

State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project



Governance Challenges for PNG and the Pacific Islands

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The illustration used for the title page and the section dividers is a carved design from the Sepik River region. It is taken from *Mak Bilong Sepik: A Selection of Designs and Paintings from the Sepik River* collected by Helen Dennett (Wewak: Wirui Press, 1975). The design represents earth-worms.



Women caught in a 'Big man' culture: Challenges for future democracy and governance

Introduction

Women's participation in decision making is guaranteed under the Papua New Guinea Constitution. Yet, our people, particularly those who can make key administrative, legislative, and political decisions to effect changes continue to think that women are 'OK where they are.'

This limited and limiting mindset in an increasingly male dominated society is the topic of my paper. I discuss Simbu Women's experiences in elections and the government, in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. However, there is a big-man culture in nearly all spheres of life in the highlands, and elsewhere in PNG, and this continues to marginalize women.

The problem for women leaders is that they are operating in the ideological context of male dominance. I write from personal experience as an insider, activist, official, and candidate. When I was entering politics a highly learned person with a doctorate and from Simbu Province told me, "Simbu is not ready for women leaders". He was actively involved with the political party now in government. Sadly, people like him continue to turn a blind eye to women's aspirations, their desire to claim an equal stake in nation-building.

Women contesting the 2002 elections for both the National Parliament and Local Level Governments (LLGs) in the highlands had to face daunting pressures at all levels. The major problems with the election stemmed from women candidates not having equal footing as the men. Most polling places were controlled by male candidates' supporters and gunmen, so people did not vote freely or were prevented from voting altogether. Women candidates did not have the money to be able to compete on par with the male candidates.

Many observers and voters stated that Election 2002 was the worst managed election they'd experienced since PNG Independence. Indeed, Simbu women candidates echoed

that sentiment. They could see that this was going to be the case and, before the elections, approached the previous government to help them address the anticipated problems at both the provincial and national government levels. By not heeding these warnings, however, the government failed in its obligation to provide safe and orderly elections. Past negative election experiences can easily be repeated if all responsible organizations, both government and non-government, fail to take drastic measures. A long term intensive process of civic education is required to change attitudes and perceptions.

Questions of good governance need to be discussed. We know there are instability, inefficiency, and corruption everywhere both within the government system as well as without. People at the grassroots, activists from non-government organizations, church leaders, and government ministers and aid donors all point to the failure by the political system to deliver the basic services to the people. There are no longer any judicial systems at the District level except the Village Courts, which are operational only in some parts of the country.

In response, reformists have attempted to strengthen Papua New Guinea's (PNG) democratic institutions to improve good governance. Political analysts such as Dr. Bill Standish¹ and Dr. Henry Okole² wonder whether Constitutional reforms can achieve stability.

Many commentators world over, including our very own Sir Rabbie Namaliu³ and Sir Anthony Siaguru,⁴ believe good governance demands the equal participation of women in all levels of decision making. This is concurrence with the declarations made at the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

How much longer can women struggle for fair representation in Parliament, and for the right to represent their own interests, and voice their own demands?

In order to sustain the meaningful participation of women, it is imperative that responsible people examine the factors that have hindered women's effective participation in governance. This paper hopes to do that by describing the case of Simbu women in the 2002 elections, and the emergence of the organization, MERI I KIRAP SAPOTIM (MIKS). MIKS itself hopes to address some of the imbalances and injustices that arose during national 2002 elections.

Context: Simbu women, elections, and governance

Standing for public office is not something new for Simbu women. A number of women stood for Local Level Government (LLG) elections as early as 1982. In 2002 a significant number of women stood for both the LLG and the National Parliament. Thirty- six women stood, twenty eight for the LLG, six for the Open seats, and two for the Provincial seats. This was the highest figure of women contesting in any of the country's provinces. The results showed only one Provincial seat candidate scored 2% of the votes, while the highest percent of votes for an Open candidate was 1.5%. There are no figures for the LLG elections; however, three women in three different LLGs won their Ward Council elections (Karimui Nomane LLG, Kundiawa Urban LLG, and Sina Sina Yongomugl LLG). No Simbu woman won a National Parliament seat.

In 1999, there was a by-election for the Simbu Provincial seat. Not one woman stood for it, even though two women had contested the same seat in 1997. A Simbu woman (Maima Poiye) wrote a newspaper article headlined, 'Women Must Enter Politics.' The cartoon (by Biliso, The National) that accompanied the article caused the women to be even more geared up for the election 2002⁵. It depicted a woman with an heavy load – on top of a heavy load of bilum (bag), she had a bundle of firewood, a bucket of water, and a child, and she was walking up the mountain. In front of him walked a man with bows and arrows in one hand, and a radio in the other and he was listening to the elections counting results. The woman sighed and said, "I wish a woman had contested the Simbu provincial seat and win it and help us women out of our woes".

Thus, MERI I KIRAP SAPOTIM emerged. Women who saw this cartoon depicting their day to day lives were awakened by it. They realized politics would continue to be an exclusively male business, contrary to the principles of the National Constitution.

'Simbu Elections In No Way Fair and Proper'

Leading women candidates met after the voting (and counting continuing for three weeks!) in Kundiawa town and agreed that the conduct of the elections in this province had been in no way fair and proper. Together we drafted the following press article:

Simbu Elections In No Way Fair and Proper

So yupela ino ken ting ol meri kendidet long Simbu I bin lus long dispela election. Mipela ino win tasol mipela ino lus. Long wanem? Ol man meri long ples, ol ino bin vot.

(So do not think Simbu women candidates lost in this election. We did not win but we did not loose either. Why? People were not allowed to vote).

The 2002 National Election in Simbu Province cannot be called an election by the people. Voters were not allowed to choose their leaders through a democratic process.

Violence, intimidation, bribery were widely practiced, and furthermore, accepted by the general populace. This situation made it virtually impossible for women candidates to be competitive. They simply did not have the inclination or the resources to buy votes, in the fashion of the men who stood.

Violations of the most fundamental processes of political participation, and the normalization of weapons and intimidation during election campaigns and polling, have marginalized women in the election process.

There were thirty six strong, intelligent, capable Simbu women who dared to challenge the corrupt practices of vote-buying, intimidation, violence, and discrimination in this election process. This good fight will continue, however. It is time that men realize that they must also support women in their endeavor to enter Parliament. At present, women have no chance in the Highlands Big Man Show.

Collectively we argued that candidates who were declared winners in the Simbu election were not representatives of their electorates. Rather, they were the warlords of their clans only.

Simbu women candidates say: There is injustice and inequality. How then can we

say there is democracy? If injustice and inequality is present, then there is no democracy.

Politics has become an end in itself. Politics have been criminalized and the people have become victims.

On a live telecast of the opening of the 7th Parliamentary Meeting in July 2002, Radio personality Roger Hau'Ofa quoted 'a Simbu woman candidate' as saying, "We have warlords in Parliament"; she asked the current government to address this issue.

Highlands big man culture

Traditional bigmanship in the highlands has changed over time with newer forms of leadership emerging. There has been a shift from traditional leaders as elderly clansmen with power earned by being orator, peace maker, and/or wealthy, to now, when a young man between roughly twenty-seven and thirty-five uses force and bribery to become elected as Village Court Magistrate or Ward Councilor. Anyone who has a gun now is referred to as a young leader and whatever he demands is obeyed by community members.

More and more, PNG elections have become a game for those who have money, especially in the Highlands. Here, holding feasts to attract crowds has become the main competition among male candidates. This is not traditional, as in *moka*, where there were exchanges of pigs and food items and where old friendships were strengthened and new friendships made. Election feasting exists to show one's wealth, and to lure voters with free services that they assume will continue when their candidate wins. Politics has become an exclusively male business because women do not have the resources to compete on this scale of competitive feasting.

This 'big man show' is not traditional. It is, rather, a money game among money men intent on getting elected. Past experience demonstrates that those who win do not return to their electorates because they have paid for the votes received and do not need to. Traditional leaders acquired resources which were used to look after their people. Most of our so-called leaders now do not look after their people, they do not even provide basic goods and services to their electorates.

Do women have a place in the political life of the highlands, currently dominated by the modern "big man culture"?

Some control measures for electioneering expenses and activities are necessary to ensure fair competition between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' during election, especially in these locations where violence is a common electioneering 'strategy.'

The dominant power structures of government (and society in general) continue to be tailored to suit men, and the excuse of "custom" is simply empty rhetoric.

Women need affirmative action

The government must realize and acknowledge that women cannot enter the political arena without affirmative action. Members of Parliament have a responsibility to ensure that all people, men and women alike, are able to participate fully at every level of

government. There is no real democracy in PNG when half the population is not represented in Parliament and cannot participate freely on the electoral process.

I quote from one of Sir Rabbie Namaliu's statements in the *Post Courier* (1998) regarding the abolition of provincial seats. "Setting aside the 20 seats (...for women...) would make sure the women were fairly represented and had a fair hearing in the House, that they contribute significantly to decision making and had a chance to air views, that men could not really understand."

Sir Anthony Siaguru and Professor John Nongorr have also made comments in several articles to the effect that women are definitely not on equal footing with men and should be assisted to participate fully in the development of Papua New Guinea.

Quite recently, Sir Anthony Siaguru again called on the current Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare to make history by reserving the 19 Provincial seats for women.⁷ Papua New Guinean women are swimming hard against the tide of domestic violence, rape, polygamy, poor literacy, lack of medical resources, and injustice in all the areas of public decision-making. As a nation we seem to be regressing in the matter of women's participation in all aspects of social, cultural and economic development.

It is imperative that the new National Government urgently address the injustice of these highly undemocratic and violent 2002 elections in Simbu Province. Failure to do so would cast doubt on the integrity of the entire National Parliament.

Democracy is about fairness. As we can see, there is no democracy in PNG when half its population is not represented in Parliament.

MERI I KIRAP SAPOTIM

MERI I KIRAP SAPOTIM was formed as a result of 2002 National election, by women in the highlands of PNG who stood for elections for the Local Level Government and the National Parliament.

MERII KIRAP SAPOTIM (MIKS) started by holding a highlands region seminar in April 2002, to share experiences of the 2002 election. The participants from five highlands provinces, including those who contested election 2002, all expressed the need for massive education on issues of governance and elections, and discussion of the increasing public acceptance of guns, bribery, and violence.

MIKS' Vision is to empower Papua New Guinean women (and men) to participate in and contribute to good governance and active citizenship. MIKS' Mission is to provide educational support and advocacy programs for women (and men) contributing to good governance and active citizenship.

- In order to realize the vision, the organization MIKS' goals are:
- To encourage women through education
- To mobilize women
- To encourage and mobilize community support
- To advocate women's rights and equal representation

To network with Members of Parliament and LLGs; and with organizations, individuals and other stakeholders

MIKS will facilitate discussion about *taim bipo* and now, which is PNG in transition. MIKS believes our people are trying to grasp the meaning of 'development' and are confused because of the way governments in the past have led them to a 'cargo' mentality. MIKS believes that by facilitating discussion around how people lived in the past, comparing that with the justices and injustices of life today, people can decide how they want to shape a better future for themselves and for their children, our next generation. Unless our people understand 'governance' and 'democracy', and the concept of 'development', they will continue to be victims of an introduced system of governance which remains foreign and inaccessible to the masses of this country.

MIKS believes: There is something wrong with our present government. PNG has lost its value system, which used to look out for its people and was based on building relationships among its people. Our leaders in traditional times looked after our people. Papua New Guinean men have changed, especially where leadership is concerned. Our leaders now are not looking after our people.

Women were naturally protected, respected, and valued in *taim bipo*. What has changed now is men's role. Women's role has remained the same, and because of this they are now overburdened with work, have less access to development rewards, and realize fewer of their rights as citizens. Women's rights are an issue that must be addressed.

Training for women in issues of governance, politics, and power is necessary to create a level playing field in politics, and for our democracy to be responsive to women's demands. Women demonstrate leadership and good governance every day in their households and communities. They lead women's movements so that women may have a voice where politicians fail to listen. They organize to demand services, a safe environment for their families, and peace. They should also be free to stand for election.

A call To action

As a women's group based in the highlands, we make this plea to our people, the voters:

We believe that when half or more elected representatives are women, the institutional structure of the government will change: the impact of women's culture in the government will result in a transformation of political hierarchies.

All of us together (Civil Society, Government, Private Sector, Individuals), can work together to right the wrongs and change attitudes and perceptions of democracy and good governance among our people.

Footnotes

- Bill Standish, *Papua New Guinea politics: Attempting to engineer the future*, Development Bulletin 60: 28-32, 2002.
- ² Henry Okole, *Political Reform will it change the system*, Foreign Policy,

Social Development

Governance and Development: Challenges for Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands Conference, 22-23 March 2004, Madang, PNG.

- ³ Member of Parliament and current Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade
- ⁴ A Senior statesman, current President for Transparency International
- ⁵ The National April 8, 1999
- ⁶ Citation unknown.
- ⁷ Post Courier Sept 6, 2002.