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INITIATIVES FOR ADDRESSING IRREGULARITIES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA'S NATIONAL ELECTIONS

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Key Points

- Irregularities such as vote buying and block voting are common practices in Papua New Guinea (PNG) during National Elections.
- Some politicians use social events as opportunities to gain popularity and secure more votes through paying for immediate needs of people.
- Some voters use their votes as a form of cultural currency to mend broken relationships, resolve conflicts and compensate for damages.
- In order to address irregularities in PNG's National Elections, there is a need for tough penalties on vote buying, votes linked to block voting nullified and more awareness on the impact of vote buying on public service delivery.

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By William Kipongi

Introduction

Free, fair and safe elections are an integral component of the principles of democracy. An individual's constitutional right should be freely expressed in the ability to vote without undue external influences. However, the approach and behaviour towards national general elections in Papua New Guinea (PNG) by both candidates and voters has changed dramatically in the last two decades. Studies done by Gibbs (2006) on the PNG 2002 National Election, Matbob (2013) on 2007 National Election, and Gibbs (2018) on 2017 National Election have identified the occurrence of some abnormal practices in the past national elections. These include violence and intimidation, block voting, common roll stacking, multiple voting, use of large sums of money and firearms. Practices which were regarded as common in the Highlands Region has also now proliferated into the coastal provinces. For instance, Gibbs (2018) noted in the 2007 elections in Madang, incidences of parents exchanging votes for school fees of children attending higher educational institutions. In this environment, voters perceive elections as an investment. Selection criteria for intending candidates are based upon their possession of wealth and the ability to access resources. Virtues of honesty, integrity and respect which are fundamentals of democracy are rather exchanged for short-term needs. This voting culture has prominently emerged in the past general elections in PNG and threatens the fabrics of a democratic society. This paper highlights one of the findings of a study on the 2017 National Election in Enga Province by Kipongi (2018). The findings illustrate the challenges imposed on the democracy of National Elections by the huge cash flow between candidates and voters.

Influence of money in PNG National Elections

Money has played a major role for candidates contesting in the National Elections over the years (Gibbs, 2006; and Kipongi, 2018). Elections in PNG have now developed into most expensive exercises where politicians spend millions of Kina. A study done on the 2017 National Election impact on the socio-economic life of the people of Wapenamanda in Enga by Kipongi (2018) revealed the use of money in the National Election was a snare to ensnare people's votes. For example, one of the interviewees gave the nickname 'Mr. ATM' to a prominent politician who said: "I don't talk, my money does all the talking." He distributed millions of Kina to his supporters in the 2017 National Election. There

were other politicians who did the same and here are some strategies they use:

- Directly buying individual votes with cash.
- Paying for children's school fees so parents vote for them.
- Support people to pay compensation, bride price, funeral feast, etc.
- Funding little family businesses and community projects.
- Meeting individual needs like building homes, funding trips, medical bills, etc.

It seems that people prefer to vote for those with wealth and financial strength more than those with leadership qualities. Some politicians use just one strategy (buying of votes), while others use more than one. For example, politician pays school fees for children, support in compensation payments and money for personal use. Voters having gained tremendous support from a particular candidate will not vote for another candidate instead. Their freedom to choose otherwise has been compromised with the gifts and money received.

Influence of social events on voter choices in voting

Cultural and social events such as compensation, bride price or funerals are recurring events which candidates provide support often leading up to and during National Elections. Sometimes the events turn out to be snares that ensnare voter's rights and freedom with money and gifts flooding in by politicians. Voters see it as an opportunity to ask the candidates for services like roads, bridges and schools but candidates knew that their positive response to voters request will in turn trap voters interests and choices to voting. Therefore, voters are misguided in demanding politicians to pay for social events and yet asking for services at the same time. For instance, majority of the voters in the 2017 National Election reported that: "I will vote for you if you give me money or help me in my need". Then what happens after the candidate won the election? One elected member of Parliament said: "I gave you what you needed, and you gave me what I needed". One can easily draw conclusions that voters use their votes to compensate for the money and gifts received from the candidates and their request for services were of less priority for the candidate elected.

Kipongi (2018) noted that people see National Elections period as an opportunity to host more social events so that their immediate needs be paid off by candidates. Most of the voters never realised that money and support received, ties them into voting for certain candidates. For instance, compensation and bride price payment ceremonies are usually organised during the election period. This is because people know that candidates will come around with a lot of money. But they never realise that they will certainly repay what they received with their votes. It is like; *'you give me this and I give you that'*. Lakane and Gibbs (2003) described the effects of such social gathering as a platform for money to speak and dictate people's choices in voting.

The practice of communal voting

Communal voting or block voting means only a few people will cast all the votes for a particular candidate in a council ward on behalf of the voters. This is another form of practice overriding an individual's democratic right to vote. Such a practice is agreed upon based on their cultural practices where people vote for their own relatives. They do not mind whether the person wins or loses. What matters most is voting for the candidate who they identify with, it gives them satisfaction. Anyone who decides otherwise is most likely to be assaulted, chased out of the community or rejected. That defines the behaviour of people leading to communal or block voting.

When there is no one from within the council ward contesting, the people from that ward form groups according to who they support. Once their names are called for voting, they collect their ballot papers and put them together and ask one person to cast all the votes while another person keeps the records. This is another act of communal voting system noted in the polling booths. All of these are done publicly, and nothing is done in secret. Everyone knows who is voting for whom. Such a practice violates the individual's constitutional right to vote. Much of these behaviours widely described are noted in Lakane and Gibbs' (2003) study on the 2002 National Elections.

Cultural norms permeated into elections

Cultural norms have permeated into election strategies, giving rise to new election behaviours and practices. Traditionally, in many parts of PNG, leadership is continued to be earned through kinship, clan and tribal groups. People do not vote or discuss who will be the next leader like that of in the National Elections.

Various election studies have noted an emergence of a new style of election. Those supporting one candidate against those supporting another (Lakane and Gibbs, 2003). Some candidates provide their supporters with guns to threaten supporters of rival candidates. Huge amounts of money is

involved. There is free food, accommodation, transportation, and even sex is offered freely in some campaign houses (Gibbs and Mondu, 2011). Gibbs (2006) described those behaviours as *political culture*. Such behaviours were consistently noted again in 2007, 2012 and 2017 National Elections (Gibbs, 2006; 2018; Lakane & Gibbs, 2003; and Matbob, 2013).

In cultural feasting events, when meat is distributed, it is normal to call out names of people to come forward to get their share. Similarly, when names were called from the common roll for casting votes, voters got their ballot papers and started calling the candidate they support to come forward and get the ballot papers. This practice was noted at many polling areas in the 2017 National Election (Kipongi, 2018).

Votes are also used to serve other purposes. For instance, people give their votes as a new form of cultural currency in place of pigs and other wealth to restore peace, as compensation payment, rebuilding relationship and a gesture for peace agreements between conflicting parties. It could be just one person's vote or votes of a family or a clan given in place of money and other wealth. This pattern has also been consistently noted in many polling areas around Wapenamanda District in the recent past elections (Kipongi, 2018).

Initiatives for promoting free and fair voting during PNG National Election

To disband undemocratic practices during elections, here are some possible ways that can be considered:

- Tough penalties should be imposed on voters and candidates gambling with money for votes. Part of the exercise is to ban campaign houses erected by supporters along the roads during the national elections because it provides the opportunity for both candidate and voters to gamble with money for votes. If such an activity is witnessed it should be reported to the police and allow the law to deal with it.
- More workshops should be organised by the government at certain times on certain locations for candidates to present their policies to the public. This will give voters the opportunity to be well informed about political parties' policies and to make a choice on the candidate to cast their votes for.
- More awareness is needed on the importance of the National Elections and voting. This can be done prior to the National Elections so that voters can be prepared both psychologically and physically to vote for a leader instead of money and other material gains.
- There is a need to create more awareness on the

impact of vote buying on service delivery. When a candidate started buying votes, it becomes an excuse for him/her not to deliver service after being elected. That is why voters should be well informed of the consequences of selling their votes for money and goods.

- Votes cast through block voting should be nullified. It is against the principal of democracy in the PNG National Elections and a crime committed against ones' right to vote. Such practice should be reported to the appropriate authorities and declare that particular polling booth null and void so that both candidates and voters can learn that such a practice is not tolerated in the National Elections.

Conclusion

The emergence of the political culture is grounded on the fact that election strategies are enmeshed with the cultural norms and values. People participate in the PNG National Elections in the same way as they do in cultural events. They apply their cultural concept of 'give and take' mentality (money for vote). In other places like Madang where such practice is quite new, people are scared of the consequences of such a behaviour and practice (Matbob, 2013). Money and gifts offered to people on numerous occasions deprive people's rights to vote. Some politicians see vote buying as an investment and as an excuse not to deliver services when they are elected. Thus, any irregularities such as vote buying, block voting and the use of violence must not be acceptable during the National Elections in PNG. This paper will contribute to the discussion on how to promote free and fair elections in the country.

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