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POTENTIAL STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING ELECTORAL IRREGULARITIES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: EVIDENCE FROM WOMEN IN THE 2017 NATIONAL ELECTION STUDY

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Key Points

- Electoral irregularities continue to prevail in elections in Papua New Guinea (PNG).
- Electoral irregularities hinder women candidates from winning elections in PNG.
- Factors contributing to electoral irregularities need to be identified in order to take measures to improve future elections.
- For elections in the country to improve, all parties involved in the national elections must practise transparency and accountability, and there must be government commitment to ensuring free, fair and safe elections.

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POTENTIAL STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING ELECTORAL IRREGULARITIES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: EVIDENCE FROM WOMEN IN THE 2017 NATIONAL ELECTION STUDY

By Cathy Keimelo

Since independence, women have been underrepresented in Papua New Guinea's national parliament. Given that PNG is predominantly a male-dominated society, women have struggled to get into leadership positions. However, PNG's political history shows that seven women who have contested in their respective electorates have been elected into parliament. This shows that women can contest and win elections. However, politics has not been an equal playing field for women in PNG and they are often faced with challenges that hinder them from winning elections. This article is based on the findings from a recent study carried out in the Huon Gulf and Lae districts of the Morobe Province by Fairio and others on women in the 2017 national elections in PNG. The study found that political leadership at the national level continues to be a challenge for women in the country. A range of key factors hinders women candidates from winning in national elections. These include negative perceptions or gender stereotypes, electoral irregularities and financial and logistical constraints, which make it even more difficult for women to win. This article focuses on electoral irregularities, specifically common roll update and vote buying which are the most common irregularities in PNG.

How electoral irregularities hinder women from winning elections in PNG

Electoral irregularities such as vote buying and common roll update decrease the chances of women winning in the national elections. In the Women in the 2017 National Election study, Fairio and others reported that electoral irregularities were a common concern during the polling period that impacted women candidates' performance during the elections. This happened through their voters not voting in some areas due to missing names on the common roll and being bribed through vote buying or influenced by others to vote for other candidates (usually male). This resulted in women candidates not having enough votes to win the elections.

If the intention of the government is to improve the conduct and outcome of elections in the country, these electoral irregularities must be addressed at both national and local-level government elections. They can be addressed with the government's full commitment to allocating sufficient financial support to carry out the common roll update across the country and impose strict regulations and penalties on both candidates and voters for vote buying.

Electoral irregularities in PNG's national elections

Electoral irregularities refers to improper conduct that occurs during elections. It has been and continues to be prevalent in elections in PNG despite efforts to improve. Examples of electoral irregularities include bribery through vote buying, names of eligible voters missing on the common roll and tampering of ballot papers among other illegal ways to interfere with the result of the election. During the 2017 national elections in PNG, international and domestic observers all reported that serious electoral irregularities were prevalent across the country. Human Rights Watch (2017) also stressed that the elections were marred by widespread electoral irregularities and violence.

The Australian National University (2018), European Union (2017) and Transparency International PNG (2017) observers reported electoral irregularities such as vote buying, threats and intimidation of voters, poor state of the common roll – which saw a lot of genuine voters missing out – and tampering of ballot papers. Similarly to the observation reports, two major electoral irregularities that stood out in the PNG NRI Women in the 2017 National Elections study were vote buying and common roll update. Likewise, the European Union stated that both international and domestic observers had identified that the main problem during polling was the high number of people not included in the common roll across the country (2017: pp. 5–6).

Electoral irregularities not only disturb the democratic process of elections but also impact election outcomes for both female and male candidates, hence potential strategies must be formulated to address these issues.

Factors contributing to electoral irregularities

The general public and other relevant stakeholders need to understand and address the factors contributing to electoral irregularities, in particular on the common roll update and vote buying, in order to improve the conduct of elections in PNG. These include:

- *Inadequate financial support.* The inadequate financial support from the national government to the PNG Electoral Commission (EC) means that roll update and verification is not adequately addressed, hence the incomplete list or missing names of eligible voters.
- *Lack of awareness of voter registration.* Lack of awareness of the importance of voter registration by the people of PNG in both rural and urban areas also contributes to missing names on the common roll.
- *Lack of advance preparation of the common roll update.* The process of updating the common roll requires ample time to cover the entire voting age population in the country. The lack of advance preparation during the four years between election years results in the incomplete update of the common roll.
- *Lack of strict regulations and penalties set by the EC.* The penalties for manipulating the common roll during the polling period are not strictly applied and too lenient; this allows for candidates to bribe voters and for voters to sell their vote preferences during elections in PNG.
- *Lack of material goods and the need for access to food or cash.* Many poor people living in rural areas have immediate needs for access to food and cash. These short-term needs are met by candidates in exchange for votes, who buy votes to gain more numbers to win.

Potential policy interventions for tackling electoral irregularities

Electoral irregularities can be tackled through the full commitment of the government of PNG with potential policy interventions such as:

- Adequate financial support by the national government to the EC to carry out the electoral roll update across

the country over the four years beforehand by using the services of the village recorders for voter registration in their respective areas.

- Voter awareness and education is vital for tackling electoral irregularities. It is important to educate voters on the democratic process of elections and choosing a good leader based on leadership qualities and sound policies rather than electing on the basis of who they know or other such influences. Gender sensitisation of voters is also important so that they are aware of women candidates who are contesting and what they can contribute as leaders if they win.
- Strict regulations and penalties must be imposed by the EC in collaboration with the police so that those caught in the act of improper and illegal conduct in elections are dealt with accordingly.
- All parties involved in the elections – EC, candidates, voters, election officials and security staff – must be transparent and accountable so that democracy prevails and elections are free, fair and safe.

Conclusions

The common roll update, vote buying and other electoral irregularities continue to be major problems that have serious implications on the results of elections in PNG. To improve the conduct of elections in PNG, potential strategies to tackle these issues must be seriously considered. Drawing lessons from the Women in the 2017 National Elections study and other election observer reports, electoral irregularities, particularly of the common roll update and vote buying, can be addressed in several ways. Sufficient financial support by the government to the EC will ensure that the common roll is adequately updated. Also, strict regulations and penalties must be set by the EC to address the issue of vote buying. However, to ensure that this occurs, transparency, accountability and collective effort at all levels of society must work collaboratively. Informing relevant government bodies can enable them to make better decisions that will improve future elections in PNG.

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