

## **Moving forward from the high drama of recent weeks**

PNG has experienced a dramatic few weeks in politics and growing public awareness and debate, following the Supreme Court's ruling over OLIPPAC, an attempt to table a 'no confidence' vote, but also a succession of issues where Government appeared insensitive, parliamentary processes appeared abused and vested interests protected... Some have come out of the process looking statesmanlike, others insensitive, manipulative, backward-looking, undemocratic or protecting vested interests.

As in the movies we all love the simple 'good' and 'evil' scenario, especially if good is represented by a David-like figure confronting a powerful and entrenched Goliath. In reality, the world is rarely straightforward, with undue categorisation unhelpful or even counterproductive, as with George W Bush's simplistic characterisation of 'good' or 'evil', and countries as either 'for or against us', failing to recognise diverse perspectives or consult and secure consensus on what is right or wrong; nevertheless, countries and the international community need core principles and ethics, as do households and individuals, starting with applying core Human Rights principles, and achieving basic social indicators (e.g. including MDGs). PNG readily signs these international conventions, (e.g. on rights of women and children, addressing poverty, environmental or corruption, but, as with many Constitutional obligations, tends to ignore them. Once in power there are multiple pressures, with commitments overlooked often sidelined. Once corrupted, it's hard to turn back once exposed to blackmail. So we must minimise opportunities for abuse, with a system of public exposure and effective checks and balances. Otherwise "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". In most countries the legislature should provide the principal oversight on government, but in PNG has appeared as a lapdog (of late). Free and fair media is critical, together with strong but accountable official and community watchdogs and the public.

Some NGOs are very attentive and represent wide public interests, others are more focussed; NGOs (like government and development partners) must also be accountable, ready to listen and avoid entrenched positions (some unduly averse to the private sector, or all development), recognising the private sector's role, including for providing public revenue.

There's been a wide public view that in recent years government has sold out the country cheap to private, largely foreign interests, including for private gain of some domestic leaders and parties, with landowner and community rights dented, and obligations to provide accessible public goods (including access roads, airstrips, basic education and health services) sidelined to releasing natural resources, including land and forest resources, whilst diverting public money to provide hospital facilities or an executive jet for the elite and their cohorts. There's a strong public perception that deals are struck on natural resource extraction, without adequate process or professional advice to protect national and local interests, and that we're forgetting the lessons of the past, which demonstrated the need

for rigorous development forums (including landowners and provincial authorities) on new mining/hydrocarbon or forest/land/agricultural developments. There've been many reports of leaders and officials involved in coercing local community members into giving away forest and other resources or intimidating or enticing reticent community leaders. There's a widely held view that some leaders or parties gain 10% on log export earnings, perhaps financed from the reduced log export tax (granted on the implausible grounds that logging projects were all losing money).

Unfortunately, there is some basis for at least some such concerns. Why would the government adopt a mechanism for funding district goods and services (DSIP) largely controlled by sitting MPs (and withheld to uncooperative MPs), when district/local funding is inadequate for most core services, and conventional public sector systems desperately need restoration. Why reduce log export taxes without requiring compliance with laws, agreements, or company tax paid, and why exempt semi-processed timber from export tax? Why have a massive 2.5 million hectares of land been allocated as special purpose leases (largely apparently for bogus projects) without landowners' informed consent? And why are bulldozers allowed into Collingwood Bay to clear forests, supposedly for some (unlikely) agricultural project, without landowner' consent and when a Court ruling was obtained by the landowners against such a project a decade back; yet some armed police provide protection against the legitimate resource owners? Why were various laws hurriedly amended to make the environmental permits unchallengeable, leadership responsibilities diminished and chances of penalties for abuse of power reduced, and the capacity of the Ombudsman Commission to intervene prior to major abuse of public funds undermined?

Why, when PNG has so many natural resources is there such a rush to sign them off without full transparent negotiations or signing onto the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), which, amongst other things, requires commercial developers and the State to reveal all payments and receipts. Why a major casino for Boroko, when the associated criminal and social implications are widely recognised (money laundering, extortion, kidnapping, gambling addiction etc), especially with landowner leaders already disinclined to share the proceeds of development (royalties etc) within their communities. Why such a disinclination to follow up any recent inquiries (some highlighting defrauding the State – i.e. the public - of massive sums of money , which should be for schools, access roads, staffing and medicines, and why are those implicated not penalised, or the government showing any inclination to address these problems. Why have watchdog institutions, including Auditor-General, Ombudsman Commission but also Parliament and its committees (like PAC) been so under-resourced to perform their functions? It's true the task of government can be onerous, and Ministers and even Prime Ministers' hands are often tied by circumstances (e.g. ineffective, squabbling public service, satisfying competing political factions), but there seems to have been so little political will to reform, clean up, look forward and make progress and be accountable to the people of PNG. It seems the message has constantly been, 'we have the mandate and been voted to rule, and between elections you, 'the public' have no right to question, or hold us accountable" .

This is clearly unacceptable and much of the population, including many leaders (in Parliament - on both sides, and the wider community –including youth and women leaders) have recognised this and seem ready to speak out and demand change, greater consultation and accountability; of course, it is one thing to make commitments during elections, in speeches or under duress, but another thing to live up to them and apply stated policies, consistently and accountably in practice; the process of good government and maintaining answerable processes (not just voting every 5 years) takes commitment and constant effort on everyone's part, not just public sector leaders.

What remains critical are standards and a readiness to listen on everyone's part. This includes recognition of the role of the private sector as drivers of the economy, and that business needs suitable and stable investment conditions, including ability to make a profit if they are to invest in the first instance, allowed to compete and not be undermined by other monopoly arrangements struck with government, if they are to play their part as good corporate citizens. There must also be recognition of the role of foreign direct investment and technical skills, particularly for major investments and the introduction of new technologies, until local capacity is established.

It should also be recognised that foreign things, whether people, institutions or ideas, are neither all good nor bad, in the same way that everything from PNG, is neither universally good or bad. One often hears Papua New Guineans deride all PNG institutions or ways , whilst contrastingly deeming, foreign ways or people, for example from Asia, as invariably corrupt or exploitative or Australia as bullying. These scenarios are far from the truth and simplification is invariably unhelpful, although xenophobic views are widespread in many societies. There is much that is good within PNG and much that others around the world can learn from PNG, including ways to resolve long-standing conflicts amicably. Problems of government corruption and accountability are widespread worldwide, although some countries have progressed further with applying mechanisms to make leadership, companies and public funds more accountable. Reform-minded leaders and committed civil society members, in universities, NGOs, chambers, faith-based organisations and media are struggling to achieve similar objectives, and much can be learnt from sharing efforts and successes.

For example, Azerbaijan came out of the Soviet era highly corrupt and controlled by secretive bureaucrats, little able to handle its oil boom and ensure wide public benefit from the proceeds. It remains largely that way, but reform-minded leaders responsible for the oil sector, encouraged by academics and civil society groups, chose a more accountable path, including committing to EITA , with major benefits; despite its booming economy, China's public sector remains highly inefficient, with public funds often utilised poorly, but a few provinces and cities have made dramatic advances, showing leadership in financial transparency and accountability, engaging with the community and no doubt becoming a showcase in providing improved public goods for their population with available resources. The Philippines and Sri Lanka's press have been heroic in their struggle for exposing corruption and political abuse.

PNG leaders have too often made bad connections (with unscrupulous businessmen) and learnt bad habits from overseas (on secretive deals and autocratic leadership), when there are also so many positive ideas and experiences to share both ways, and not just sharing PNG's natural resources! PNG's human and resource wealth, including its public funds, belong to the entire community (including whole communities); control of public funds and natural resources cannot be usurped by small groups, whether at the national level by individual Ministers or a tightly linked 'kitchen cabinet' or by a handful of leaders or usurpers at the community level. Fair rules, must be combined with wide public literacy, awareness, access to information and public consultation and genuine participation in decision-making; even if that slows processes at times, in the longer run it increases ownership and broad-based benefits from the development process and ensures greater harmony and sustainability of that process.

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