

Exploring factors that shaped results of Bougainville's general elections in 2015

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Abstract:

The 2015 election of the Autonomous Bougainville Government is the third General Election after Bougainville assumed its autonomy status from PNG in 2005. For the first General Election in 2005 the first-past-the-post system of election was used. The Limited Preferential Voting system was used for the second General Elections in 2010 and again for the third General Election in 2015. This paper is the result of inquiries into the factors that shaped the results of the 2015 General Elections in Bougainville.

Keywords: limited preferential voting system, voter's choice, elimination process, wantok system, Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, general elections

Introduction

Bougainville is a dependent territory to Papua New Guinea (PNG) after it assumed its political autonomy under a *Presidential System* of government inaugurated in June 2005. This arrangement emerged as a resolution to the 'Bougainville crisis', a conflict which erupted in 1988, caused by controversies related to the inequity of both the economic benefits from the Bougainville Panguna copper mine and the severe environmental damage caused by the mine. The warring parties were the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) and the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF). Eventually peace was restored with the signing of a Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA) between the PNG government and Bougainville leaders in 2001.

Bougainville comprises a major island (the mainland) together with Buka Island and the outer islands. It is geographically located south-east of Port Moresby, the capital of PNG, which is north of Australia. Its landmass is approximately 8,730 square kilometres (Oliver 1991). According to Braithwaite, Chazrleswiorth, Reddy and Dunn (2010), Jennings and Claxton (2013), Linnett (2009) Ewin (2003), and Ogan (1991), the total population of Bougainville is between 260-300 thousand people who are Melanesians. Currently, Bougainville is struggling to restore its law and order systems, revive the economy, and rebuild and maintain infrastructure destroyed over the nine years (1988-1997) of the Bougainville Crisis. A referendum is scheduled to be conducted to determine the political future of Bougainville, not prior to the year 2015 and no later than 2020 (Bougainville Peace Agreement 2001).

This overview sets a background to explore the factors that contributed to influence the 2015 Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) General

Elections including; election systems, post conflict situation, Melanesian culture, and even scatted geographical settings of about 39 islands.

Literature review: Systems of elections and the factors that influence results

There are two main systems of conducting elections; the ‘first-past- the- post’ and the preferential voting system. The first system is referred to as the simple majority where the winner is the one who scores the highest votes after exhausting the counting of all the allowable ballot papers for each electorate or constituency (Australian Politics.com 2015).

In the preferential voting system there are three types.

The limited preferential voting (LPV) is where a limit of choices is made (in this case 3) from the list of candidates on the ballot paper. The choices must not be less than the approved LPV number of preferences (3 for this case). If less or more than the approved number (in this case less or more than 3) are marked that ballot paper becomes invalid. This article is limited to the LPV system which was used in the 2015 Bougainville’s General Elections.

Second is the optional preferential voting (OPV) system where only those candidates favorable to the voters are selected out of the list of all contestants on the ballot paper. In this case a ballot paper can only be invalid if there is no choice marked at all on a ballot paper.

Third is the Exhaustive preferential voting (EPV) system where all candidates listed on the ballot papers will have to be marked with a choice. A ballot paper can be invalid if some candidates’ names are not marked with a choice. (Office of the Bougainville Electoral Commisiner 2015).

LPV system with three preferences

The main elements of conducting the LPV preferential voting system is as follows:

- Voters are required to place the number “1” against the candidate of their choice, known as their “first preference.”
- Voters are then required to place the numbers “2” and “3”, against two other candidates listed on the ballot paper in order of preference.
- The counting of first preference votes, also known as the “primary vote”, takes place first. If no candidate secures an absolute majority of primary votes, then the candidate with the least number of votes is “eliminated” from the count.
- The ballot papers of the eliminated candidate are examined and re-allocated amongst the remaining candidates according to the number “2”, or “second preference” votes.
- If no candidate has yet secured an absolute majority of the vote, then the next candidate with the least number of primary votes is eliminated. This preference allocation continues until there is a candidate with an absolute

majority which is 50 per cent plus 1 of the total allowable votes. Where a second preference is expressed for a candidate who has already been eliminated, the voters' third preferences are used (Weitenberg 2013).

Advantages of the LPV system

1. The LPV system ensures that only a candidate with the support of an absolute majority of the electorate can win, eliminating the possibility of minority winners. Put another way, the winning candidate is the "most preferred" or "least disliked" candidate.
2. The LPV system ensures that voters can support minor parties and independent candidates, knowing that their preferences may be used to decide the winner. Thus, votes for minor parties and independents are not wasted.
3. The LPV system allows parties of like-minded policies to "exchange preferences" in order to assist each other to win.
4. The LPV system promotes a strong two-party system, ensuring stability in the parliamentary process (Australian Politics.com 2015)

Disadvantages of the LPV system

1. The LPV system is more complicated to administer and count than a 'first past the post' system.
2. It can produce a higher level of informal voting.
3. It promotes a two-party system to the detriment of minor parties and independents.
4. Voters are forced to express a preference for candidates they may not wish to support in any way (Australian Politics.com 2015).

As alluded to above in Bougainville's elections both the first-past-the-post and preferential voting systems have been used since the inception of the ABG in 2005. These election systems are influenced by various factors which contribute to shaping the results some of which are discussed below.

Factors that influence voters and election results

The electoral choices of voters are influenced by a range of factors, especially social or interest groupings with common aims and interests. In addition, voters are to a greater or lesser extent susceptible to the influence of more short-term and contingent factors such as campaign events, issues, and candidate appeals. In particular, the perceived governing competence of candidates and political parties often weighs heavily on voters' choices (Eulau 2015).

Election participation rates depend on many factors, including the type of electoral system, the social groupings to which voters belong, the voters' personalities and beliefs, their places of residence, and a host of other personal factors. Research suggests that, voters in Western democracies who retain their long-term partisan identities have been reduced and voter choice is now more heavily affected by short-term factors relevant to specific election campaigns. This shift from long-term predisposition to short-term evaluation has been facilitated in part by enhancement of the political independence and

intelligence of voters who are both better educated and better informed than earlier generations (Webb 2015).

Nevertheless, many independents and non-voters are poorly informed politically and relatively uninterested and uninvolved in politics. These groups can in most cases influence election results. Elections seem to be competitive between parties or coalitions of parties if control of the government has to be changed. In such cases some voters had to switch party support from one election to another. New voters and independent voters can therefore provide a vital source of change in election results (Eulau 2015).

The level and type of election have a great impact on the rate of electoral participation. Voter turnout is greater in national elections than in state or provincial elections. If local elections are held concurrently with provincial or national elections, generally a higher voter turnout is achieved compared to non-concurrent elections. Supporters of political parties vote more often than those without party affiliations. Participation is also usually greater in candidate elections than in non-candidate elections such as referenda for political determinations (Webb 2015).

Factors that influence elections in Melanesian states and territories

The integrity of contemporary elections in Melanesia is diminishing. Over the course of the past few elections, fraud and malpractice have increased in PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to varying degrees. In addition to voters being influenced by cultural affiliations, money politics has also shaped election results in the Melanesian states. The influence of cultural affiliation is particularly the practice of the *wantok* system. According to Renzio (2000), Schuermann (2015) and Nanau (2011), *wantok* broadly refers to a relativist concept used to express patterns of relationships and networks that link people in families, clans, tribes, ethnic language groupings, and regional localities and also with reference to provincial, national and sub-regional identities. The *wantok* system in elections leads to situations where people vote for their *wantoks* regardless of their leadership qualities. As a result of fraud and malpractice, the PNG 2012 national elections was seen as worse than the 2007 and 2002 elections (Haley 2014).

The 2010 PNG General Elections is considered one of the 'the worst ever' in terms of bribery, intimidation, abuse of opponents by supporters of other candidates and abuses of voter registration. A proliferation of money politics has been noted across Melanesia over the past decade although it continues to be most pervasive in PNG. It is particularly noteworthy that political gifting and money politics have spread beyond the PNG's Highlands region and are now evident in other parts where there are no 'big men' and where cultures of competitive exchange are largely absent.

In the 2012 PNG elections, candidates were observed to have spent huge amounts of money offering incentives to voters. Vote buying was reported in each and every electorate in which observations took place, and there was an

unprecedented amount of gifting with food, pigs and other material items including boats, trucks and ambulances (Haley 2014). Such influences on election in the globe and Melanesia set basis to explore factors that influences the results of the 2015 Bougainville's General Elections.

Research question and methodology

The main research question for this study is: *What factors influenced election results of the 2015 Bougainville's General Elections.*

Secondary data collection method mainly from documents and online sources was used for this study. Combination of; thematic, discourse and interpretive analysis were employed to address the *research questions* (mentioned above). I used these methods to analyse words and/or even speeches which, according to Heffernan (2001) is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give meaning around a particular study area. As recommended by Bowen (2009), I also used this method to describe the nature and forms of documents, and outline the advantages and limitations of documents, and also enumerated specific examples in the researched area. Public records, which include the online sources especially, web pages such as Facebook and blogs were also used as advocated by Heffernan (2001).

Findings

Factors that influenced 2015 ABG's General elections:

Common roll updates

According to records from the Office of Bougainville's Electoral Commissioner website about 102, 000 people out of about 172,000 (about 59 %) Bougainvillean eligible voters did not casted their votes. Some did not vote due to absence of their names in the Bougainville's Electoral common rolls and others could not turn up to polling sites for various reasons including mobility. For example Halia constituency (one of the most populated in whole of Bougainville) has about 5,285 eligible voters, and only 3,455 (about 65 %) casted their votes (Facebook website.Bougainville Forum 2015).

Practise of wantokism (Interest groups) versus Good leadership qualities

There is indication where people vote for candidates with good leadership qualities even if they may come from other area/regions of Bougainville. One example of such cases is, Momis who comes from South Bougainville (Buin district) collected 69 per cent (1892 out of 2719) allowable votes from Nissan Island in the northern tip of Bougainville (Office of the Bougainville Electoral Commisiner 2015).

On the other end there are is reflection of nepotism where some candidates collected more votes from their area/region of origin compared to other areas/regions. This is particularly evident in the regional seats (south, central and north) for ex-combatants and women representatives. The voters tend to give first preference to the candidates who originate from their district within

the particular area/region. For example, Isabel Peta the winning candidate for southern women representative collected more votes (the real figures not available) in Buin district (when she originates from) compared to the sister districts of south Bougainville, Bana and Siwai (Facebook website. Bougainville Forum 2015).

In the race for the presidential seat, regionalism (or wantokism) was also reflected when Kauona collected more votes (968) in central (where he originates from) taking over Momis (785) who is from south. This was evident given that from previous counts Momis was the most influence candidate who collected most votes in the previous counts. Voters were also partly influenced by the situation on the ground. For example, the Ramunikel. PNG Mine Watch (2015), blog reported that the anti-mining people especially from Panguna did not vote for Momis who is pro Rio Tinto. Instead they voted for anti-mining candidates; Kauona (9,000 votes) and Domarinu (3,200 votes).

In considering women leadership, out of the eleven women who contested together with men for constituency seats (apart from the exclusive women's regional seat) only Josephine Getsi, of Peit constituency in north Bougainville won (Radio Australia 2015).

How LPV system was used

Comparatively a total of 1685 informal votes against 104,542 valid votes implies the Bougainvillean voters are fairly familiar on how to cast a vote in the LPV system (Office of the Bougainville Electoral Commisiner 2015).

The elimination process is a critical stage in the LPV system because it involves multiple handling of the ballot papers when counting 2nd and 3rd choices. There is also series of calculations particularly realignment of the *absolute majority* mark against the *exhaustive votes*. Hence, there is risk of making error in handling ballot papers, calculations or recording the figures. Any error committed either by mistake (or even intentionally) by officials would seriously undermine the international standards of *fair* and *free* elections.

Discussion

Among many other factors, the ill-updated Bougainville's common roll would have significant impact on shaping the 2015 Bougainville's General Elections. As referred to above around 41 per cent of the Bougainville eligible voters population did not cast their votes (Facebook website. Bougainville Forum 2015). The argument could be that the poor state of common roll prevented supporters or affiliates of certain parties to vote for their candidates. The other factor could be poor voters turn-out due to various reasons like difficulty to reach polling sites. This would be the case for isolated areas (like Torokina, Kongara) and remote areas (like Nissan and Atolls) where transport would be very difficult. The other factor that would affect voters turnout is security concerns especially in Panguna district and Siwai districts where there is

presence of armed anti-ABG fractional groups (Mekamui and U-Vistract respectively).

The influences of cultural values and practises was eminent given that Bougainvilleans are part of the Melanesian cultural based society who take into account in their socio-economic and political decision making processes. Cultural traits are common and in broad term referred as wantokism (discussed above) where people feel obliged to given first priority to family, clan and tribe members. So in the case of elections voters might give primary vote to their close relatives. The bonding among the voters as a group could have been partly caused by people living in isolated islands whom therefore have limited inter-actions with those in the mainland Bougainville. This case could be applicable for people in the outer-atolls like the Carterets islanders and Mortlocks.

Voters being influenced by candidates with good leadership connote the aspects of quality where a particular leader is deemed to have necessary capabilities to influence decision as per their campaign flat-forms for the benefit of the Bougainvillean citizens. This is critical especially given that referendum through which the Bougainvilleans will freely and fairly determine their political future which will be due under the ABG leadership elected in this election.

For the presidential seat the contestants are mixer of guru politician John Momis who has been in PNG politics (prior to establishment of ABG in 2005: as discussed above) since 1963. Out of the nine presidential seat candidates there were few warlords and others affiliates of the so-called Mekamui government of Unity. This is an armed factional group, who declined to join the ABG formation and the peace process consistent with the Bougainville peace Agreement signed in 2011. They are comprised mainly of the remaining group of former BRAs who claim to the legitimate government of Bougainville (Autonomous Bougainville Government.Veterans Division 2013). So, obviously Bougainvillean citizen's especially educated elites who are against the Mekamui Unity Government's existence would not vote for the candidates associated with them.

The voters' choices at the constituency level could have also been influences by the factors of capability of the candidates. This is partly reflected in cases where candidates that performed well in the previous (2010-2015) ABG government were re-elected and those deemed as did not performed were voted out. From the results at least eleven MHRs from the previous government retained their seats. Among them three are from the first ABG HMRs in 2005, and four from the first ABG HoRs returned to the 3rd HoRs (Office of the Bougainville Electral Commisiner 2015). The winning of one female candidate in the male dominated constituency seats could also indicate consideration of good leadership in the highly patriarchal society (McLeod 2005).

The effectiveness and proper use of LPV system also had a significant influence on the outcome of election results. Firstly the informal votes continue

to reduce the number of votes for contesting candidates. Secondly, in the elimination system where the second and third preferences counted concurrently can be deemed as unfair given that the value of 2 and 3 are not same. When 2 and 3 choices are distributed simultaneously the process disadvantages contestants whose second preferences are still in the candidates that are not eliminated as yet. It would be more democratic (that is fairness) to have all second choices eliminations first prior to 3rd choices. The third preferences elimination should only come in the situation where the only two candidates are left and the absolute majority has not been reached.

There were various types of allegations of tempering the election processes and the counting system. Some argued that the poor state of the common roll was deliberately done to prevent people from voting their candidates. Others also claim there was mis-recording of tallies by the vote counters. This was evident given that the numbers did not reconcile with other ballot papers for contestants for different seats. For example, the vote counts for the president seat against women and/or ex-combatants seats from the same area were argued to be not same. There were also claims arguing that the real ballot papers were removed and fake ones were inserted into the boxes. In the Taonita Teop constituency it was claimed that some voters casted their votes more than once (Facebook website.Bougainville Forum 2015).

The democratic measure in terms of fairness of the 2015 ABG's General Elections can be assessed by weighing the factors discussed above which are deemed to have influenced the results.

Conclusion

Derived for the discussion and analysis, elections throughout the globe are influenced by various factors. Such includes; candidates' platforms, party affiliations and even the assessment of the personality and capability of the candidates. In the Melanesian societies apart from the above factors, elections are influenced mostly by culture and corrupt malpractices especially bribery through cash or kind.

Some factors that influence elections in the globe and Melanesia are also evident in Bougainville, an autonomous region of PNG. Some are culture related, others are shortfalls of administrative tasks of the Bougainville Electoral office and still others are derived from the post-conflict situation where ex-combatants or warlords tend to manipulate due process in favour of their interests. One critical factor that can be seen as having direct bearing on the scores of candidates is the counting of second and third preferences concurrently although they did not have the same value. This disadvantaged contestants who had second preferences scores from candidates that were not excluded yet.

Essentially, difficulties in accessing polling sites by voters, ill-updated common roll, Melanesians, cultural values and practices and suitability of candidates significantly contributed to shaping the 2015 Bougainville's

General Election results. There is a need to improve in these areas to meet the international standards of fair and free elections.

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