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Backdrop to the national election

The 2012 national election in Papua New Guinea was conducted during a time of political and constitutional crisis unprecedented in history. Economically, the country experienced greater wealth due to high commodity price from mining boom, while social indicators are still poor compared to the Pacific neighbours. What ever are the motives of an increased in the number of candidates contested in the 2012 national election, the citizens of Papua New Guinea are in dire need for basic service delivery and a hope for a better future. The unsuccessful women bill has also contributed to an increase in the number of women contestants. How many of them will be elected into parliament is yet to be seen. The number of political parties has increased to all time high but will they influence citizens to vote along party lines? The 2012 national election attracted international attention and support much bigger than ever before. More security personnels were deployed and resources spent.

The election was conducted amidst the move by parliament for deferral, the Electoral Commission was seen to be unprepared, the Commissioner was under the threat of sacking, the public rose against the decision to defer election, the military and police forces were divided between two regimes – Somare and O’Neill/Namah. One regime was recognized by the court and the other by parliament. The judiciary was at loggerheads with parliament. The country was held in suspense on the eve of the national general election. Will these influence citizens decision through the ballot papers in the poll?

The race for political power has seen an increase in an aggressive campaign through every available means including social media. Political parties are striving to win new Members to Parliament, whilst retaining the current MP who are party members. The sitting members faces tough challenges from their rivals. New political parties campaigned hard to win sits to form the next government or have an influence in the formation of the new government whilst current government are aggressive to muster enough numbers to remain in government. O’Neill/Namah faces challenges from both Somare team as well as new political parties and independent candidates. The whole country were enthusiastic to go to the poll, see the election result and the formation of the next government. National Election in PNG is held once in every five years and it has always been an event which generated overwhelming interest.

On June 23, 2012 the national election commenced after months of fear, speculations and uncertainty. Ultimate powers were once again transferred back to the people to decide their future.
The Electoral Commission has chosen “free, fair and safe election” as a theme and supported by other organizations who believe in good governance including Transparency International (PNG) (TIPNG). Will the voter education conducted over the months preceding the election have an impact on the voters at the polls? Can the contestants allow due electoral process to take precedent? Will the security personals and electoral staff be impartial and allow democracy to prevail? Will the supporters of candidates respect the rights of other candidates in the Limited Preferential Voting? Will good governance in the electoral process prevail or community consensus? Will the 2012 national election be safe, free and fair? Will the citizens cast their votes based on party policies, candidates personality, clan influence or individual choices?

**Political parties in electoral process**

Reign of political parties, election of members to parliament and its operations are a byproduct of the electoral process. How the process is managed to ensure democracy rules during national elections to achieved its desired outcome will always remain a major concern of all stakeholders. The electoral process can either make or break a nation depending on who is elected though what process. Therefore the work of electoral commission, security personals, polling officials becomes critically important in managing election outcome. Also important is the work of political parties in linking the citizens to parliament and government through the electoral process. Political parties always has the opportunity to play a proactive role to positively influence the electoral process to ensure free, fair and safe election. But these opportunities are often under utilised or not at all.

Amoung the many international and domestic observers, TIPNG has engaged more than 370 observers in all provinces except Manus. I was part of the team of trainers and coordinators for the Highlands region (Southern Highlands, Enga, Western Highlands, Simbu and Eastern Highlands provinces). It was my first experience in election observation which I wish to share in this Insight PNG.

**Election observation in the Highlands**

Although the requirement of the polling process is fixed, the actual condut of election at the polling place has a lot to be desired. Wheather the process is adhered to, violated or rules are bent, differ from one region to another, one province to another, one local level government to another and one polling area to another. The heavy presence of security pesonal helped to minimise election related law and order but it does not influence or improve on the compliance of the electoral process at the polling sites. Some of the irregularities observed are as follows:

1. **Too young to vote** – A citizen must be 18 years and above to be eligible to cast their vote. But this is not the case in Tente 1 – Mendi Urban local level government, currently held by Isaac Joseph. Below is a grade two student who collected ballot papers and headed to the polling booth to cast her vote. I intervied her couple of hours later on her way home and found her to be between the age of 7and 9. The community, security personals and polling officials witnessed this illegal activity time and again but did nothing nothing to stop it. Under aged children were seen voting in other polling areas in Enga, Western Highlands, Jiwaka and Simbu Provinces. Whereas in Kamas in Wabag LLG, under aged children were turned off by polling officials and security personals. Generally, underage voting were condone even by the community.
2. **Block voting** – a polling official who originated from the pooling ward – Tente 1 solely marked almost all ballot papers for all the voters as they enter the polling booth. Couple of times during my observation, I noted the biological son of the candidate from the polling ward, who is not a polling official assisted the polling official to mark ballot papers when he took a break. Block voting was also observed in Kauwi ward in South Whagi rural LLG where the presiding officer pre-marked all the first preference votes on the ballot papers from the polling booth.

3. **Transparent voting** – Both the presiding officer and the polling clerk sits on the same table. Ballot papers are signed and collected from the presiding officer and solely marked by the polling clerk and witnessed by the policemen and the voters in the queue. There is no polling booth for secret voting in this case. The polling clerk who marked all the ballot paper is in a yellow T Shirt after the presiding officer in the front with white chair. At the back of the polling clerk stands police men watching closely to see the marking of ballot papers. This is a violation of voter’s rights to vote secretly but not even the policemen, presiding officer and the public rise up against it.
4. Scrutineers marking ballot papers – In Rakamanda ward 24, Wabag Urban LLG, five to six scrutineers stands before and after the presiding officer and the polling clerk. As soon as the voter’s names are called and papers are collected, they raced to grab the ballot papers at will and marked them.

The three men on the left who are bending their back and marking the ballot papers are all scrutineers. They decide where the three preference votes for both the open and regional seat will go.

5. Bias in the polling area – In all the polling areas observed, polling officials including the presiding officers came from the same ward. Often they are non partisan in conducting election. They either acted in favour of a local candidate they support, or other open or regional candidate who have offered some form of bribe.

6. More ballot papers with less voters and vise versa – In some polling areas, there were more voters and less ballot papers and vise versa. The picture on the right is Tente 3 (Mendi), more ballot papers were distributed with less number of voters. More than 400 ballot papers remained. Since it was urban settlement and no candidate from the ward contested, no one took ownership and let go the remaining ballot papers. In other areas like Tente 1, where a candidate contested there were double voting and applied pressures to complete the ballot papers. In Kamase (Wabag), there were more population and less ballot papers. Upon learning that many will not have the chance to vote, they reached a consensus and distributed the ballot papers amongst the different clan. They do not have to check their names against the roll or paint their fingers to vote.

400 ballot papers remain
7. **Double voting** - Double voting becomes a common practice as observed in Mendi, Wabag, Dei, Jiwaka and Simbu province. One person voted time and again for as many as twenty times or more. Double voting occurred in a polling area where either one candidate contesting or none. There is less in polling area where more than one candidate contested.

8. **Dividing of ballot papers** – In polling areas where two or three candidates contested, and even in areas where the community support are divided and less ballot papers are distributed, leads to high tension among voters. Often after fiery exchange of words and argument, consensuses are reached to evenly dividing the ballot papers amongst the different clan. This is seen in several polling areas. In some instances, first choices are pre-marked and give the other two choices to voters.

9. **More tension in open seat than regional** – In all observation, tension among voters for open seat is much higher than regional seats. PNG is a communal and is strongly clan based. Therefore, clan interest becomes paramount than individual interest and this has reflected in the polling. It would be interesting to observe council election.

10. **Late start** - Polling observed in all areas has common problem of starting as late as 3.00 pm. This has a lot of implication as voter’s race against time to complete the polling. These includes common roll not followed, fingers not marked, voters racing to collect their ballot papers, senior citizens missed out in voting, undue influence from candidate supporters, bribery and many more.

11. **Bribery** – Bribery come in a form of cash and kind. I observed in Rakamanda (Wabag) where a police men in uniform and police vehicle, parking more than 50 meters away from the polling area, distributing cash to voters. Police were used by some candidates to facilitate their interest. In other cases, candidates offer bribe to polling officials to preside in their favor. This was observed in Simbu. In Jiwaka, candidate supporters put up feast for polling officials and whilst conducting polling there were frequently offered bettlenut, cigarettes, soft drinks and even used women to induce them to support their candidate or their illegal conduct at the polling area.

12. **Splitting votes** – In many provinces, it was observed that sitting Member of Parliament put up candidates in several local level government areas to split votes in their favor. In SinaSina Yongomugl electorate, several candidates were endorsed by the sitting Member.

13. **Process versus consensus** – Melanesian big man system and consensus approach to decision making still has a strong hold and greatly influenced polling. In tense situations with high likelihood of electoral violence, community leaders facilitated discussion to reach consensus. The decisions they arrive at are followed even if it means block vote or to divide ballot papers among sub-clan and supporters. This was witnessed in many places.

14. **Common roll flawed** – Many names of voters are not registered in the common roll. Other names which are registered are either under aged or deceased. In my ward and others, the number of names registered on the common roll are less than the total voting population.
15. Common roll not followed – In the highlands common roll was done according to family order listing. In most polling areas observed common roll were not used. People lined up in any order to vote. In polling areas where common roll are used and family name are called, totally different people stepped in to vote and the siblings are not of the name called. Polling clerk who called the names did not confirm the person against the name before voting.

16. Young people dominate the polling area – In most polling areas, young people dominate and even control the polling area. They push their ways to cast their votes. Thus displacing the elderly and even women voters who missed out in having a chance to vote.

17. Vote Buying – In one polling area observed in Sinasina Yongomugl electorate held by the speaker of parliament, remaining ballot papers (39), were bought by the supporter of the incumbent member. The illegal deal was made with the presiding officers, ward council, polling officials and security personnel’s. Vote buying is not only done at the polling areas, but from ward to ward and person to person. Candidates dished out a lot of money to supporters in different wards in exchange for their votes. The LPV has increased voters chances of collecting bribery from candidates. This has been a common practice seen and heard from almost all provinces observed.

18. Security personnel are not impartial– Whilst the conduct of security personnel’s differs from one polling area to another. The conduct of security personnel’s as observed in Rakamanda in Wabag, Tente in Mendi, Tabare in Sinasina Yongomugl was clearly biased. They allow due process to be trampled underfoot or even their presence did not minimize or prevent flawed in the electoral process.

19. Conflict of interest – Polling officials had conflict of interest as demonstrated in many polling areas in Mendi, Wabag, Dei, Jiwaka and Simbu. Polling officials including the presiding officers are from the polling area and have supported candidates for both the open and regional seats. In Jiwaka, the presiding officer marked the first preferential votes on the ballot papers when signing his signature. In Mendi (Tente 1) polling officials allowed double voting and polling official to mark all ballot papers.

20. Ink not applied – In Jiwaka (Kauwi), ballot papers were divided amongst voters after all the first preferences votes for the open seats were already marked. The second and third preferences were given to the voters to decide with the regional ballot papers. Inks were not applied onto the fingers to show that they have voted or not. Similar practice was seen at Kamase (Wabag). In Tabare (Simbu), ballot papers were distributed amongst the different sub-clan who have supported different candidates but voters were ordered to mark their fingers with ink.

21. No polling booth – In Tente 2 (Mendi), there was no polling booth and the ballot papers were marked openly by polling officials. Voting did not become a secret matter.
22. **Intimidation** – Intimidation and threats from candidate’s supporters are seen in many polling areas from Mendi to Wabag, Dei, Jiwaka and Simbu. Threats are taken seriously in strong communal societies as it means accessibility to road, transport services, business and etc.

23. **Election Observers** – The presence of election observers to some extent prevent fraudulent behaviors of security personnel’s, polling officials, scrutineers and voters but it did not stop malpractices in the polling areas. I was even offered bribe by a candidate supporter in Mendi to fill all the remaining ballot papers late at night.

24. **Logistics** – The transportation of election officials, ballot boxes, papers another items to polling area was not efficient and effective. This has a major implication in the electoral process.

25. **Separate polling booth.** One of the positive developments observed was the separate polling booth for women and in some polling area, women joined different queue to vote.

26. **Security** - The deployment of heavy security personnel’s especially in the Highlands contained dispelled the fear or electoral violence and contained law and order. It is early to rule out post election violence.

**Conclusion**

Obviously, the people of Papua New Guinea were enthusiastic in exercising their rights in electing their representative to the National Parliament. The Electoral Commission has the mandated responsibility to manage the electoral process with integrity so that citizens can have confidence in the results. The National Election in PNG is generally safe but it is not democratically free and fair. There are common occurrences of gross violation in the electoral process as observed. This means that the results can be falsified. Same sentiment has been expressed by candidates even in Port Moresby and remote Goilala district.

The election results of Ialibu Pangia and Kandep where sitting members are able to score 70 to 80% primary votes to be declared in the first count raises a lot of questions. Especially in strong communal based societies like the Highlands, first preferential votes are seen as obligatory for candidates contesting in their own ward than candidates from other wards and local level government area. Already, losing candidates in Kandep are taking legal proceedings for a recount as they dispute the absolutely majority win of incumbent member and leader of Triumph Heritage Empowerment party.
What is also obvious is a strong grip which the communal culture of PNG has on the national election. Highlands being part of a communal society, the social and economic consideration of voter’s relationship within the clan and the tribe has a greater influence in deciding their votes. Individual interests are subjected to communal interest. This can mean keeping the relationship so that they can have access to road, health, education services and business opportunities. The community also feels obliged to reciprocate for help or assistance given in time of need, like compensations, marriage alliances, bride price, assisting in tribal fight or providing support in time of tribal war among others. Therefore, if the community agrees to give all their first preference votes to a particular candidate and allow one person to mark the ballot papers, they consider it as free and fair election even if it violates electoral process. I think there is a need to integrate cultural elements into the electoral process or providing room for Melanesian way of doing things even in the electoral process.

Lack of effectiveness, efficiency and integrity in the administration of the electoral process by the Electoral Commission will always remain a major concern. There are major flaws in the electoral process which includes: poor common roll update, logistic issues, impartiality of electoral staff and polling officials, complication in filling out ballot papers by majority of the population who are illiterate, either over or under distribution of ballot papers, block voting, double voting, underage voting, pre-marked ballot papers etc demands an improvement to bring credibility into the electoral process and restore citizens confidence in the election outcome. The 2012 national election is although safe; democratically it is not totally free and fair. Despite the huge resource allocation to the exercise, the management of the electoral process has failed to set a high standard.

Unless there is a reform in the electoral process, the election results will continue to be falsified and this can either make or break the country depending on who gets into power. The reform can consider improving voter’s registration process and early dissemination of common roll, strengthen separate polling booth for women voters, how communal interest can be accommodated without compromising the integrity of secret voting, redesign the ballot papers to accommodate for the illiterate among others. The discussions on electronic voting are gaining momentum and should be considered.