

ELECTION: PROFANATION OF THE HUMAN POWER OF CHOICE

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[The footnotes in the printed version were incorrect – running from 7 to 18, instead of 1 to 12. This has now been corrected. —Revising ed.]

Introduction

Elections are not part of traditional Melanesian culture. These days, there is a blending of elements – the old and the new. And this includes elections, as a way of deciding leadership, by people's own choice. The power of choice influences the whole framework of society, from non-formal groupings within communities to intercommunity groups, for example, women's groups, prayer groups, school boards, and youth groups. There are also governing and service bodies at village level, such as village courts, local government councils, provincial governments, and, of course, the national government – which is the principal focus of this paper.

The importance of national elections rests on the fact that, when one votes, one acts according to the rights, intelligence, dignity, and liberty, endowed in the human person. These dimensions of the human person identify our humanity. They do not come to us by accident. Both the Bible and natural wisdom show us that the human person is made by God, and has received the capacity to make choices. Election is a political matter pertaining to civil state, civil good, and order, but its essence lies in our choice, and our task to “subdue and have dominion over” (Gen 1:28).

The Papua New Guinea Constitution is based on democracy, and safeguards the rights and the dignity of every citizen. Every citizen of voting age has the right and duty to vote for public officials. According to the Constitution, the good of the nation is directly entrusted to its citizens. They are to choose the representatives who will form the government. Those elected to the

Parliament must perform in clear conscience, since they are empowered by the people, and they should have the sense of obligation and duty to act for the people's future well-being.

The instability in government, and the rapidly-deteriorating situation in Papua New Guinea, in all dimensions of society (social, economic, and political) are partially, or directly, to do with the kind of members of Parliament (MPs) elected by the people. "A good and efficient government can be achieved, if only worthy and able candidates are appointed for public office, and the unqualified are removed from it."¹ People have to accept that, if they did not act responsibly in their right to elect someone to represent them, then they are, in some ways, responsible for the mistakes, ignorance, misconduct, and failure in performance of their MP, and so it makes no sense to lament the fact. People have to think twice before looking past themselves, and pointing a finger at the MPs, whom the people themselves chose.² This paper is concerned with the issue of voter responsibility, and human dignity.

Choice: An Inherent Faculty of the Human Person

Endowed with intelligence and freedom [every man] is responsible for his fulfilment. . . . By the unaided effort of his own intelligence, and his will, each man can grow in humanity, can enhance his personal worth, can become more a person.³

Human beings are born with certain specific human qualities. Aristotle defines a human being as "an animal, distinguished from other animals, by his gift of speech, and power of moral judgment".⁴ Whether or not we are aware of it, we are continually making choices, from the most ordinary, to the most

¹ K. H. Peschke, *Christian Ethics*, vol. 2, Alcester UK: C Goodliffe Neale, 1986, p. 266.

² In a letter to the editor of *The National*, Bertha Somare writes, "Ultimately, we voters have only ourselves to blame, when we elect individuals who abuse their positions. We often know the character of these people we voted for. It is not necessarily the office that corrupts the person. These elected people bring with them into office their own can of worms that we as voters have helped to open." *The National*, May 12, 1997, p. 15.

³ Pope Paul VI, encyclical letter, *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples), #15.

⁴ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol 14, p. 685.11; Pope Leo XIII, encyclical letter, *Sapientiae Christianae* (The Chief Duties of Christians as Citizens) (1890), #2 and #6.

complex decisive choices. It is fascinating to consider the sorts of choices people make: whether or not to smile, to sit, or stand, or lie down, to eat, or to bear with hunger, to eat this, or that, to get out of bed, or remain, to watch a documentary, or the news, to take a stroll, or a bus ride. Major choices, at one or another time, are inevitable: paying an outstanding bill, lest the power be cut off, opting for an apprenticeship, or going to college, pursuing one career or another, getting a divorce, or starting anew, taking part in a tribal fight, or excusing oneself, getting married to a colleague, or to the village girl marked by one's parents, selling off assets, or putting more energy and commitment into the business, and all the rest.

An election, by definition, is an act of choice. An election is an occasion that calls for, or requires, a high level of choice at the political level. Politically, an election connotes "democracy"; an ideology that enjoys favourable opinion, as it is one based on freedom, liberty, rights, and human dignity.

Papua New Guinea is a democratic state. The Five National Goals in the preamble of the Constitution refer to "equal participation of its citizens", and state that "Christian teachings and principles be the norm for managing its affairs, decisions and policies". These are a reminder to the state, and Papua New Guinea's people, that the inalienable rights and freedom of the people must not be suppressed, but must be preserved at all costs. An election is a constitutive and integral part of life in Papua New Guinea, as an independent democratic state. It is an election that allows us to have a democratic form of government. Absence of elections would mean forms of government other than democracy, like a dictatorship, totalitarianism, or some form of communism.

The principle of an election is that people choose a representative from among themselves, by their own discreet judgment and choice. In this way, they empower the chosen one with their own power, and entrust that representative with their dignity and welfare. In other words, the government, in principle, is really the power and reign of the people, through their chosen representatives. K. H. Peschke says it clearly, "The form of government . . . the constitutional structure of the state, the leaders and parties in power, derive their authority from the people." Papua New Guinea elections occur once every five years, except for extraordinary cases. The point of interest

here is not to dwell on the rosy concept of an election, as a distinctive and important aspect of democracy, but rather to look at the reality, and the actual experience, of an election.

State and Religion

If we would judge aright, the supernatural love for the church, and the natural love of our own country, proceed from the same eternal principle, since God Himself is their Author, and originating Cause. . . . If then, a civil government strives after external advantages merely, . . . if administering public affairs is wont to put God aside, and show no solicitude for the upholding of moral law; it deflects woefully from its right course [and should be accounted] as a deceitful imitation and make-believe of civil organisation.⁵

The “state” stands for the secular-political environment, which people share with other individuals. In “religion” one comes to terms, in some depth, with the yearnings and urges of one’s inner self, and, thus, tends to have regard for transcendent realities. These two entities affect and mould the well-being and livelihood of every person.

The state and religion ought to work together. Papua New Guinea is a good example, because both the government and the churches provide basic services, especially in the areas of health and education. However, recently, relations have become strained, with the lack of financial support for church-run health services.⁶

History shows that religion and politics are often not on good terms. Some learned people would argue that they are incompatible. Karl Marx, for instance, defined religion as an “opiate” for people who cannot work, or think for themselves. In our time, the tension is there implicitly. A recent Catholic Bishops’ Conference released a strong statement, stating that priests, clergy, or the religious should avoid any direct involvement in politics.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Leaders, including the opposition leader, have been urging the national government to release funds for all government- and church-run health centres and hospitals, to ensure that people have access to health care, *The National*, May 12, 1997, p. 3.

While the relationship between religion and politics is being debated, in truth politics cannot be isolated from religion. The state (with whatever political system it employs) is generally about creating, or building, a better society. The state's vision for the welfare of its citizens, and the society in general, means that the state and religion are concerned fundamentally with the same thing. The state and the church (we speak, precisely, of the church, not religion) are essentially "counterparts", so that one cannot function independently of the other. K. H. Peschke writes, "The necessity of the state, and of state authority, has, ultimately, its source in God Himself, who created man as a political and social being."⁷ Peschke also notes that the traditional understanding of the state and church was (and still is, but in a more refined way) that they are, or can be, "perfect societies" in themselves, because they possess all the means necessary for the attainment of their needs and ends. Yet, neither of them can forget the human person. Both exist to serve humanity.

The age-old attitude of separating religious concerns from those of the state has to be reversed. An election is a state-political matter, which must not be avoided, nor reduced, simply to something secular, because the consequences of an election affect people, as a whole.

An election is a privilege, and the rights and obligations of being part of the political life of the state should not be suppressed. The act of electing involves the total person. As pastors and shepherds of believing people, the Catholic bishops of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands have challenged the citizens of both countries.

It is the time for us all to cooperate fully to ensure that we have healthy and useful general national elections. If we put our hearts and minds together, we can expect to vote in, and enjoy having a strong and responsible government.⁸

The concern of the Bishops should be the concern of all Papua New Guineans. Unless the people avoid past mistakes, and temptations, and choose someone

⁷ Peschke, *Christian Ethics*, vol 2, p. 262.

⁸ Catholic Bishops' Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, *Commission for Peace, Justice and Development: Discussed Issues 1990-1991*, p. 28.

for whom they are, and what they can do, then the desire for a responsible government will be in vain, and matters will become worse.⁹ The people need to be cautiously mindful of the kind of leader, or representative, they vote for at the elections. It is not simply something to get over with, for it is here, in an election, that the future is determined. Not only that, participating in elections, as thinking and sensible people, means that people are doing justice to the state, to the future government, and to themselves, and their children.

Overlapping of Two Cultures: Modern and Traditional

In traditional society, leadership would either be ascribed, or inherited, in the chief-oriented cultures; or, in other cultures, leadership would be achieved, or attained, through personal merit, and, importantly, with the approval, and consent, of the people. The tribal communities were isolated from each other, and were autonomous, so leadership was an essential, binding force. A tribe or clan would be weak, unstable, and disorganised without good leadership.

In modern society, much is being lost or changed. Communities are no longer isolated, as they used to be, and leadership functions in society with a much wider scope. It is high time that people came to grips with the modern notion of elections. Some people take elections lightly, because they consider that elections are not Melanesian, that many of the traditional qualities and values are absent, and anyone, by right of the Constitution, can run for election. It is obvious, though, that people are starting to realise that running for election is becoming a game for the “haves”. Sadly, leadership qualities and virtues do not really seem to matter any more. Moreover, although issues can be debated at great length, it does not always have an effect on the election result.

The so-called “campaign time” is an essential part of the election. It is within that time that the candidates make themselves known: their aspirations, their goals, and whatever else they have in mind to do if they are elected. For the people, it is time to listen, and watch, and to make their judgments on the candidates, so that they can elect a candidate, who can well represent them in

⁹ The Governor of the National Capital District, Bill Skate, said recently, “The leadership in this country needs a change. . . . You voters must choose carefully so that the right person gets in to ensure that real services are delivered”, *The National*, May 13, 1997, p. 4.

the Parliament. In Papua New Guinea, the campaign time has tended to become a kind of “gold-rush fever”. Many people abandon their normal daily tasks to exploit the situation, in whatever way they can. It is not a secret that the well-meant time allotted for campaigning has become a time of abuse and manipulation. People tend to perceive the campaign time as an opportunity for the “hand-out” of goods and money. Thus, the handout is now almost a custom in Papua New Guinea, even outside of campaign time. It is not a good custom, and should be done away with, to allow real democracy to prevail, so that people can be free, when it comes to voting. Unfortunately, the free handouts, which occur, particularly in government circles, are becoming common through all levels of Papua New Guinea society today.

In many cases, both the candidate and the voter are responsible for perverting the purpose of an election, according to the Constitution. The unconstitutional aspects, and sinister practices, that have crept into the elections, have no other cause than people themselves. There is a risk that the whole purpose of elections will be lost. Perhaps Martin Luther was right to say that humankind is fundamentally sinful and corrupt. Some things are designed for a common good, yet people are inclined to find ways to suit themselves.

Dignity and Folly of Human Life

Though humankind is a creature of God, the human being is imperfect, and subject to sin. This may be a limitation, but we possess free will and intelligence, so as to manage our lives for good or evil. This is a risky business. “Man can organise the world, apart from God, but, without God, man can organise it, in the end, only to man’s – his own – detriment.”¹⁰

When people’s participation in an election is thwarted by external influences and constraints, civil society regards it as abuse. Humanity shares in the light of the divine mind, and rightly affirms that, by one’s intellect, one surpasses the world of mere things.¹¹ In partaking in an election, if the choice of the candidate is narrowed to selfish motives, or outside constraints, then, from the

¹⁰ Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, #42.

¹¹ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church and the Modern World), #15.

perspective of our very humanity, it could be termed an indignity, or profanation, and to incorporate some elements of idolatry as well.

People's erroneous mentality, regarding an election, should not be left to prevail unheeded, and thus adversely affect the situation. I suggest that people must be educated to recognise their inviolable worthiness, and to appreciate themselves as they truly are, as free and intelligent human beings.¹²

Conclusion

Freedom makes sense when it is lived as a "responsibility", as opposed to abuse and manipulation. From Genesis, we learn that humankind is God's masterpiece among created things. God not only created humanity in His own likeness, but breathed into humanity His own life. This great dignity brings with it special responsibilities: responsibilities to self, to others, and to all creatures. In an election, one is exercising an important degree of responsibility, rooted in human freedom.

St Paul warned the Ephesians:

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro, and blown about, by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But, speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Him, who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love (Eph 4:14-16).

Paul's words apply equally to ourselves. Christians in Papua New Guinea must take a stand, and be part of the solution to the present problems. People cannot risk continuing to make the same mistakes, as the consequences would be tragic. As the upheavals and crises in Papua New Guinea in recent times are becoming worse, people are developing a greater awareness that something has to change. Not only the constitutionally-just order, but also the

¹² Aristotle said, "Man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all, and he is equipped, at birth, with arms of intelligence and wit, moral qualities, which he may use for the worse ends", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol 14, p. 686.

overall good of the society, needs to be restored. As Paul says, above, we must speak the truth with love, for that is the opposite of trickery and deceit. When people take an election seriously, and participate in it, accordingly, as free and intelligent persons, and, more importantly, as Christians, then some kind of conversion will occur. Only then can we be certain of the change of government that we hope for.

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