

# Observing Elections in Papua New Guinea

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**Heavy security during the voting process**



There are many ways of being political: one may lobby through a non-government organization, join a political party or support a candidate. In many modern nations, there is a separation of church

and state, so the Church tries to keep a low profile in electoral politics. This autonomy of the Church allows it to play an important role when it comes to observing elections.

In 2007, I was asked by the Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission to lead a domestic observer team during the PNG National Elections. We were sent to the Enga Province in the Central Highlands, a province known as a "hot spot" among the nineteen provinces in Papua New Guinea. In the previous elections, there had been accusations of gross fraud, many people had died in election-related violence and many ballot papers were destroyed when the shipping containers in which they were stored were blown up and burned. Electoral officials wanted to ensure that there would be no repeat of such attempts to derail the elections. Domestic observer teams like ours were part of that strategy.

The polling took one week and the counting lasted another three weeks. I will give an account of Tuesday, the first day of polling.

Tuesday  
6:00 a.m. - The police superintendent, who had found lodging with us at the diocesan headquarters, is speaking loudly into his mobile phone. Polling in the Enga Province is to begin. Police reinforcements coming from the neighboring Southern Highlands should come quickly. Helicopters to airlift defense force security personnel and ballot boxes to isolated communities will come as soon as the cloud lifts.

7:00 a.m. - At morning Mass in the cathedral, the bishop prays for just and trouble-free elections. People do not remain after Mass as usual, but hurry home to prepare for polling.

8:00 a.m. - I meet with the six-member domestic observer team. They are men and women strongly motivated by their Christian faith and also wise to political intrigue. Among other things, on polling day they are to observe and document how the new electoral roll is used and whether the voting is free and fair.



**Counting the votes**

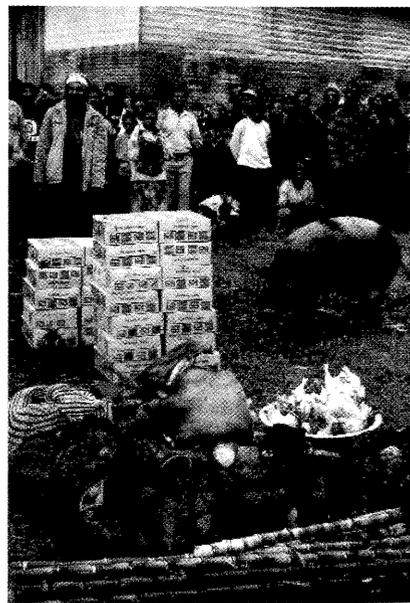


**Clockwise: Candidates at election rally near Wabag; Woman tells man how he should mark her voting slip; Defence Forces ready to stop trouble during polling; Locals offer gifts to candidates during the campaigning; Casting a vote**



Caritas Internationalis is a confederation of Catholic relief, social service and development organizations. In the past, during the campaign period in Papua New Guinea, Caritas has organized political awareness efforts focusing on justice and human rights. This time, the new Limited Preferential Voting System, whereby people would have three choices rather than one, was the center of interest. Would it allow people greater freedom or might it mean that people have three votes to trade or sell instead of one? "Money for votes" is commonplace in the Papua New Guinea Highlands.

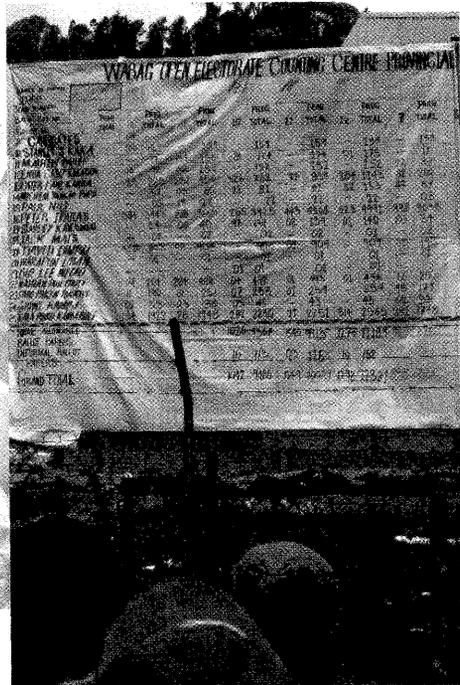
In their rally speeches, candidates promised new levels of well-being and an end to corruption. Well-being is measured by functioning schools, health centers with well-stocked dispensaries and roads to allow vehicles to take coffee and vegetable produce to market. Royalties and spin-offs from the huge Porgera gold mine at the western end of the province ensure income, but management of funds often leaves much to be desired. Many candidates claimed that they were "God-fearing" in the hope that this might increase their credibility and add greater legitimacy to their promises.



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9:00 a.m. - I observe electoral officials setting up polling booths in parts of Wabag, the main town of the province. This time there would not be separate voting compartments for men and women. This is an innovation because, in past elections, men would vote in place of their wives or their sisters. One would think that separate voting would be culturally acceptable in Enga considering the separation of the sexes in many aspects of life, including in church. However, it seems cultural separation does not count when it comes to sharing power and there was no separate voting this time.

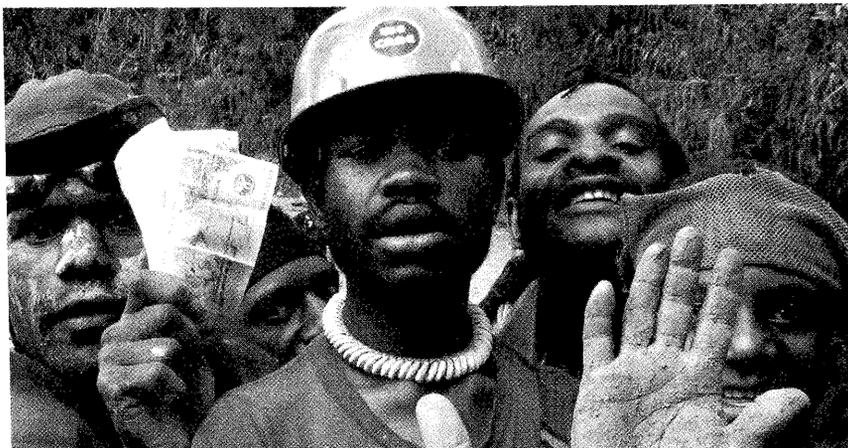


10:00 a.m. - I arrive at the Par mission. In the 2002 election, two men died on polling day when one tried to "hijack" a ballot box. In the ensuing weeks, another sixteen people died in fighting that occurred. This time it is peaceful and there is an atmosphere of quiet business. People have learned the hard way that violence is no solution to conflict.

11:00 a.m. - Not far from Par, at Lakemanda, the people refuse to vote. The electoral roll is grossly inflated with dubious names, but they claim that 300 names of eligible voters are missing from the electoral roll. "Who are we?" they shout, "Are we not citizens with a right to vote? Take your ballot boxes back and sort out the roll first! Then we will vote." Defense force personnel arrive with their automatic weapons and long staves tipped with barbed wire. They do not have to use their weapons, but they cannot appease the angry crowd. The ballot boxes are returned empty to the electoral officials.

12:00 noon - Members of the Provincial AIDS Council come by in a rented car handing out posters warning people about HIV and AIDS. The HIV epidemic is of grave concern in Papua New Guinea and electoral gatherings provide new opportunities for finding sexual partners. The Catholic Family Life office has taken a lead in producing many thought-provoking posters.

**Top: Finger of voter is marked with indelible ink to identify and discourage multiple voting**  
**Middle: Voting results displayed for the public**  
**Bottom: Young men stop cars on highway, not allowing them to proceed until money is paid**



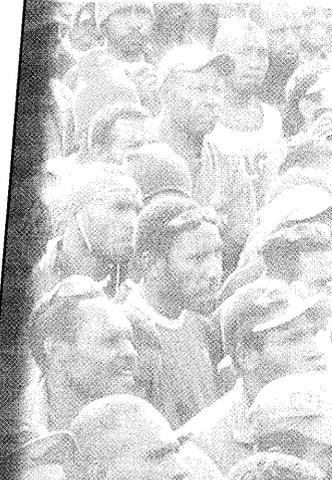
Politics is a serious business in Papua New Guinea. The Public Service is highly politicized and politicians easily become managers rather than legislators. Supporting a successful candidate brings a better chance of accessing funds and services in the ensuing five-year term. If one's tribe or clan is known not to have supported a winning candidate, it will often mean having to survive at subsistence level. In 2007, there were 2,700 candidates contesting the 109 seats in parliament in 9,100 polling places.



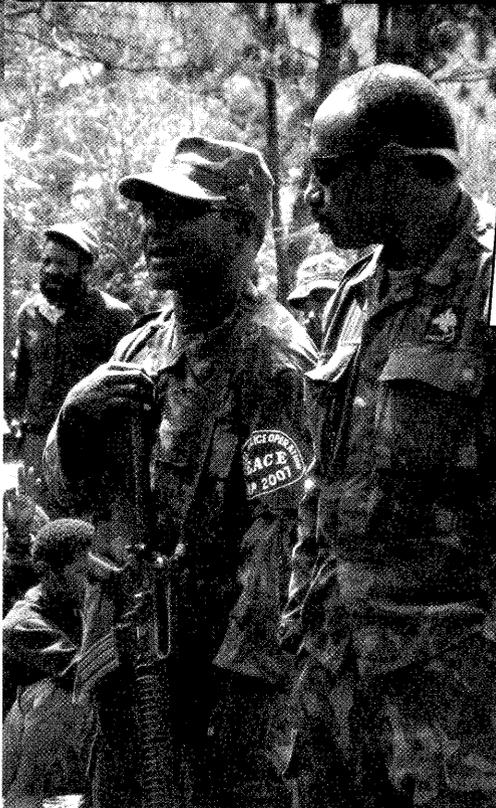
1:00 p.m. - I observe voting at a booth at Teremanda. There is no individual secret vote. Male leaders, with the occasional woman, come in family groups and claim voting papers for the whole extended family. The papers are then filled in openly by literate members of the groups. To demand a secret ballot would raise suspicion that one wanted to vote contrary to the will of the tribal leaders.

2:00 p.m. - Security is tight at Wakumale. Extra police and defense force personnel have been dispatched to the province to ensure that there is no breakdown of law and order as happened during the previous election. Because of the tough presence of armed forces, life appears more orderly, but perhaps it is more control by fear than real peace, another form of "gunpoint democracy."

3:00 p.m. - I meet an educated woman who could not vote because her brother voted in her place. She is angry and frustrated and says, "Very few of the females voted without intimidation. For this young nation to progress forward, we need balance in the parliament. Gender has to be promoted. Our customs stand against us like a brick wall. We are relying too much on the government to make strong laws that can make men recognize our potential and that we have equal rights just like the men." Of the 101 women who stood for election in 2007, only one was successful.



**Top: Woman carries her precious possessions away from the election-related fighting**  
**Bottom: Security Personnel observe polling**



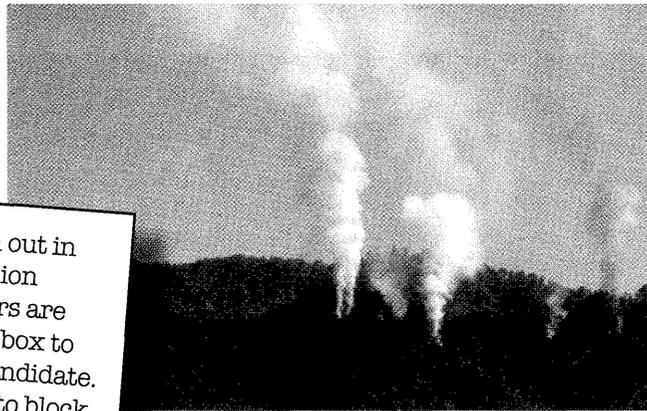
What can the Church do in such a situation? I am reminded of the words of Pope Benedict XVI in his letter *Deus Caritas Est* (#28), "The Church . . . cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice." Political involvement is a duty. However, one must ask questions from the perspective of faith: What is pastoral involvement within politics? Does it not have to do with reminding the political world of its real task, that is, the attainment of peace and justice and the development of a more human world?

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4:00 p.m. - Fighting has broken out in the hills above the Yampu mission station. A candidate's supporters are rumored to have stolen a ballot box to stuff with votes for their own candidate. The opposition cuts down trees to block the road and trap the vehicle carrying the box. Supporters are armed with factory-made and homemade guns. Women hurry along the road to safety away from the fighting. They are carrying as many possessions as they can.

5:00 p.m. - A number of wounded men have been brought to the mission hospital. The more serious cases are taken to the provincial hospital. A makeshift sign is put up. It asks people to donate blood.

6:00 p.m. - Back at the diocesan headquarters, we share the experience of the day with the bishop. He has witnessed six previous elections since Papua New Guinea gained independence. He ponders aloud: "After the elections, will there be an ongoing effort to reduce infant and maternal mortality? Will the new government address issues of poverty, employment and stability in family life? Catholic social teaching points out the dignity of the human person and the importance of the common good. More people must be trained to disseminate that social teaching."



Divine Word Missionaries see "prophetic dialogue" as the deepest and best understanding of the call to mission. In the field of politics, dialogue might involve a ministry of assisting people toward self-awareness of their own power, strengths and capabilities. That was part of my motivation for accepting the role of domestic observer. If democracy is the rule of the people, then the elections we observed leave a lot to be desired. One educated man commented, "I did not exercise my democratic rights, someone else did on my behalf." When is dialogue prophetic? The prophet is someone who listens to the Word of God and proclaims it, announcing the Good News and denouncing what is opposed to the Gospel and the kingdom of God. This requires prudence and cultural sensitivity on the part of expatriate Divine Word Missionaries, and a good deal of courage for our local missionaries.

It has been said that every five years a miracle happens in Papua New Guinea. In spite of dire predictions, an election is accomplished and a new government is formed. Compared to what takes place in the Highlands, elections are usually more peaceful in the coastal provinces. Nevertheless, the miracle has happened again and life is returning to "normal," if ever it is normal in "the land of the unexpected." Our observations have been aired at meetings of the Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission. Hopefully, those observations will contribute to the implementation of reforms for more democratic, just and peaceful elections in the future. ♦

**Top Right: Smoke rises as houses burn during election-related tribal fighting**  
**Bottom Right: Truck stopped and burned to block road during election-related tensions**  
**Bottom Left: Winning candidate, Samuel Tei Abai, speaks to the crowd**

