

The Religious Factor in Contemporary Papua New Guinea Politics

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In the 1997 National elections, religion seemed a more important element in the politics of PNG than ever before. Philip Gibbs describes the various dimensions of this involvement and asks what motivated this unprecedented entanglement of the churches in politics. Lastly he calls for caution and the need to build an appropriate (critical) relationship between faith and politics.

Introduction

In the lead up to the 1997 national elections in Papua New Guinea one heard frequent calls for "God-fearing Christians" to enter politics. There was no shortage of volunteers for the task. Among the 2209 candidates, many declared themselves to be endorsed by God to lead the nation. Some concerned Christians formed the new Christian Democratic Party.¹ Meanwhile, Bill Skate, the leader of the People's National Congress, declared that he would lead the PNC party candidates "with the power of Jesus Christ".² Several candidates divided the space on their election posters between their own portrait and an image of Christ (see appendix).³ At a post-election prayer service, the Prime Minister declared that Jesus was the real Prime Minister of the nation, and the first declaration of the Speaker of parliament was about how prayers should be said in the parliamentary sessions. Events such as these might be regarded as bizarre in countries with a secular ideology like Australia or New Zealand, but, in contemporary Papua New Guinea, public demonstrations of Christian faith are accepted as quite the right thing to do.

Political scientists in Papua New Guinea have paid little attention to religion in the politics of previous elections. Political analyst Ray Anere notes a study showing that in the 1987 elections, "same school/church"

was insignificant in people's choice of candidate.⁴ R.J. May says that the "Operation Jesus-Election 92" in Wewak had little visible impact.⁵ So the question arises -- has anything changed in the recent elections? Has the "religious factor" become more important? Certainly, as this paper will show, the churches became involved to a much greater degree than before.

This paper will present some examples of the involvement of religion in politics during the 1997 election campaign, and then draw some lessons from that experience. What motivated the unprecedented involvement of the churches in politics? What groups were involved? What are the gains and the pitfalls of such involvement? How can these events be evaluated theologically? The paper wrestles with the issue of an appropriate relationship between faith and political involvement in present-day Papua New Guinea.

The Integration of Religion and Politics

Anthropologists report that in Melanesia, typically one finds an integrated worldview with no separation between the natural and supernatural.⁶ This "integration" does not mean that the worldview is "monistic". There is a distinction between the sacred and secular, empirical and non-empirical. However, the sacred or non-empirical is found, not in some other world, but within the context of ordinary experience. This integration affects the way people understand non-empirical phenomena. For example, sickness and misfortune are often attributed to unfavourable relationships with fellow humans or spirit beings.

The integrated worldview means that, traditionally at least, politics and religion were closely linked. Politics has to do with the distribution of power. However, even though a person might be skilled in public speaking, fighting, or trading, those skills would be ineffective if there was discord in relations with the realm of spiritual forces. Sacred power impacts on the exercise of secular power, thus magic and sorcery may

play a significant role in maintaining the balance of power in Melanesia. Traditional religion still has influence. Some people in Enga attributed the success of Albert Kipalan in previous elections to his (*Kii*) clan being the key group for organising the *aete* ritual. Though the ritual is no longer performed, its legacy remains in helping to explain political success.⁷ Even today, though power may be inherited, bought or achieved through hard work, many Melanesians will have recourse to diviners and visionaries to ascertain the best way to be successful in the political realm.⁸

Calls to separate religion and politics, often by non-Melanesians, meets with incomprehension or resistance on the part of the general populace in Melanesia. Many of the students at Holy Spirit Seminary are favourable to priests playing a significant role in national and provincial politics. With an integrated worldview it appears only logical that religious leaders should be involved in social and political processes that have a significant influence on people's wellbeing. In a 1975 article John Momis wrote, "We must be community builders and in fact co-redemptors and co-creators with Christ. The only way we can effect structural changes that would benefit the majority is through our involvement in public affairs".⁹ In other words, political involvement is part of our Christian vocation.

Three examples of the political involvement of Christians in the period leading up to the recent elections are the following:

1. The political awareness campaign by the Catholic Bishop's Conference.
2. Religious motivation of some Armed Forces operations.
3. The inter-church prayer campaign: "Operation Brukim Skru".

The Catholic Bishops' Campaign in Preparation for the 1997 Elections

The Catholic bishops of Papua New Guinea mounted two campaigns in the year before the elections: one to conscientise people on their political rights and the other to try to keep priests out of politics.

The awareness campaign, costing over K200,000 (US\$150,000) comprised of training for political awareness teams, glossy booklets in English and Tok Pisin, posters, billboards and advertising in newspapers. The aim was to try to convince people that they had God-given political rights, and that their vote was something special which should not be sold or traded for material gain. People were told that those who accept bribery are simply selling out their own lives and the lives of their families. It is hard to assess the effectiveness of such a campaign, though reports from those in the political awareness teams maintain that the campaign had some effect and was not in vain.¹⁰

The bishops' campaign to stop priests entering politics was not successful. In April 1996, in a letter addressed to priests, seminarians and religious, they wrote: "We bishops emphasise that we do not want any catholic priest or seminarian or religious to become involved politically by running for office in 1997 or at any other time". They warned that anyone ignoring this prohibition would be suspended entirely from the exercise of his faculties and public ministry in the church. Despite the warning, three diocesan priests stood for election and two were successful. Fr. Robert Lak is now governor of the Western Highlands Province, and Fr. Louis Ambane is governor of the neighbouring Simbu Province. Both have been suspended from public sacramental ministry.¹¹

The bishops' efforts were complicated by persistent rumours about Catholic ambitions to "take over" the government. Some people interpreted the church's political awareness campaign as part of the plot. Such rumours are not new, but they persist and grow in ingenuity. Sometimes the rumours concern the number of the "beast" in the book of Revelation. At other times they have to do with "world money". The postage stamp to commemorate Pope John Paul's visit to Papua New Guinea for the "beautification" (sic) of Peter ToRot was seen by some as a sure sign of the immanent take over by Rome. These rumours, spread by members of churches like the Seventh Day Adventists, may seem laughable to outsiders, but are indeed troubling to many people,

especially those in the more isolated areas of the country. In fact the number of Catholics has decreased considerably in the new parliament (see appendix).

Religious Motivation Behind some Armed Forces Operations

During the election campaign period the news broke about a secret multi-million kina deal involving a mercenary force to train soldiers and to fight in Bougainville. This quick-fix contract with the "Sandline International" company backfired badly on the government, with a near military coup and rioting in the streets of Port Moresby. Eventually the Prime Minister, his Deputy and the Minister of Defence had to stand down to allow for an official inquiry into the affair. The Mainline churches could not present a united front. Catholic Archbishop Karl Hesse issued a press release expressing his deep concern at reports that mercenaries had been covertly engaged for service in Bougainville, while Lutheran Bishop Gam, caused something of a furore when he supported the government on the Sandline issue.¹²

Born again Christians achieved a good deal of publicity during the Sandline crisis.¹³ The Governor General, Sir Wiwa Korowi, published a full page press release in the daily paper calling on people to "get down to your knees and pray and ask God to give you and me a total peace of mind that we need to endure".¹⁴ The military commander who sparked off the crisis, Brigadier General Singirok, said that his decision to denounce the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, was based on ethical principles and his Christian convictions. He is reported as saying that he was an instrument used by God.¹⁵

The development in religious rhetoric did not go unnoticed in the press. On April 3, *The National* published an editorial entitled, "God as a political weapon". The writer said, "The countdown to the elections has led to a sharp rise in the use of God as a political weapon.... It is all too easy for devout Christians to delude themselves into believing

that they are some kind of 'chosen vessel' through which God's will must be channelled to the people".¹⁶

Besides Sandline, there were other politically sensitive issues involving Christians in the Defence Force. For example there was a move by some born again Christians in the military to establish a mission of "spiritual operations" in war-torn Bougainville. The objectives of the mission were as follows:

1. To break the main power of the Devil which has been assigned specially to look after the New Guinea Islands excluding Manus.

2. To break the principalities which have been assigned specifically to look after each districts in Bougainville.

3. To break the evil power for cargo cult, conflicts, religious pride, divisions in Provincial Government and in churches and lust and love for money etc.

4. To pray for God's protection over the Security Forces members, assets, etc; To raise an army of prayer warriors in all districts of Bougainville.

5. To witness to surrendered BRA about Jesus Christ as a rehabilitation programme.

6. To conduct crusades as an awareness to people about God.

7. To conduct awareness of God in public places, and

8. To distribute Bibles and Bible tracts to people.

The mission to send the army of "prayer warriors" to Bougainville was abandoned after the chairman of Heads of Churches Committee, wrote to Brigadier General Singirok expressing his amazement that private soldiers had been identified for detachment to Bougainville for spiritual duties. This was contrary to the policy that spiritual duties were always the sole responsibility of official chaplains.¹⁷

Though it might appear to be an honest evangelisation effort, the proponents were surely not blind to the political implications and the side effect of undermining the Catholic efforts at reconciliation in Bougainville. The Bougainville population is 80% Catholic, and the Catholic Church's solidarity with the people in their plight has aroused suspicion on the part of some in the National Government and in the Papua New Guinea Defence Force.¹⁸

Operation Brukim Skru

The most significant involvement of the churches in the political process came with a prayer movement called "Operation Brukim Skru". All the churches were involved, though the initiative in most cases lay with the conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal churches.¹⁹

At the National Prayer Assembly in Port Moresby in 1993, people had gone to the parliament to pray for unity. Provincial groups came forward to claim their Province for Christ. Sir Peter Lus, member for Maprik and a former pastor in the South Seas Evangelical Church, led the group into the parliament to pray. The group of over a thousand Christians joined hands in a human chain around the parliament and prayed to cast out spirits of evil within the house of assembly. In 1994 there was a special seminar at the Airways Hotel. The Governor General attended, and this set him on the road to becoming a born again Christian.

At the end of August 1996 the prayer campaign entered a new stage. Marlyn Stuckey had begun a National Prayer Centre near Mount Hagen. While praying there he and his friends felt that Christians were being called to have an impact in society including politics. They mentioned the idea to a few people, and everyone agreed that it was what they had been praying for. So they went ahead. That is how Operation Brukim Skru began as a prayer campaign for the election of a God-fearing government.²⁰

In January 1997, the involvement intensified. The question surfaced whether there should be Christian volunteers to work at the polling sites in order to provide "prayer cover" during the actual polling. Marlyn was wary at first. But then he felt that God was saying, "Why pray if you're not prepared to be the answer to your prayers?" In other words, committed Christians were being called to have a socio-political impact. The leaders of Operation Brukim Skru then set out to find 20,000 Christian volunteers. The goals were as follows:

1. To pray on site (to counter pressure, corruption, threats). This is to offer a "prayer cover".
2. Keep corruption out of the polling places.
3. Offer a testimony: doing something for free.

The Electoral Commissioner supported the idea, but as it turned out the plan ran into some difficulties and only a few hundred Christian volunteers did in fact serve in that capacity during the elections. Nevertheless the plan itself showed an unprecedented willingness for conservative Christians to be directly involved in the electoral process.

While these events were unfolding the National Intelligence Organisation (NIO) started investigating Operation Brukim Skru. A report in *The National* on April 2 carried the headline, "NIO: Plot by leading citizens".²¹ A report in the *Post Courier* the previous day included the following:

The Prime Minister said he believed people involved with the religious movement Operation Brukim Skru had a lot to answer for in the troubles of the past week or two. He said the mainline churches had created benefits for the people of Papua New Guinea, with institutions like schools, but the more recently introduced religious movements behind Operation Brukim Skru played on "people emotions". The problems we see are that in the past 10 to 14 days, as part of this, they have caused this problem, working on people's emotions to stir up trouble. "I know there are very

influential people in this movement and we have to be very careful. But churches should not use emotion to achieve an end. It's a result of that, that the nation was in chaos".²²

A secret NIO report speculated that there could be a deliberate plot by politically minded Christians, riding on the wave of anti-corruption sentiments and using the Sandline issue, as a means to further their political ambitions. The report noted that this was "not the first time that misguided religious fanatics, blinded by their own virtue and by their concept of what is right and wrong, have attempted to assume power through any means possible".²³ In a belated reply, apparently referring to the same NIO report, the Governor General announced on national television and in a full-page press statement that the "'Operation Brukim Skru' cannot be meddled with politics, Sandline evil and satanic motives of our own making (sic)". He declared, "NIO has got very pathetic lying habits and they are out to create sensational stories to carry out character assassination of people".²⁴ The NIO report does paint a biased and inaccurate picture of Operation Brukim Skru. There is a good chance that the situation could have got right out of hand if there were not so many committed Christians at the forefront of the protests. However, one cannot rule out the possibility that some unscrupulous people might use the movement as an excuse to further their own agenda.

The outcome of the elections was ambiguous, with the parties from the previous government still in power. Those associated with Operation Brukim Skru were happy to see that a number of the leading players in the new government are professed Christians. In a rally at the Boroko United Church on 27 July, 1997, the Governor General and the Prime Minister were quite jubilant. The Prime Minister pointed out that now the Governor General, the Chief Justice and himself were born again Christians and that the new speaker of the house is a devout Christian (SDA). "Jesus has conquered satan here in PNG", he said. It is notable that with the new government, the heads of the judicial,

executive and legislative arms of government are either SDA or born-again Christians.

The Churches and Political Involvement

The details above on the high profile given to Christian convictions and the role of the churches in some recent events indicate that "religion" did become a factor in the politics leading up to the 1977 Papua New Guinea elections. Just how significant religion was warrants further study. Furthermore, the term "religion" needs to be refined. Church policies differ and theological opinions vary within the churches themselves. Many members of "Mainline" churches, particularly members of the charismatic renewal movement within those churches, share similar convictions to the born again Christians in conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Yet similar convictions sometimes hide radical theological differences.

The more conservative Protestant churches reputedly see the present world as evil and wicked in stark contrast to the world to come and the glorious return of Christ. Perhaps influenced by the New Christian Right in the USA, they tend to regard religious and political liberalism and secular humanism as enemies of God and governments. However, their professedly apolitical position in effect is quite political as their stance contributes to the maintenance of the societal status quo.²⁵

Churches such as the Catholic church with its strong tradition of sacramentality, have tended to allow for greater continuity between the sacred and secular. In the sacramental, God's presence is mediated by created realities. Catholic thought generally does not accept theories of defiled human nature in which there is no spark of the divine reality in creation after the Fall. Creation may have been tarnished or wounded by its contact with sin, but it was not destroyed. God does not act in spite of us, or contrary to the ordinary dynamics of created potential.

Rather, God "works" within human and created life. Thus one should not totally divorce religious practice from social and political realities.

Despite the difference outlined above, it appears that in fact the conservative Evangelicals, Pentecostals and born again christians have achieved a high profile in recent events. Comparisons between apolitical Evangelicals and sacramental Catholics offer little help in sorting out theological differences. The contrast is not between denominations but rather between the more liberal Christians who tend to take a secularised viewpoint and the conservatives who have a more sacralised view of reality. The contrast may be seen in two principal areas: view of the world, and approaches to power.

Secularised and Sacralised Views of the World

The modern Western worldview tends to separate the natural and supernatural and to explain events by natural causes. Supernaturalistic beliefs and actions are assigned a minor role in explaining everyday experiences. Direct intervention from the heavens is generally restricted to past events, and any intervention by God today would have to be "miraculous". This mechanistic secular worldview is generally sceptical about visions, possession, links between sin and sickness, and so forth.

The Catholic bishops, in their political awareness campaign have tried to utilise the best insights of modern Western education with its clarity and logic (interspersed with cartoon drawings). Theirs is an attempt to influence people by appealing to their intelligence and common sense. This approach is commendable but has its limitations. Some prominent Catholic Melanesians confess an ambivalence between the traditional Melanesian worldview and the modern scientific one.²⁶

The conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal churches consciously hold to a Biblical view of the world and in many ways their worldview is closer to the typical Melanesian worldview than the Western scientific one. Ecstasy, speaking in tongues, divination, and the like are

common in the traditional Melanesian religious experience. With the conservative churches one finds similar religious phenomena. God's intervention is expected as a normal consequence of prayer. In the Pentecostal churches one finds powerful preaching, demonstrations of spiritual power in confrontations between the power of God and evil, and practices based on belief in the link between sickness and sin.

From a cultural perspective it appears that in many respects the experience of the conservative groups fits with the traditional Melanesian experience.²⁷ However there are some unexplained features for example, if the thinking of the conservative groups is so consonant with traditional Melanesian ways, then why do they break up communities, preach against cultural symbols and ban traditional festivities? It could be that the appeal of the conservative groups lies in their sacralised viewpoint rather than in any particular cultural resemblances.

The sacralised viewpoint is seen particularly in references to the year 2000. Many people associate the year 2000 with dramatic changes in the world. In more isolated areas of Papua New Guinea people connect the year 2000 with the end of the world. There are many different views, but the general opinion in many of the conservative churches is that the present state of world events corresponds to prophetic signs for the imminent Second Coming of Christ.

Such beliefs give a real sense of urgency to the present time. They motivate Christians to use every means to spread the gospel so that others too may repent and be saved. It also gives an added urgency to finding God-fearing politicians. In the Highlands (Enga) some people were talking about the importance of electing the right politicians, because they would be leading them into the "last days" of the year 2000!

In the Catholic church one must look to the popular devotions to find a more sacralised viewpoint and a greater emotional appeal. At the end of the election period an internationally famous statue of Our Lady of Fatima was brought to Papua New Guinea. Stories circulated of

miraculous powers connected with the statue. During the two-week pilgrimage around several dioceses, many Catholic parishes witnessed an unprecedented amount of activity with processions and all-night prayer vigils. From a phenomenological point of view, it appears that accounts of the miraculous and a message like that of Fatima, with its summons to repentance lest terrible events befall the human race, appeal to peoples' religiosity. Whether it be the Second Coming of Christ or the apocalyptic message of Fatima, the vivid end-time imagery is able to capture peoples' imagination and arouse them to a heightened sense of religious fervour.²⁸

Approaches to Power

Esau Tuza, in his paper "Spirits and Powers in Melanesia" tells how the concept of *mana* is central to Melanesian religion. *Mana* is not simply physical strength, but rather, "it is a force that saves".²⁹ *Mana* can be determined by a person's own skills, it can be given from the spirits, or it can be gained through participation in ritual. However attained, *mana* and the issue of power were and are key issues in the lives of Melanesian people.

With many conservative groups power is experienced particularly in the realm of "spiritual warfare". In his book, *Spiritual Warfare for Every Christian*, Sherman Dean begins with the account of an experience in Port Moresby.³⁰ He had been in Port Moresby for three months with a Youth with a Mission (YWAM) team witnessing in the market places. There were few "results". So he fasted and prayed and heard God telling him that there were "forces of darkness" holding the city and that these had never been challenged. He felt that the only way to overcome these forces was to praise God, which he did, and soon they saw a difference. "Instead of hardened, unrepentant people hiding behind a Christianised facade, we saw individuals stand weeping publicly, renouncing their witchcraft". Through this experience and the experience of one of their group getting cerebral malaria, which he attributes to the