PNG National Elections 2017

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The journey to the 9th PNG National Parliament has just started. I take this opportunity of the festive season and the beginning of a new year to reflect on what is in store for 2017 for our beloved PNG. Festivities for Christmas and New Year are just behind us, but the tempo for more celebrations will rise as we approach the national elections in the middle of the year.

National elections, however, are serious matters that impact on all our lives, and the lives of those yet to be born. The path to the PNG National Parliament is fraught with costly and difficult challenges. Nonetheless, parliamentarians will be elected and an executive government formed before 2017 comes to an end. Political life will roll-on in the land of the unexpected, with unexpected consequences. I draw on a book I am now reading and the plight of many unemployed in PNG to give shape to a topic of immense national significance: that of opportunities for income generation.

Festive Season and Election 2017

I began writing this article on 31 December 2016. It was a very hot day and my family, having earlier watched Moana at the cinema with our neighbours, had been busy preparing for our new year celebration meal of roast lamb, potatoes, salad, and cake for dessert. During the festive season, I began reading (former Australian journalist turned politician) Maxine McKew’s recent book, Tales from the Political Trenches. My thoughts started to process the storyline in Moana, our New Year roast and the events described in Maxine’s book. Shaped by these thoughts, I started to write this article.

While the family roast reminded me of the new year parties across the length and breadth of PNG during the festive season leading to an election year, Moana reminded me of the development of traditional leadership skills, and the rise to leadership across the Pacific Islands, including PNG. Maxine McKew’s book provided an account of Australian political life, with McKew having defeated the sitting Prime Minister, John Howard, in the seat of Bennelong in New South Wales. She made Australian political history as only the second person to unseat an incumbent Australian Prime Minister in a national election. Details of her campaign strategy and her appreciation of the role she wanted to play as the local member of parliament were interesting to read.

These three events – my family preparing roast lamb for the New Year’s eve dinner, Moana finding her place and leadership role, and McKew emerging to be a giant killer in the Australian political scene – reminded me of the kind of events that must be taking place across PNG throughout this festive period, given that 2017 is a National Election Year.

From personal experience, I have seen aspiring candidates and their supporters use the festive season leading to the election year to launch election campaigns. This is the period where political interests start to take shape and intending candidates start to convey their interests with their supporters, close friends and families.

I am quite sure several pigs must have lost their lives across the country during this festive season. Likewise, cartons of Coca-Cola must have been consumed, and the telephone services provided by Digicel and Bmobile/Vodafone would have been running hot as conversations turn to politics across this beautiful and diverse nation. This, of course, is just the
beginning. There are more pigs to be slaughtered, more cartons of Coca Cola to be traded, and more mobile phone and social media conversations to be had in the lead-up to the national elections.

This is the PNG version of modern day parliamentary democratic elections. In my humble opinion, Moana’s and Maxine’s strategies have limited relevance in the context of the PNG National Elections. If the past is any indication, it will be a costly and highly divisive process. Lives will be lost, through both direct and indirect election related causes. On the other hand, elections in PNG are colourful and vibrant affairs, involving traditional dances and partying. Truck loads of people sing and chant. The midnight oil burns as supporters and candidates strategise and plan through the night.

**Has election 2017 started?**

While election 2017 has not officially started, the campaign has long been underway. The timing and the way Maxine McKew describes her campaign to unseat John Howard is in direct contrast to what I tried to briefly describe above. While both Australia and PNG have adopted the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy, elections in both countries are distinctly different. The PNG electoral process has a mixture of Moana’s and Maxine’s worlds – the launch of political interests and campaigns under the guise of Christmas celebrations, the clout of cultural exchanges (i.e. cash for votes), and traditional obligations to muscle-in voters.

Moana’s world is no different to the subsistence way of life found in the PNG rural setting. Maxine’s world in the seat of Bennelong was far away from the realities of PNG’s cities and towns. Our country finds itself caught between the two extremes. It is in this space, where tradition and modernity clash, that the 2017 elections will take place.

Whether we choose to count in Kina, pork, four-wheel drives, or unfortunately even in terms of human lives, elections in PNG are expensive. By August 2017, only 111 winners of parliamentary seats will emerge from the thousands of aspirants to represent the seven or so million people of a vastly diverse and geographically fragmented nation. Our new leaders will not just live in Moana’s world of sea farers or subsistence farmers. They will also compete with Maxine McKew’s Australia and others in a globalised community of nations. These 111 will be national leaders representing and shaping the present and future lives of the PNG people.

**What should candidates, political parties and the electorate focus on in Election 2017?**

What are the real issues and policies that the candidates and the political parties should focus on in the lead up to the elections? Similarly, what should the electorate demand from the candidates and political parties?

While pondering on such questions, I am also mindful that service delivery may not be an expectation from some segments of the community. Likewise, candidates may be lining up to get their share of the cake from the exploitation of the country’s natural resources. The motivations and interests of candidates and voters are more than likely to differ across the country.

As a PNG citizen who has navigated his way out of Moana’s world into McKew’s world, living and working in Port Moresby, and as the director of the country’s only public funded think tank, I see it as my duty to ask these difficult yet pertinent questions. My hope is that others will join in raising the level of debate in the lead-up to the national election. The PNG NRI, as part of its contribution to the 2017 national elections, will be encouraging informed national debate.

Looking beyond the political rhetoric of candidates, political parties and the electorate, the main issue for me is jobs and income generating opportunities. Survival on subsistence farming, which is a reality for more than 80 percent of the country’s population, is a slow and painful path towards destitution through poverty. Promises of improved rural service delivery are, as I have described in few of my earlier writings, a fallacy. The fallacy has been perpetuated as part of the ‘feel good’ political rhetoric of many politicians and their supporters, repeated in mobilising
votes, and then forgotten soon afterwards. This political rhetoric has been recited at each and every election since independence. I will be surprised if the same does not happen in the current elections.

What the electorate should demand, and the candidates should commit to the people of PNG, both now and into the future, are jobs, jobs, more jobs and income generating opportunities. It is critical that elected leaders create opportunities for jobs and income generating activities. The electorate should demand this of them. Creating job and income generating opportunities is critical to empowering citizens to have a fulfilling life. Jobs and income generating opportunities will have direct impact on the family (food, clothing, home and education), directly impact on businesses (demand for goods and services creates more businesses), and tax revenue for the state at all levels (national, provincial and municipalities). This will in turn be useful for the apparatuses of the state to provide core public goods.

To place this argument in perspective, we should note the growing number of young people coming out of the education system who need jobs. The bulk of these graduates remain within their village communities. They need meaningful employment and income generating opportunities, rather than leaving them behind to subsist on whatever they can find. Similarly, those living in the expanding squatter settlements around the cities and towns need genuine jobs and income generating opportunities.

Creating jobs, more jobs and income generating opportunities should be the focus of every candidate and political party contesting the national elections in 2017. The electorate should pay attention to the strategies and policies of each candidate and political parties on job creation and income generating opportunities. Promising rural service delivery and cargo in the form of Coca-Cola, four-wheel drive vehicles, banana boats, and roads and bridges that lead to nowhere, will continue to leave the majority of our people on the path to poverty and destitution.

PNG and the people of this great country deserve better. It is incumbent on national leaders elected to deliver on this expectation, and it is the responsibility of each and every voter to demand the best for them from their aspiring representatives.

**Conclusion**

In 2017, the electorate must demand jobs, more jobs and income generating opportunities. We should refrain from being sold out with cargo. The electorate should know that you cannot have both – cargo and jobs/income generating opportunities. You can only have one and that should be jobs and income generating opportunities.

On this note, for those who make it to the 8th National Parliament, you will be called upon to serve our nation. Your electorate will be an integral part of a nation. A prosperous and cohesive nation will be a blessing to your electorate. Thinking creatively about job creation and income generating opportunities for the country will be a benefit to your voters in your electorate. In creating jobs for your electorate you will be strengthening the case for your job as the representative of the people.

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