

Negotiating asylum in PNG: let the media in, and hasten slowly

by Nayahamui Michelle Rooney

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The recently passed Australian legislation on asylum seekers which effectively resumed the off-shore processing detention centres in Nauru and Papua New Guinea (Manus Province) has shifted the Australian dominant public debate from “stop the boat people” mode into “Pacific solution” mode.

The Australian asylum seekers bill has had an instantaneous domino effect in terms of awakening the dormant, but, at Australia’s whim, changeable political dialogue on asylum seekers in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Within days, and without the same depth, breadth and history of a national public debate on this issue, PNG has been pitched into responding to Australia’s formal request. The mode of debate in PNG, at least as presented in the PNG public arena, has been more or less about responding as a friend and to negotiate diplomatically with a “development deal”. Manus province, being the location for the detention centre in PNG, is foregrounded in the negotiations in terms of consultation with the locals and what it can gain out of the arrangement. Part of the PNG government’s negotiating tactic has been to place a ban on international media coverage on this issue, reasoning that this will allow for proper and undisturbed local consultation. The Government of PNG argues that too much media attention will only add to the confusion.

For PNG, this turn in Australian domestic politics has to be understood deeply and broadly. This matter has been debated in the Australian society and political arena for decades. That the Pacific solution is turned off or on like a light switch in response to changes in political power in Australia, and that Australian political leaders fear losing elections over this issue should be an indication to PNG’s leaders of its significance for Australian society and politics. Within hours of Gillard announcing the re-opening of the Nauru and Manus detention centres, the Australian media reported a marked shift in opinion polls towards Gillard as the preferred Australian prime minister. While other factors were noted, the break in the deadlock over the asylum seeking issue was highlighted as a key reason.

The foreign media ban on the issue of asylum seekers in PNG is detrimental to

PNG's international position as well as its negotiating position with Australia. It is in the interests of both countries to encourage an open dialogue within PNG society before any asylum seekers are sent to Manus Island even if this results in a slower process than the Australian government may desire.

PNG is not comparable to Nauru and the bilateral dialogue with Australia has to reflect this. PNG's diverse society, its large population relative to Nauru, its historical relationship with Australia and its proximity both to Asia and Australia make it a far more complex entity. Manus is one province of twenty two so consultations on Manus alone will not suffice for a full national consultation process. Already questions in PNG are arising over the fact that the detention centre in Manus is unconstitutional.

In addition, the foregrounding of development aid and stress on consultations with the locals of Manus province suppresses the necessary broader public debate as to whether the detention centre goes against the grain of PNG society. Both the Australian and PNG government need to allow a process of genuine national debate and consultation to occur around this topic.

PNG society needs to be given a "fair go" at debating the social, economic, legal and moral issues about how a country or society treats human persons who seek help and refuge as they flee humanitarian crises. Australia's position in this raging international debate is often criticised for its hardline approach. While recognising PNG's historical and bilateral relationship with Australia, its engagement on this international debate must be as a member of the international community with all the guiding conventions and frameworks that have been set up to enable this engagement. Not only is this the right thing to do but by doing so Papua New Guinea will establish itself as a serious member of the international community on human rights issues.

While the humanitarian issue should be the core of the political debate in PNG, there are also practical reasons for hastening slowly, and for allowing media scrutiny.

PNG has long been in a subordinate and passive recipient position vis-a-vis the wealthier and more powerful Australia. Australia's dominance and negotiating position will be even more effective if the negotiations can take place in the private arena – with less public debate.

The most important scrutiny for Australia will come from its own public – its voters and tax payers – who will hold its leaders accountable. This scrutiny is more likely to take place if there is international media coverage. This is especially important given

the relative unity on the issue by the two dominant Australian political groups which means that they are less likely to take each other to task to ensure a fair debate takes place. As a result, the weakest people in this deal with the least ability to voice their concerns – the people of Manus, the asylum seekers and the rest of PNG are more likely to lose with less public scrutiny.

In particular, it is important to recognize that if the funds for the development package are to be redirected from the existing aid programme there is no gain at all for PNG.

The message of this post for the PNG Government is that media coverage, both national and international, will give it the teeth to dialogue fairly with Australia. It will allow both countries to hold a dialogue based on humanitarian grounds first and foremost and secondly, to negotiate a fair development deal. The international media should be viewed as an enabling tool for positioning PNG in this international debate.

The message for the Australian Government is that recent public demonstrations in PNG in relation to various breaches of the Constitution, such as the one questioning the decision to defer the 2012 elections, should be a signal that PNG civil society is evolving and increasingly wanting to engage on matters that affect them. This means that the context within which the bilateral dialogue on asylum seekers is taking place today is different to when the Howard government set up the Manus detention centre. Australia's dialogue with PNG should accordingly be cognisant of the need for a broader PNG national consultation and debate.

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