



THE NATIONAL
RESEARCH INSTITUTE
PAPUA NEW GUINEA

SPOTLIGHT

IS PAPUA NEW GUINEA A CHRISTIAN STATE? EVIDENCE FROM THE CONSTITUTION

Eugene E. Ezebilo

www.pngnri.org

Volume 13, Issue 11

Key Points

- Some people view Papua New Guinea (PNG) as a Christian nation because more than 95 percent of people who live there are Christians.
- For a country to be a Christian nation, the Constitution of the country must recognise Christianity as the country's religion and the country must have a state church.
- PNG's Constitution does not recognise Christianity as the country's religion and PNG does not have a state church; thus, PNG is not a Christian state.
- If the intention is to make PNG become a Christian state, Section 45 of the Constitution should be amended and a state church should be established.

inquire
inform
influence

June 2020



IS PAPUA NEW GUINEA A CHRISTIAN STATE? EVIDENCE FROM THE CONSTITUTION

By Eugene E. Ezebilo

This paper focuses on one of the findings from the article written by Laveil (2019) concerning whether Papua New Guinea (PNG) can become the richest black Christian nation in the world. The article stated that PNG ranked 23rd among black Christian nations in terms of real gross domestic product per capita. In the current paper, emphasis is placed on whether PNG is actually a Christian state as claimed by Laveil (2019). For a country to be a Christian state, the country must recognise Christianity as its official religion and must have a state church (Backhouse, 2011). Reference to “Christian principles” and “guiding hand of God” is made in the Preamble of PNG’s Constitution. However, section 45 does not reflect this. Thus, there is no explicit declaration that PNG is a Christian country in the Constitution. Furthermore, PNG does not have a state church. Thus, PNG is not an officially recognised Christian state. If the intention is to recognise PNG as a Christian state, Section 45 of the country’s Constitution should be revised to reflect that Christianity is PNG’s religion. The country should also identify a Christian denomination as the state church. It is important to note that Christianity is the predominant religion in PNG, and the government collaborates with the Christian denominations to provide public services. Churches also participate in local government bodies. However, these are not sufficient conditions to make PNG an official Christian nation.

How a country can be officially recognised as a Christian state

For a country to be recognised as a Christian state, the country needs to meet the following requirements:

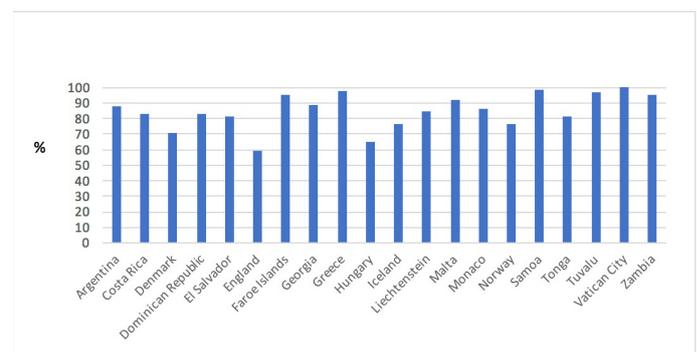
- The Constitution of the country must recognise Christianity as its religion (Backhouse, 2011). It must be written in a section of the Constitution that the country adopts Christianity as the country’s religion.
- The country must have an established state church (Eberle, 2013). The state church can be a Christian denomination supported by the government and supportive of activities of the government.

This implies that a country dominated by Christians may not necessarily be a Christian state.

Countries officially recognised as Christian states

Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as the nation’s religion, in 301 AD (Milman & Murdock, 1887). Other nations that adopted Christianity at that time include Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), Roman Empire and Byzantine Empire. However, the modern republics of Armenia and Ethiopia are secular states; that is, they are neutral to matters associated with religion. The countries that currently identify as Christian states (Christian state, 2020) are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Christian States in relation to Christian population in percentage



Of the countries that identify as Christian states, Vatican City has the highest proportion of Christian residents (100%) followed by Greece and Samoa (approximately 98%) and England has the lowest proportion (59%). Although PNG is not a *de jure* Christian state, 97 percent of the country’s population identify themselves as Christians, which is 12 percent more than average for the countries that identify as a Christian state.

What does PNG’s Constitution say about religion?

In the Constitution, there is a reference to “Christian principles” and “guiding hand of God” in the Preamble. However, section 45 does not reflect this, thus, there is no explicit declaration that PNG is a Christian country in the Constitution.

According to Section 45 of the Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea (1975):

“Every person has rights to freedom of conscience,

thought and religion and practice of his religion and beliefs”

“No person shall be compelled to receive religious instruction”

“No person is entitled to intervene unsolicited into the religious affairs of different belief”

“No person may be compelled to take an oath that is contrary to his religion or belief”

“Religion being referred to includes traditional religious beliefs and customs of the people of PNG”

Hence, the PNG Constitution does not recognise Christianity as the official religion of PNG. This means that PNG does not meet the first requirement associated with a *de jure* Christian state.

Is there an established state church in PNG?

An established state church is often a Christian denomination supported by the government and the church also supports activities of the government. PNG has several Christian groups and the government collaborates with them to provide services. Some of the Christian groups also participate in government bodies. However, the government has not recognised any of the Christian groups as the state church. This means that PNG is potentially a secular state, which allows freedom of religion and belief in the country. Thus, PNG does not meet the second requirement associated with a *de jure* Christian state.

What PNG can do to become a Christian state

If the intention is to recognise PNG as a Christian state, the following should be considered:

- Amend Section 45 of PNG’s Constitution to reflect Christianity as the country’s religion, after consultation with key stakeholders.
- Establish a state church that is supported by the PNG government. For example, an agreed portion of the government revenue generated from tax should be allocated to the state church as practiced in some countries recognised as Christian states. It is important to not choose one of the existing Christian denominations in PNG as the state church because such moves have the tendency to trigger tension and anarchy among the existing Christian groups.

Concluding remarks

PNG is dominated by people who belong to Christianity, which makes some people view PNG as a Christian nation.

However, PNG does not currently meet the requirements to be officially recognised as a Christian state. PNG’s Constitution does not identify Christianity as the country’s religion. Moreover, PNG does not have a church that is established by the state. If the intention of the PNG government is to adopt Christianity as the country’s religion, it should consider amending section 45 of the Constitution to explicitly state that the official religion of PNG is Christianity. The PNG government should also consider establishing a state church that can be called “Papua New Guinean Church”. It is important to consider that the conversion or recognition of one of the existing Christian denominations in PNG to a state church might generate tension and animosity among the Christian denominations in the country. Hopefully, this paper will assist members of the parliament and policy makers in discussions about religion and customs in PNG.

References

- Backhouse, S. (2011). *Kierkegaard’s critique of Christian nationalism*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Eberle, E.J. (2013). *Church and state in Western society: Established church, cooperation and separation*. Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea. (1975). <http://www.parliament.gov.pg/images/misc/PNG-CONSTITUTION.pdf> (accessed 9 March 2020).
- Christian state. (2020, March 2). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_state
- Laveil, M. (2019, 14 June). Can PNG become the richest black nation in the world in ten years? Retrieved from <https://devpolicy.org/can-png-become-the-richest-black-nation-in-the-world-in-ten-years-20190614/> (accessed 4 March 2020).
- Milman, H.H., and Murdock, J. (1887). *The history of Christianity, from the birth of Christ to the abolition of paganism in the Roman Empire*. New York, NY: A. C. Armstrong & Son.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Osborne Sanida, Director of the PNG National Research Institute (PNG NRI) for his useful comments in the earlier version of the manuscript. The author thanks Dr Francis Odhuno, Program Leader of the Economic Policy Research Program, PNG NRI for his valuable comments.

About the Author

Associate Professor Eugene Ezebilo is the Deputy Director, Research, at the PNG National Research Institute. He is an Associate Professor of Economics and holds a PhD in Economics from Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Sweden. His research interests include economic development, housing economics and policy, environmental and resource economics and socio-economic impact analysis.