

Religion and religious institutions as defining factors in Papua New Guinea politics

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Introduction

At present, in Australia's nearest neighbour, Papua New Guinea (PNG), there are more than two million adults looking for ways to express their feelings of anger, disappointment and frustration at the June-July 2002 election for the National Parliament. With 43 political parties and 2,875 candidates vying for 109 seats in parliament, some hitches were predictable. However, nobody predicted the extent of the chaos and intimidation that was experienced in many parts of Papua New Guinea during the election period. Whilst it would be foolhardy to try to generalise about the situation, there seems to be a pervasive sense that something has gone terribly wrong.

On the first day of polling, 17 June, the Prime Minister, Sir Mekere Morauta, having waited 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 2002:1). The situation has deteriorated since then. The Prime Minister was fortunate. Bishop Arnold Orowae lined up in Wabag to cast his vote only to find 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 their names would be on the common roll, but on voting day only five of their names appeared. The other 85 students went back disappointed and angry. This has been a common experience. In the Highlands, what Standish has called 'gunpoint democracy' is rife (Standish 1996), with presiding officers being forced to sign ballot papers with guns to their heads (*Post-Courier*, 21 June 2002:1). The police are outnumbered and outgunned. Now the army has been called in to try to bring a semblance of order in some provinces.

The defining nature of religion and its institutions in the country's politics can be stated as follows:

1. The perception of religion is quite different from that in the modern Western countries.

In *The National* newspaper (July 10:4) there was a large bold headline: 'Use of magical powers alleged'. The article was about ex-prime minister and re-elected Kokopo member of parliament, Sir Rabbie Namaliu, rejecting calls from nine losing candidates for him to resign because his victory was a result of the use of magic. They alleged that invisible objects tampered with the ballot papers in favour of Sir Rabbie while the votes were being counted.

People accustomed to the rational empiricism of the West may find this illustration rather bizarre, but this is not necessarily the case for the Papua New Guinean who has not studied the history of the enlightenment, modernism or postmodernism. Most Papua New Guineans have a holistic world view within which the empirical and non-empirical, the sacred and the secular are distinguished but not separated. Thus dreams and visions, rituals and spells, blessings and misfortunes, and public professions of faith are all considered quite compatible with power and politics.¹ In the recent *2000 National Census*, 96 per cent of Papua New Guineans declared that they were Christian (Table A6:14). Only 67 per cent claimed to be Christian in Australia in the 2001 census (table B10).

2. In contemporary Papua New Guinea, 'religious' language is an accepted and even desired element in political discourse.

The integration of the sacred and secular in the common mind 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.

Supporters also creatively utilise religious themes. For example, in the Moresby North-East Open electorate, supporters of Casper Wollom went around singing church hymns, but replacing the terms God or Lord in those hymns with the name of their candidate. That such songs might be making a mockery of a Church hymn appears not to be an issue. Indeed, perhaps the song is somehow appropriate if the candidate is seen as a saviour figure.

Many election candidates portrayed themselves as saviour figures. The former Speaker and deputy Prime Minister, John Pundari, was campaigning as 'Mr Clean', who attends church on the Sabbath, and who will clean up the mess in government. In the provincial capital, Wabag, 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' (public speech, Wabag Town, 17 May 2002). Paradoxically, his archrival, Governor Peter Ipatas, claimed that he was governor only because 'God Almighty who is up above has given this power to me' (public speech, Yampu, 29 April 2002). Such claims are a not-so-subtle search for legitimacy that appeal to people's religious sentiments and, at their worst, claim political leadership by divine right.

3. There are radical divisions between the Christian churches.

There are four main church blocks in Papua New Guinea today. The so-called mainline church block comprises mainly Lutheran, Catholic, United and Anglican churches, and some others making up the Papua New Guinea Council of Churches. The Evangelical Alliance comprises churches such as the Apostolic, Baptist, Nazarene and Salvation Army. There are also a growing number of Pentecostal churches such as the Christian Revival Crusade. Finally, the Seventh Day Adventists form a separate block with considerable political influence in Papua New Guinea. It must be frustrating for a national government that has to deal with four church groups that are quite independent of each other.

At a provincial and local level, there is greater pressure for church and government institutions to cooperate because the churches, particularly the mainline churches, still provide 45 per cent of the country's 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.

Currently, there is an attempt in some political circles to declare Christianity the state religion of Papua New Guinea. The mainline churches in the PNG Council of Churches generally oppose any move to amend the section on freedom of religion, however, many of the Evangelical Alliance and Pentecostal churches welcome the move. They welcome it because they feel it will help to counter the perceived threat from Islam (according to the recent census there are now 756 Muslims in the country, an increase of 71 per cent over the past ten years), and because supporters believe that, if they declare the nation for God, God will bless the nation and help it prosper.

The perceived threat from Islam was debated in parliament during 2000 and 2001, with some members claiming that section 45 of the constitution, on the freedom of religion, applies only to those religions who worship God, and that those who worship Allah therefore do not come under the freedom of religion clause.² The move to declare Christianity as the state religion is therefore a political attempt to set up spiritual parameters for citizens in their choice of religion.

4. The various church factions tend to define and view politics negatively, and in very different terms.

The mainline churches focus on corruption in politics and have concentrated on 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, 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 PNG 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, on 7 July 1999, Prime Minister Bill Skate was forced to resign.

Many of the other churches tend to take an ambivalent stance 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. On the other hand, many see political realities in terms of spiritual warfare against the power of Satan and other evil influences.

5. It is almost impossible to maintain a neutral stance in Papua New Guinea politics.

In the present Papua New Guinean system of electoral politics, papers and polling booths have little to do with freedom and democracy. The trappings of parliament are mostly about surviving by getting a slice of the cake, and part of someone else's slice too, if possible.

A recent edition of the *Independent* newspaper commented as follows (11 July 2002:5):

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 PNG 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.

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 could risk violent recriminations.

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.

However, in the heightened awareness during the contest between Robert Lak and Paias Wingti, the church's declared neutrality was perceived by each party as support for the other. For example, on one occasion, several priests had lunch with Paias Wingti and shortly after word went around that Wingti had the support of eight Catholic priests which, of course, was a slap in the face for Robert Lak. In their recent assessment of the elections, the bishops in Mount Hagen have given priority to a restatement of their neutrality, an appeal for calm in a potentially volatile situation, and a commitment to solidarity with the victims of the unjust electoral process.

6. Religious institutions suffer as politics becomes dominated by ethnic rivalries.

According to Bernard Narokobi, a sense of national purpose, national ethnicity or national morality was not present at the time of independence in Papua New Guinea, except among a few

politicians and civil servants (Narokobi 1980:75). Michael Jacobsen has identified resistance to a national culture in PNG, and Jeffrey Clark argues that national consciousness is virtually nonexistent in the Southern Highlands province (Jacobsen 1997, Clark 1997). What national unity does exist is often attributed to the work of the churches (Trompf 1991:254).

In recent times Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern have 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 (Stewart and Strathern 1998). That was before 2000. After the dire millennial predictions about that year, many people felt let down by their pastors and now ethnic rivalries are having a negative effect on religious institutions. The Apostolic Nuncio, the late Archbishop Hans Schwemmer, declared last year at the funeral of a murdered priest, that Papua New Guinea's claim to being a Christian country is 'getting weaker every day' (*The National*, 4 September 2001:14).

7. Electoral politics, particularly in the Papua New Guinea Highlands, is becoming a quasi-religious cult in opposition to the State.

The election campaign this year was noticeably different from that of 1997. There were no large-scale, church-led campaigns such as the Operation Bruikum Skru prayer campaign of the last election (Gibbs 1998). The open courting of the church vote was less obvious, possibly because candidates could no longer play on the highly emotional theme of the year 2000 and the end of the millennium. The focus this time was on how to gain five years in power, along with the benefits of access to that power.

This year—particularly in the Highlands—there was evidence of the emergence of an anti-state political cult. This political cult led to the institution of the state becoming redundant, brought government services to a standstill, and made the high ideals of the country irrelevant. 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 use the term political cult deliberately, as it also has religious connotations. Contemporary PNG politics has all the trappings of a religious movement, with its recruitment campaigns, its tendency to have power over the minds and emotions of its members, its creeds and its rituals. The rituals are predictable, with mug shots on posters, and meetings where candidates are presented with signs of honour such as flowers, or are carried on people's shoulders. A pastor is invited to open the meeting with a prayer, there will be songs, sometimes led by the local church youth choir—whose musical instruments have perhaps been provided by the candidate—and there will be a feast for the supporters. Fortune tellers are there watching for the least sign of the outcome of the elections, such as a gust of wind blowing feathers in a particular direction.

While I avoid the term cargo cult, some forms of cargo thinking feature in this political cult—it could be called economic pragmatism. A governor of Enga reputedly said, 'God creates miracles: men create miracles with money.' Everything, including

moral principles and personal integrity, has a price tag on it. In the short term, many groups barter their votes to the highest bidder. In the long term, to be the supporter of a winning candidate means 'life': access to jobs and economic development over the next five years. Being the supporter of a losing candidate means economic and social 'death'. In recent times, Electoral Development Funds (commonly known as slush funds) amounting to 1.5 million kina (A\$750 000) a year have been given to parliamentarians: K1.25 million as project funds, and K250 000 to use at their own discretion. It is no wonder that I heard one candidate telling his supporters that the campaign was a contest to see who would get the key to the safe.

More concerning are the totally unrealistic campaign policies of some political parties. For example, the People's Labour Party, led by Peter Yama, has a tithing policy whereby 10 per cent of the total earnings of the country would go to the Home Affairs Department to be distributed to the churches. Realists such as Lae member of parliament Bart Philemon have pointed out the impossibility of carrying out such promises (*Post-Courier*, 29 May 2002:8). A national budget of K4 billion means that this policy would see K400 million given to the churches.

Even more unreal are the claims of the National Vision for Humanity Party, which is promising a monthly social security grant of K10 000 (A\$4 500) to every family, which means a monthly social security bill of K10 billion! Such policies could be written off as the work of nuts, except that they receive support from such prominent people as Sir Paulias Matane (*The National*, 4 April 2002:13).

A notable feature of this political cult is its use of dependent clients, notably youth. The majority of the youth in Papua New Guinea are unemployed, so it is not difficult for a candidate offering money and food to recruit young people for their campaigns. As a result, the majority have been lost to the churches. During the voting period, youths with modern firearms took over polling stations in many Highlands areas and forced people to vote for their candidate.

Conclusion

With four Highlands provinces in a state of anarchy at the time of writing, we have a situation of political cult versus the State. These provinces are home to one and a half million people, 30 per cent of the country's population. Moreover, they are the principal sources of foreign trade income: coffee from Simbu and the Western Highlands, gold from Enga, and from gas and oil in the Southern Highlands. During these elections, the value of the kina has fallen steadily. The outcome of the elections in these provinces will be crucial for the economic and social future of the entire country.

Papua New Guinea has perhaps 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. The remedies are less obvious, but clearly difficult. As is known from the history of Europe and the emergence of religious fanaticism, religion and religious institutions can be used for good

or evil. With politics itself taking on a cultic role in PNG society today, we must seriously question what effect this will have on the society in both the short and long term. Does the political cult have the power to redeem itself, or will it plunge the nation deeper into crisis?

Perhaps a positive aspect of the present situation is that it is so undeniably bad: perhaps this election will shock people into making positive changes. It will take time, and the institutional churches may have an important educational and defining role. The churches will have to put aside some of their differences and form a workable, unified interchurch group to engage with the government. NGOs and churches must form a high-level forum to discuss issues such as how to develop workable democratic processes for Papua New Guinea, and how to transform politics so that it can be seen as an honourable profession informed by Christian and humanitarian values.

The churches will have to put more effort into communicating with civil leadership, and offer alternatives to what has become a power-hungry dysfunctional cult. They must also help bring the disempowered casualties of the present system together for dialogue. The solution to an abused system is not necessarily another system, but rather the transformation of the present system in a way that ensures liberation for a majority of the frustrated and disenfranchised people. If the churches can work with the state in these ways, then they will fulfil an important role in defining the future of Papua New Guinean politics.

Notes

1. The preamble to the Papua New Guinea constitution contains the pledge to 'guard and pass on to those who come after us our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now'.
2. See, for example, the PNG Parliamentary Hansard for the debate on 8 August 2000.

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