferential Voting system and the rights and duties of all citizens for an honest election. Nevertheless, the 2007 election in the Highlands was marked by widespread electoral fraud and malpractice (Haley and Anere 2009, p. 66).

The lead up to the 2012 elections was plagued by a national crisis that rendered the political and legal environment for the elections extremely complicated.¹⁰⁶ On May 9 the Catholic Bishops appealed for political leaders to respect the democratic process.

With great love for God and the people of this nation we, the Catholic Bishops of Papua New Guinea, urgently appeal to you, our political leaders, to end this impasse swiftly. And we urge you to do this in the way that is transparent and just and that promotes the common good of all the people. It is now or never!¹⁰⁷

Anticipating major problems in the Highlands, three months prior to the election a state of emergency was declared in the Southern Highlands and parts of the Enga Province and special police units were deployed. At the time of the election in June operation NATEL saw the biggest PNG defence force troop deployment since the Bougainville crisis, with over 1000 soldiers, and 2300 police including some 380 correctional service officers sent to the Highlands (*Post Courier*, 6th June 2012). Caritas PNG, operating through the Catholic Dioceses at parish level, was prominent among the NGO groups providing awareness on the electoral process, governance issues and the importance of electing “good” leaders. A year before the election the Catholic Bishops published a reminder about public funds and corruption.

As the 2012 election approaches we see early signs of these very abuses and fear that a great deal of the wealth of the nation will be wasted in

106 The political crisis is well documented in the Report of the Commonwealth Observer Group, (Commonwealth Secretariat 2012, pp. 4-7).

107 Catholic Bishops Conference, 2012, “Appeal of the PNG Catholic Bishops to the PNG National Political Leaders to end the current political impasse in Papua New Guinea”.

electioneering rather than being used for real prioritised and sustainable development.¹⁰⁸

Politics and the Catholic Church

In the year 2000 census, 96% of Papua New Guineans declared that they are Christian.¹⁰⁹ Particularly in rural areas the State has not penetrated as deeply and effectively as the Churches (Young 1997, p. 125). The Catholic Church, being the largest Church in PNG is a major provider of education and health services.¹¹⁰ These and other services mean that Church and State serve a common interest and this not only blurs any boundaries of separation of Church and State, but also gives the Church added recognition for speaking out on social concerns in the public forum.

Some might find it incongruous that a Church that appears to work with autocratic monarchical structures on a global level sees fit to promote democratic principles at a national level in PNG.¹¹¹ The complexity of Church structures aside, the Bishops in PNG strongly promote what is termed “Catholic Social Teaching” with its principles including subsidiarity, solidarity, human dignity and the common good.¹¹² This social teaching provided a resource for those

108 Catholic Bishops Conference, 2011, “Statement on 2012 PNG Election”.

109 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”.

110 As of 2012, in Education, the Catholic Church has 1102 primary schools catering for 181,721 students, 38 secondary schools with over 15,000 students, six technical secondary schools with 2630 students, 51 vocational training centres with 5688 students, three teachers’ colleges with over 2000 students and Divine Word University which enrolls more than 5000 students. 14 Callan service centres for disabled have over 1,300 students. The Catholic Church is also a major health service provider in PNG with five Catholic rural hospitals, 40 health centres and 132 aid posts” (*Post Courier*, 23 November 2012).

111 The Catholic Church opposed the liberal reforms of the Enlightenment that had changed governments throughout Europe. Even after accepting democracy in principle after World War II, it found it very difficult to accept the separation of church and state. “The Declaration on Religious Freedom” (Dec 7th, 1965) opened new opportunities for the Church to engage with liberal democracy. However, the late Pope John Paul II tended to champion the freedom of the Church against the state in the juridical and political realms. The debate continues.

112 For a comprehensive resource on Catholic Social Teaching, see The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2009 *Compendium*.

developing the PNG Constitution in the early 70s and is a reference point today for the leaders of the Church in PNG.¹¹³

The Bishops consider that they have a responsibility to promote public discourse relevant to the moral conscience of society including the political realm.¹¹⁴ That is why they have made public statements and continue to do so with this audit of the elections.

Below are eight matters emerging from the election audit meeting.

1. Bribery

Election time is a time when people have an opportunity to benefit materially. This may be in bundles of cash, but also includes goods and services, financial support for social activities such as sporting events, and contributions to the payment of school fees, marriage and compensation payments and funeral expenses. This is part of the culture of elections in the Highlands. The sitting member is expected to provide both cash and services. In some ways the expectation of the people is genuine because whether we agree with the system or not, members of parliament do have access to funds meant for development within their electorates. Whether gifts of cash, goods or services should be regarded as a gift or a bribe depends on timing and the motive or intention. Some question whether there is ever a “free” gift in PNG. People are used to a system of give and take where “I give this to you, so you do that for me.” The giving is two-way with candidates exploiting the expectation of voters by presenting gifts, cash and services to people in order to gain popularity, and people offering gifts and cash to candidates in order to show that they are supporters, with the intention that when the candidate wins, then they as supporters will benefit. People make a big fuss of MPs when they visit and in that way project onto them a handout mentality.

At election time, services and gifts inevitably have a hidden motive with strings attached. This is bribery and it takes away freedom of choice for the people. They are obliged to pay back with their votes. If they do not pay back as expected

113 This writer recalls discussing elements of Catholic Social Teaching, such as “Integral human development” with John Momis when he was visiting Enga Province with the Constitutional Planning Committee in 1973.

114 See Gibbs 2003, “Politics, Religion, and the Church”.

the consequences often bring destruction to existing social services. Such bribery begins very early, even years before the election. It gets worse close to polling time, and then it is common knowledge that it continues after the election during the formation of government.

A difficulty stems from confusion about the three principal arms of government and the influence of traditional “bigman” politics. In modern democratic systems, politicians are not meant to be primary service providers. They should be giving their constituents good laws and a workable system, not giving out cars and water supplies. It is the role of district administrators and public servants to be managing and providing goods and services. However, the trend seems to be in favour of members of parliament as they allocate themselves more funds to distribute.

Recommendations:

- 1.1. The Government should cease distribution of all district development funds six months prior to national elections.
- 1.2. The Church should not accept any goods or services of any kind (including cheques to be cleared after the election) from six months before the issue of writs.
- 1.3. The Church needs to do awareness and also educate our people on democracy and politics, good leaders and good governance.
- 1.4. The Church should design strategies to advocate on proper roles and responsibilities of Members of Parliament under the National Constitution.

2. Campaign Period and the Caritas awareness campaign

The campaign period in 2012 was relatively peaceful. But inside many people’s hearts there was a “cold war” with deep fear and anxiety. Now that the election is over, violence has broken out in a number of electorates and the majority of MPs are facing challenges to their wins in the court of disputed returns.

The Caritas awareness campaign is an important and beneficial community service. It covers relevant topics such as the LPV system of voting; good governance; the spread of HIV and AIDS; free, fair, safe and inclusive elections;

political parties; election-related violence; bribery; and making choices. However, the Caritas campaign encountered difficulties because it was held during the election campaign. Some voters thought that Caritas was favouring priest candidates. This awareness should come a year before the election.

Materials used in the Caritas PNG awareness campaign have been recycled over several elections. They should be fully evaluated and revised to address current realities. For example, can they meet with councillors and village leaders and do “dummy runs” of polling and counting following acceptable procedures. Caritas should request that funds come early, but such an awareness campaign can proceed through Church networks and need not wait for the Electoral Commission or international agencies to provide funds, often at the last moment.

Recommendations

- 2.1. The Church can contribute to on-going awareness, not just at election time. We can prepare for the Local Level Government elections in 2013, and also improve general electoral awareness by conducting elections using democratic procedures for electing office holders within Church bodies and church agencies such as Catholic schools.
- 2.2. The Caritas PNG awareness campaign should start at least a year before the election, accompanied by new training and revised resources. Particular attention must be given to awareness for youth. The method has to go beyond supplying information to a genuine engagement with the issues, hopefully leading to a transformation of attitudes and behaviour.
- 2.3. The Church should encourage healthy alternatives to “campaign houses”, since such places provide added opportunities for extra-marital sexual encounters and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

3. Violence before, during, or after the election. How safe was it?

Security forces helped establish control during the 2012 elections. Whether control is true peace is debatable. There were few fights before and during the elections, but there was violence in all Highlands provinces afterwards. There is still tension as people wait for the results from the Court of Disputed Returns. A free and fair election would reduce the chance of violence after the elections—however, participants at the election audit agreed that the 2012 National Election in the Highlands was generally not free or fair.

People blame each other: Government, candidates, and politicians. But elections are everybody's business and we are all part of it. It is a matter of taking ownership of the electoral processes and finding out what we can do to help with free and fair elections in the communities. We as Church can help organise activities within communities. It is people's privilege and their right. For example, before the election we can have candidates and supporters to agree to not have campaign houses, promise to follow strategies that avoid violence during the election period such as not carrying knives or guns, and have community leaders agree to respect the right of all to vote in person and in secret. Community leaders can plan and arrange that people can check the voter list before the election, that on polling day proper cardboard booths will be set up so that people can vote in secret, that there is only one person at a time at the booths, and that there be proper crowd management to avoid massing around the polling place.

Recommendations

- 3.1 Before the 2013 LLG elections the Church together with other faith-based and community-based organisations should conduct awareness to clarify the role of a Councillor. After the 2013 council elections the Church along with other FBOs and CBOs should assist Councillors in conducting an honest ward census that would lead in turn to an accurate electoral roll.
- 3.2 Massive and costly security operations are a temporary measure. The Church together with FBOs and CBOs should assist in developing a no-cost effective plan to help find long-term solutions to problems and tensions identified in communities.

4. Political Parties and the Election

There were 46 political parties registered to contest the 2012 election. This seems too many. Most of the parties have no clear policies and the way rallies are conducted gives little chance for people to ask questions. Some parties appear to exhibit a cult of personality associated with the party founder or leader. In the Highlands local and kin ties are still more important than party influence. For the Goroka Open seat only 5 out of 51 candidates were endorsed by political parties. The only female candidate in the Goroka Open sought party endorsement but was turned down.

In the 1972 election no party emerged with a clear majority, so Sir Michael Somare began lobbying to form a coalition. This post-election lobbying of apparently unattached members (independents) set a precedent for all subsequent elections. People are now starting to realise how political parties play an important part in the formation of the government after the election.

One party policy that did appeal to the voters was the free education and free health care policy of the PNC party. It remains to be seen how the policy will work out in practice.

Recommendations:

- 4.1. The Church should assist the Government (Electoral Commission) to develop effective policies for limiting the ever-increasing number of political parties.
- 4.2. The Church should advise the Government (Registrar of political parties) to demand that parties develop specific platform policies before being registered as a party.
- 4.3 Church should assist the Government (Electoral Commission and Registrar of political parties) to ensure that there is appropriate support for women candidates in party guidelines.

5. Women and the Election

There were more opportunities for women in the 2012 election than in previous elections, but the situation leaves ample room for improvement. Cultural barriers still exist that intimidate women both as candidates and as voters and it is hard for women to overcome these. Many women did not vote because ballot papers were distributed to male clan leaders. Because men are typically heads of families, the family order roll in the Highlands tends to favour male voters. In provinces like Enga, women who are strong enough to insist in front of their male relatives may get to vote. In some places the primary role assigned to women was “decoration.”

From the experience of the 2012 election, with the size of electoral rolls, limits on polling booths, and lateness of the start of polling, one-day polling is unrealistic in many wards if all men and women are to have the chance for

a personal vote. Women tended to have more chance to vote in Goroka and Simbu. It was difficult for women in the other provinces, particularly in Hela and in Enga.

Recommendations:

- 5.1. The Church should encourage the Electoral Commission to ensure that there are separate polling booths for women. This will require specific directions to electoral managers and extended awareness to enable the cultural change necessary for permitting the use of separated polling booths.
- 5.2. The Church and other organisations can offer adult literacy programmes for women, which should in turn reduce the necessity for some women to have assisted voting.
- 5.3. The Church must involve women in leadership positions in all Church activities, as a model for the wider society.

6. Christian Values and Elections

Christian values seem not very influential in influencing candidates and voters' actions and decisions. The behaviour of Catholics seemed little different from the wider society. Some see Catholics as social service providers (education and health) rather than as a leaven in society. There is the irony of some Christians fasting and praying for a good election, while on the other hand, many accepted bribes.

Awareness is not sufficient. We need moral transformation and the development of a moral conscience. It is a matter not only of knowing what is right, but of training the will to do what is right. In some ways our awareness campaigns are telling people what they already know. The issue is how to put that knowledge into practice.

As Church we have an important role to play in politics. We don't have to become politicians, but we have to be involved in the political (i.e. the affairs of the polis, the "city") realm for transforming the lives of people in favour of the common good. The underlying issue is the relationship between faith and life. How do we translate the faith that fills the churches into lives of honesty and integrity?

The offer of some parties to tithe and give 10% of the budget to the churches is a dangerous move that runs contrary to the separation of church and state which protects the independence and freedom of the church. Direct funding to churches risks a situation whereby funds which should be coming through normal channels for education, health and social services will be diluted, making us worse off than now. If government provided good roads and services, our Christian people could earn money from their hard work and contribute according to their ability to their churches. This is the correct and blessed way for churches to obtain funds, from the free gifts of their people. The other major risk is that churches will be seen to be just another department of government, accountable to government and dependent on it.

Recommendations:

- 6.1. The Catholic Church should encourage all its members (laymen/women) to participate actively in all levels of the political process so as to transform current politics and society.
- 6.2. The Church should look for ways of promoting Church social teaching in a way that will be comprehensible to people throughout the wider community and thus influence people's moral conscience.
- 6.3. The Church must make its internal structures and procedures a model for the values we hold and preach.
- 6.4. The Church should promote the use of the seven-step Bible study method, with particular emphasis on the step that applies the Bible message to life. This should result in some practical point of action no matter how simple it is.

7. Voting and Counting

In the Highlands there appears to be a conflict between two different systems—Western individualism and Melanesian communalism. The latter appears to take precedence with voting at election time. The underlying traditional cultural value is prosperity and security (gutpela sindaun). But today we see a distortion of culture and because of this system people are in effect becoming poorer and more insecure. In parts of the Highlands they call it clanship democracy

where the decision to vote for a political leader is regarded as not one person's private business. Decisions are made in public forums weeks and days prior to polling. It sounds good, but is open to abuse and disenfranchises many people, especially women.

We should not go by the principle "Everyone does it so it must be right". Line-up voting, scrutineer marking and group voting hijacks the political process. In many Highlands Provinces, giving all eligible people the right to vote will require changes not only to the manner of voting, but also to the manner of understanding democratic politics.

The question arises why the current system of counting take so long in some places, yet accomplished so quickly in others (such as Ialibu-Pangia). We hear that the electoral commission used electronic counting successfully in the Kundiawa-Gembogl by-election in Simbu in 2011. Could this not be used more widely?

Recommendations:

- 7.1 The Church should frequently exercise democratic voting in its institutions (for example, electing class captains in schools or for Boards in parishes, schools and health facilities). This could include the entire process from developing a "roll", through policy based campaigns, and secret ballots, to transparent counting and declarations, and hopefully would familiarise people with democratic principles in practice.
- 7.2 The Church in association with Government Departments and NGOs can facilitate further reflection on the relationship between democratic freedom of conscience and the traditional cultural emphasis on the importance of the clan consensus in decision-making. There might be a place for a church-sponsored national convention on the issue of culture and the electoral process.
- 7.3 The Church should advocate for the Electoral Commission to introduce electronic counting, and also guard against corruption by changing counting personnel within the Province and/or having counting personnel come from other provinces.

8. Church involvement in Election

Church involvement in the electoral process is welcomed. Church facilities and personnel can be used to assist in elections. This happened in many places, including with the Hela Council of Churches. However, we must beware of becoming a conduit for funds or turning churches into a department of government.¹¹⁵

Unfortunately some church workers have participated in corrupt practices. Priests standing for election cause a great deal of confusion and this should continue to be strongly discouraged.

Recommendations:

- 8.1. Clear and timely guidelines need to be issued by the Catholic Bishops' Conference regarding appropriate behaviour of priests, lay-church workers and all Church members regarding participation in the electoral process, including penalties for those who do not follow the guidelines.
- 8.2. At least one year before elections Bishops should meet with priests and Church leaders to discuss the above guidelines and agree on pastoral solutions for non-adherence to those guidelines.
- 8.3. The Church should request the Government to not set polling days on Saturday or Sunday.

Concluding Comments

This audit with its recommendations has been prepared in order to help the Church integrate faith and life and to prepare communities for better management of future elections.

115 Prior to the election, Bishop Anton Bal of the Kundiawa Diocese sent a letter out to all parishes. The letter has 11 points, one of which is to ask candidates and supporters to stay away from Church property since the services offered by the church should be seen as independent from politics. *"Katolik Daiosis i askim ol Kendidet na Sapota i stap longwe long ol propati bilong Sios. Ol i sevis bilong olgeta pipol na ol dispela sevis bai i sevim ol pipol longpela taim bihain. Politik i save kam na go, olsem na larim ol sevis i stap fri na longwe long politik."*

The audit revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the entire process of the election. Participants felt that there needs to be a moral transformation and renewed critical awareness by Church members and the wider society. It noted how cultural values, such as “bigman culture” clash with Western cultural values behind such practices as the secret ballot. It also noted how we as Church must begin to practice and familiarise people with acceptable democratic procedures and principles.

The participants reconfirm their desire to work closely with the Government, NGOs and CBOs to empower people to take ownership of the election. They also noted that women must actively participate in all aspects of elections.

The outcome of the audit will be communicated to the Electoral Commission, sitting MPs, NGOs and other Churches to facilitate ongoing dialogue on this important issue.

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