

Paving the Way forward

Finally the Election is upon PNG, providing all adult citizens who have registered (which is legally required) their chance to choose a new Parliament, and, indirectly, new government. The months of political purgatory, with confusion over the legitimacy of the incumbent government should be over, so it's time for voters to choose carefully to select candidates with the capability and integrity both to represent the constituents diligently and, if offered a Ministry/governorship, contribute to honest and effective government.

What are MPs, Parliament and government there for? Democratic government has evolved since its debut in Greek city states some 2,500 years ago, to become the most effective, albeit flawed, system of government, adopted by most nation states, using many models. MPs are there to serve their electorates (not just their supporters), overseeing executive government (partly through committees) to ensure it serves the people's needs, and by examining and approving/rejecting new and amended legislation prepared by the executive or submitted as Private Member's bills. Some members are also invited to be members of the Executive.

Voters generally do not have the time, or necessarily the skills or inclination, to read all these draft laws and reports themselves. It would also be impractical for the whole population to participate in all debates and government business, so the function is delegated to supposedly well-educated and skilled representatives (MPs/senators/congressmen). It is becoming easier to hold wider debates, using modern social media, and in Switzerland many major legislative changes are voted upon by the whole population. In California, the electorate can also pass constitutional and other legal reforms, outside their two Houses. So, in future it is likely that the role of MPs/Senators/Congressmen may diminish in future, as more direct decision-making is made by the public.

The main functions of government, under the concept of a 'social contract' with the population, were initially security and protection from other tribes/nations and subsequently from unruly elements within the country. The nation-state remains a relatively recent phenomenon, created from allegiances, conflicts, colonial subdivisions and others' historic factors. As time went by a wide variety of other functions and obligations were assumed/imposed on the State, including establishing a broad rules to enable society, including businesses, to function in an orderly manner. Initially rulers combined the functions of executive (government) and judiciary, but various reforms and revolutions against rulers' arbitrary power, and the introduction of constitutional government/democracy, required the separation of powers, whereby all executive decisions were subject to appeal to the people's Court (Judiciary) whilst their performance and proposed laws were subject public scrutiny through the legislature (parliament).

The private sector provides most of the jobs in PNG, from the biggest employers, (like NBPOL), down to small enterprises and the informal economy. It is government's job to provide the conditions for businesses to invest and the population to be empowered to secure livelihoods in the formal or informal economies.

However, over recent decades government has performed its core functions very poorly, notably:

- ensuring sound law, order and public (including business) safety,

- providing reliable infrastructure (notably maintaining reliable roads, airstrips, wharves, and basic utilities – whether directly or through partnerships, let alone keeping pace with increased needs from a growing populations and economy),
- supplying reliable health and education services, including preventative and priority treatment and ample supplies of essential medicines and school materials, aimed at empowering the community for productive and meaningful lives, including accessing suitable employment or other opportunities, (PNG has amongst the worst social indicators in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly badly with maternal and child mortality rates, where so many are dying of readily curable illnesses or complications; PNG will also barely achieve any of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, despite being deemed a lower-middle income country, with extensive resource wealth)
- ensuring suitable fiscal/monetary and regulatory conditions (and level playing field) for investors, and the steady economic development, whilst ensuring resources are utilised sustainably, resource owners not exploited, and opportunities provided equitably across the nation, between wealthy and poorer regions and between advantaged/ disadvantaged households and community members.

Roads and much other infrastructure have deteriorated widely over the years, largely because a mere fraction of required maintenance costs are budgeted annually for national or local requirements, combined with poor planning/coordination and extensive corruption. Politicians prefer major new projects, which increase subsequent maintenance costs, leaving major highways like feeder roads, and feeder roads closed, along with hundreds rural airstrips defunct or ill-kept. LLGs receive no operational funds to maintain their responsibilities, as they're far down the pecking order.

Hitherto, there were local district hubs, with schools, health centre, district office and local banking outlets, served with a road or airstrip; now many of these places have been semi-abandoned, without access, and teachers unwilling to be posted/remain where there's unsuitable/no housing or health facilities or linkage or if too remote, and likewise for health workers.

The country's economy has grown steadily over the past decade, so what's wrong? The leaders apparently have adequate funds to travel incessantly, even buy executive aircraft to market their wares. Fleets of luxury 4x4s have been acquired for politicians and senior public servants; real estate has boomed in cities and leaders are major property buyers in Queensland and beyond. Yet it's not the State providing basic services in more rural areas, but the churches, who provide quality rural health and education services, even in urban centres. The churches also provide nearly all training for primary school teachers, with very limited contribution from the State. Church aviation services (notably MAF, Sunbird, Adventist Aviation, SIL, etc) even provide the backbone of rural aviation services.

So what is government doing? Have they abandoned the core functions, for which they exist. Why the big performance over electing new leaders for Parliament and government, when it is the churches who provide such a large slice of government's core responsibilities, supported by donors, which provide medicines and other infrastructure and supplies, together, in some areas, with major companies and local/international NGOs.

Of course there are honest and dedicated political leaders and public servants, and some public facilities which perform beyond expectations, like Kundiawa hospital or the Bank of PNG. However, the functioning public sector entities perform largely despite government rather than thanks to it. Funds for core functions are released in the 2nd quarter or later, (although some privileged projects are “front-loaded”). Ministers constantly intervene to appoint cronies or direct operations, even in legal contravention. Major public funds, e.g. from the development budget are diverted to pet projects, which are sometimes not even implemented, when essential services are unfunded. Public servants are left without housing or other basic needs or operating funds, so the more innovative and marketable often jump ship to the private sector or even overseas. DSIP were launched to build up facilities and capacity at district level, but was diverted to a politically controlled (often slush) fund (along with NADP etc). Where DSIP is used wisely, too often it has been through establishing parallel and therefore unsustainable mechanisms. Major public funds are seemingly accumulated for expenditure in untimely projects (or worse) at election times, with MPs dishing costly vehicles and outboards, often tagged as ‘donated by the Member’, rather specified as public funds.

What has gone wrong over the years? Much of the public service has become a law unto itself, relatively unsackable, unproductive but operationally underfunded (as per NEFC reports), and in most cases with poor direction/ morale and drifting to town, undermined by politicisation of top appointments and lack of accountability, and in many cases with duplicate appointments and various ghosts consuming the payroll.

The politicians have usurped control over much public expenditure, even managing providing more ministerial positions, and Ministerial largesse, with mates to chair Statutory authorities, lacking suitable skills, accountability or sometimes with conflicting interests, as with some transport safety authorities. Sadly, working systems were dismantled, as the powers or funds were controlled by competing interests.

The public outcry to such poor government service is surprisingly muted, perhaps partly because churches continue to provide some core services, and partly as much of the population is unaware that government’s function is to provide routine quality health, education, transport and other public goods. Many people now merely see the State as a bunch of powerful MPs, who’ve hit the jackpot, dishing out goodies every five years, controlling licenses and major resource projects and becoming very wealthy as a result, but who will provide other benefits if your own man gains that seat in Parliament.

It doesn’t have to be like this. Greater prospective wealth from natural resource extraction will not improve the situation; probably make it worse, unless the underlying problems are addressed. PNG has experienced positive localised reforms in the past, and can and must do so in future if the country is to see a bright future and avoid continuing its current path as becoming the most unequal society in Asia-Pacific, with a growing under-class of dis-enfranchised and forgotten communities and households.

However, it will require a wholesale shift in attitudes and actions by leaders and the whole community, working together to bring about necessary massive reforms. These reforms are not about establishing scores of new facilities, but largely about changing attitudes, and cooperating to make existing institutions function, leaders accountable and penalised if not performing or abusing public funds or trust.

PNG cannot afford to waste this electoral opportunity. New MPs require humility and readiness to listen, learn (from people and studying the rules and past lessons) and cooperate, as well as having clear policy ideas and commitment, and expecting high standards of him/herself and the public sector. First and foremost, he/she must be honest and accountable and seek to make the system work, rather than undermine or exploit it for his/her own ends.

If maintenance and services are underfunded and yet the sitting politician (or official) has stashes of accumulated funds for his campaign, voters must ask where these funds were from, especially if he has long been a public servant/politician or represented the community on resource projects. Presumably, if he has accumulated considerable wealth, whilst his community has been deprived, then these funds have been diverted from community or public sector funds, in which case voters must ask themselves whether this is a suitable candidate to be entrusted with (further) high office.

The country needs a new calibre and standard of leadership at the political and public sector level, which may include some dedicated incumbents, but which is dedicated to serving the community and making the system work, and not promoting private interests or elevating their own status. The public in turn must not apply inordinate pressure on politicians to provide what they are not there for, notably providing private goods and services to wantoks and individual constituents/contractors. The community must demand high standards of public goods and service, but also be prepared to commit time and effort (e.g. labour to maintain school facilities) and resources (including paying taxes and service fees) for national and community services, and not demand constant, bogus or excessive compensation. Everyone is in this together, and the country will sink or swim as a result of progressing that shared vision and commitment.

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