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Winning and losing in politics: Key issues in Papua New Guinea

Carol Kidu, Member for Moresby South electorate, Minister for Welfare and Social Development

Susan Setae, electoral candidate, Moresby North-East electorate

Winning in politics in Papua New Guinea: Carol Kidu

I entered politics by default after my husband's death, but have now won two successive elections in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Lots of congratulations have come my way, but mine is not the typical female experience. The reality in PNG is that the playing field is not level, and it is an uphill battle for women to win elections at both national and local level. What has made my situation different?

In the 1997 election, I campaigned hard and developed a specific and different style and strategy from the usual male approach. However, so have many other women, including Susan. There is no doubt in my mind that the deciding factor for my win in 1997 was the fact that I was the widow of Sir Buri Kidu, the highly respected Chief Justice of PNG. In addition to that, Buri's birthplace and home is an urban village in my electorate, so I had a family and clan base vote as a foundation for the numbers necessary to win.

Although I am sad to say that my skin colour was used against me by some candidates, it was also an advantage in some ways. On several occasions, both in 1997 and 2002, some men (and perhaps women) rationalised their decision to vote for me in spite of my sex by saying that, 'She understands these things because she is a "nao hahine"(expatriate) but we would not vote for our own women.'

I won in 1997 because of these special circumstances. I worked very hard in parliament, hoping that it would make the way easier for other women in 2002, but sadly it has not done so. The 2002 election was chaotic and desperately fought and it disadvantaged women enormously.

The majority of people in my electorate are of coastal origin, and the election was relatively smooth and peaceful other than in two areas where tribal politics of 'block voting' and intimidation were used. Susan's electorate, on the other hand, has a different ethnic composition and the election there was marked by violence and blatant abuse of the electoral process. My success, with an increased total and margin, was assisted by the ethnic composition of my electorate.

My chance of success was also helped by the fact that I was a sitting member of parliament, and had the benefit of having had electorate funds to leave my 'handmark' on the electorate. I used those funds honestly, but very strategically, to capitalise on my chances of re-election so that I could continue working on integrated community development to ensure its sustainability in the next five years.

It is very important that, during the next five years, we introduce strategies to ensure that other women gain access to the political process in 2007. They will then have the chance to leave their handmark and to demonstrate their capabilities as parliamentarians in our young and very fragile democracy.

Special circumstances have made it possible for me to have the privilege of entering the so-called 'men's house', so my experience is the exception not the rule. Susan will

now expand on the realities facing not only female candidates—and also many male candidates—who did not win seats in the election. It is a reality that must be changed so that entering parliament becomes a right for women, not a privilege.

It must be stated very clearly that Susan's loss will become a victory for the many youth who supported her as an 'honest mum' who gave them some hope, an 'honest mum' who has not deserted them or threatened them because of the loss, an 'honest mum' who is continuing to work with them and will most likely win the 2007 election if she chooses to stand again. However, being a mum is often a disadvantage because mums are always taken for granted. They are the backbone of PNG society—indispensable but too often invisible.

Losing in politics in Papua New Guinea: Susan Setae

I contested the recently conducted PNG national election with the endorsement of the same political party as Carol. I will try to cover my experiences as a losing candidate in one of the few political parties that actively sought female candidates. Although I had been considering it for some time, I actually only nominated on the very last day, and took people and the media by surprise.

Moresby North-East electorate in the National Capital District

As my electorate is in the nation's capital district, its people are from all the ethnic groups in PNG, but are predominantly people from the highlands region. The electorate is surrounded by a number of big settlements, most of which are unplanned and on traditional land, where basic government services are unlikely to reach the majority of the people. Many are unemployed, poor and illiterate. They are disadvantaged by poor housing and lack of basic services and infrastructure.

Likewise, the people living in the suburban areas cannot be disassociated from the problems faced by those living in the settlements. They also face unemployment and many are either retired or retrenched public servants living with their extended families in crowded state houses that are poorly maintained and lack basic service delivery. The extended family system plays a significant role in getting people who are unemployed to stretch their scarce resources to accommodate the needs of their less fortunate relatives in both the urban area and their home village.

Many people are disadvantaged and marginalised as a result of poor and unfair political and economic decisions, and they are vulnerable to political manipulation and bribery during national elections. Lack of political education also contributes to a low level of political participation that is often biased and economically excessive for both the candidate and the voter during the campaign period. Ethnic loyalty often takes precedence over the selection of leadership and good governance.

Key reasons for candidates losing elections in Papua New Guinea

The issues were identified during my experience of running a campaign with a dedicated team of volunteers who demanded nothing from me.

- Thousands of eligible voters were turned away at polling booths because their names were not on the roll. Unlike Carol, I did not have a base vote area that I could focus on to ensure that voters were registered. The Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) assistance in introducing a new system of registration and updating the common roll became a major problem at the polling booths.

- Bribery and vote buying is the biggest threat to an honest candidate. The failure to enforce the law on bribery and vote buying allows many candidates to abuse the law and walk away freely. Many voters have also developed a culture of bribing the candidates: 'If you pay me, I will vote for you or I will bring you this many votes.'
- Campaign period is a time of feasting, drinking and dancing. It is a financial burden to the candidate, and it creates an environment in which supporters move from camp to camp to get what they can. Just providing refreshments, without any feasts, is a huge financial burden.
- Eight weeks of campaigning is far too long and increases costs enormously. In addition, for many the focus of the campaign becomes a culture of feasting and negative oratory, rather than realistic platforms and policies.
- Many candidates capitalise on people's poverty and lack of education and make outrageous promises to their supporters. The promise of simple honesty and hard work cannot compete with the promise of sudden wealth and instant delivery of basic services.
- Ethnicity is a threat to democracy and the unity of a sovereign state. Increasingly aggressive groups are enforcing a tribal style of democracy that denies the right of individual freedom of choice. The custom of 'block voting' and controlling ballot boxes must be stopped.
- One-day polling, without proper management, proved to be chaos. Electoral officials and security (police) were unable to cope with the logistics. It has been possible in the past, but this election was chaotic with poor forward planning and dissatisfied polling officials who refused to work and insisted on being paid allowances before they finishing the counting.
- Election related violence: threats, intimidation and weapons were used to scare people into voting for particular candidates.
- The voting rates of people working in the formal sector are not high because they are apathetic. Thus election turnout in urban areas is often dominated by the unemployed and poor, who are more susceptible to corrupt practices.

The way ahead: some thoughts and suggestions

The electoral process

- Upgrading of the common roll must be a continuing process and should not rely on computerisation alone. Perhaps the village and community census books should be reintroduced to clean up the roll, because the complexities of naming systems in PNG can lead to inaccuracies and double entries on the roll.
- Procedures should be improved to ensure greater honesty at the polls (for example, finger marking with indelible ink, not just on the nail, to control multiple voting; and polling officials calling the names of voters so that scrutineers can hear and prevent voting on the names of the dead and wrong names.)
- One-day voting nationwide is possible, but needs more forward planning and would probably work out less expensive than this long chaos. (I observed one-day polling in Guyana, which faces similar problems of ethnic tension, a difficult physical environment and so on.)
- Initial counting should be done at subdistrict or district level (in safe areas it could even be done at the polling station in front of the scrutineers), then the

ballots should be returned to the boxes sorted into their bundles, the boxes could be sealed and then sent to the central tally centre.

- Security procedures must be improved, particularly with regard to the safety of supporters, especially women (separate polling booths for women should be considered).
- Specific legislation should deal with the practice of 'block voting', which denies the individual right of democratic choice. The legislation should be enforced by closing down polling stations and not counting ballot boxes from booths where the custom is practised. In addition, candidates who encourage 'block voting' should be charged with a criminal offence.

Affirmative action

- Seats should be reserved for women, for example, the 20 regional seats option at national level.
- Elected seats should be reserved for women in local-level government areas (LLGs), aiming to fill one-third of seats with women, rather than the present one seat nominated under the *Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government*.
- Political parties should play a *major* role by mainstreaming women in party machinery, as well as genuinely endorsing women and giving special attention to their needs (the efforts so far have not been genuine and the 'inducement' introduced under the *Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates*—a rebate on electoral expenses for those parties preselecting women candidates who get more than 10 per cent of the vote in their electorates—has no impact).
- Intensive and comprehensive mass education is required on good governance, development processes, democratic processes and so on by using 'picture talk' materials, drama and role playing to overcome the problem of low literacy levels.

Attitudinal issues

- Education for unity and nationhood must be given a *high* priority. We hope that it is not too late to reverse the movement to tribalism and parochial attitudes to politics and development.
- Gender education, especially on women's rights and attitudes to dominance and ownership, must also be given a high priority.
- Christian teaching should be more liberal in its interpretation of biblical texts. Denominational teachings about women's roles and status vary considerably. Some churches and church leaders have been very proactive in this regard and have become forceful agents for positive change.
- The rule of law must be emphasised and reinforced to counteract the increasing application of traditional practices in ethnically mixed communities.
- Strategies to balance individual rights and communal interests must be developed not only as a political issue, but also as a developmental issue.

Issues of definition and clarification

- We must define a Melanesian democracy. How can the noble principles of democracy be best implemented in the diversity of Melanesian cultures? What noble traditions can be incorporated successfully into democracy in the

contemporary society? An enormous amount of self-reflection is required in PNG to define an appropriate and workable way ahead, and a model for democracy in Melanesia.

- We have to clarify and redefine our parliamentary processes to reverse the movement towards an executive dictatorship—legislative and constitutional changes are needed as well as procedural change.
- We have to be more analytical with regard to the use of concepts in mass education, and address issues of semantics (for example, most people do not understand English concepts such as corruption, democracy and economy, and interpret such concepts very narrowly).
- We have to clearly define the development process in the Melanesian cultural context and adapt it accordingly to avoid enormous financial and resource wastage, and minimise the social breakdown that is occurring at a frightening rate. We must be proactive in ridding the nation of the 'dependency syndrome' and the cargo cult mentality, so that people participate meaningfully in our developing democracy.
- Education and genuine equality of opportunity is required for women and youth so that they can participate in the political and developmental processes of PNG.