

Chapter 4

The Campaign and the News Media

The Campaign

The 1997 election campaign began officially on 18 April 1997 when nominations closed. Because it was in its final stages by the time our Observer Group arrived in Port Moresby on 6 June, we were unable to see much of the campaign.

We should record at the outset that we were told that candidates were able to campaign freely. This was confirmed by our own observations at the end of the campaign period. The extent and visibility of campaigning reflected the high level of candidate participation. Everywhere we went, we encountered an enthusiastic atmosphere in which it was widely believed that anyone could win.

In general, campaign methods in the 1997 elections in Papua New Guinea were similar to those used in other Commonwealth countries at election time: vehicles with loudspeakers, bullhorns, billboards, T-shirts and posters (some four-sided and suspended from trees). Indeed, many of our Group remarked that there was seldom a rural or urban dwelling which was not festooned with candidates' posters. Many like-minded candidates in Regional and Open seats also campaigned together, occasionally drawing in national political figures for extra support. Some of the larger and better financed political parties were also able to afford paid advertisements in the Press and on the radio. But more customary methods were also used. These included motorcades, feasts and rallies, the latter often resembling colourful 'sing-sings' where supporters would be lavished with food and gifts by candidates as a demonstration of their status as traditional 'big men'.

Although there was no specific Code of Conduct for election campaigning, the Electoral Commission did produce and disseminate a leaflet entitled *Law on Campaign, Bribery, Undue Influence and Illegal Practices*. The information contained in this leaflet, as well as other election news, was also widely publicised through 'advertorial'-type columns and programmes in the national media, financed by the Electoral Commission. Pre-campaign spots warned candidates to stay within the law "or the police and defence force will deal with you." Towards the end of the campaign the threat was disqualification in the Court of Disputed Returns. Despite these efforts, our Group was aware of allegations of campaign abuses including bribery and threats, the calling-in of favours, campaigning past polling day and the nomination of 'friendly candidates' to split the electorate's vote along village and tribal lines. In addition, our Group observed that incumbent ministers continued to make announcements and to take political initiatives, which the media publicised to maximum effect.

Our attention was also drawn to the benefits derived by sitting members during the campaign period from the use of their Electoral Development Funds over the preceding years. As noted earlier, the EDF is used to establish development projects in the MP's electorate. Recently it has been decided that EDF expenditure should be controlled not by the MP alone but by a committee which the MP chairs. Nevertheless, the MP continues to have substantial influence on EDF expenditure – and to claim the benefit during the election campaign period. Critics have objected that since a sitting MP may initiate and promote projects in the run-up to the general election and even in the campaign period this contradicts the spirit of the electoral law and gives an unfair advantage to the MP.

Violence

Election campaigns in Papua New Guinea have in the past been marked by considerable violence in parts of the country. We were told that there had been less violence during the campaign period this time. The imposition of curfews and liquor bans in Port Moresby and other centres, and towards the end of the campaign across the entire country, was cited as one of the reasons for this. Police, who were on alert throughout the campaign, told us that these



Rallying support ... candidates campaigned freely and their words and activities were reported fairly: (above) election rallies such as this played an important part in the campaign and often attracted large crowds; (below) a candidate's motorcade in Morobe province



efforts had made a major impact. Church organisations also assisted by encouraging peaceful polling, as did the Electoral Commission by repeatedly stressing the importance of a calm campaign period through the media. Our Group also detected a determination on the part of many voters to ensure that campaigning was peaceful. Although there were violent incidents which were extensively reported, the overall campaign did not appear to us to have been as violent as had been feared.

Election Issues

From our own observations, it appeared that the former government parties concentrated on their record in office, while the opposition emphasised that the incumbent parties had failed to live up to the expectations of the people. However, campaigning was often localised and focused on individuals and personalities rather than issues. Many candidates had very general platforms, stressing for instance their support for development, better roads and schooling. Party manifestos were not in wide circulation. One party organiser went so far as to tell members of our Group that his party's manifesto was a secret – for fear that other parties would steal its ideas.

Corruption and the need for good governance emerged as the major national issues of the campaign. Several national and many local campaigns denounced successive generations of political leaders for their alleged failure to live up to the required standards and proposed a new style of politics. One senior media representative told us that this issue had "gripped the nation". It was given a powerful boost during our time in Papua New Guinea by the intensification of a campaign by the NGO Transparency International, which urged political leaders to sign a national integrity pledge. This group urged politicians to condemn vote-buying and to make public disclosures on campaign contributions. Debate about the conduct of Papua New Guinea's political leaders was also stimulated by media treatment of the recent 'Sandline events', the submission to the Acting Prime Minister of the Commission of Inquiry's report at the end of May and the public campaign on the Sandline issue by Brigadier-General Jerry Singirok, who addressed rallies alongside 'anti-corruption' candidates in many parts of the country.

Church organisations through 'Operation Brukin Skru' (Operation Kneeling) and a 'Pray-Before-You-Vote' campaign encouraged voters to break free of traditional obligations and elect the best candidate for the job – not just the person in their own clan or language group.

The News Media

Print Media

Papua New Guineans are well served by a small but robust and professional news media, both publicly and privately owned. The nature of the country's rugged landscape, however, make newspapers nearly inaccessible to all but urban dwellers. There are two English-language newspapers, privately owned, which publish Monday to Friday and are distributed nationally. These are the *Post-Courier* (33,251 audited circulation), owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, and *The National* (24,000 – according to the publisher's statement). There are also two quality weekly newspapers, *The Independent* (English) and *Wantok* (Tok Pisin), both of which are owned jointly by the Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican and United churches. The weeklies print 10,000 and 11,000 copies respectively.

Of the country's English-language newspapers, the *Post-Courier* has the wider circulation. However, neither it nor its lively rival, *The National*, backed a particular party in the latter part of the campaign. On occasion, both are feisty and willing to question the major pronouncements of the parties. All the newspapers provided healthy criticism of the campaign and called for a new way of conducting government business.

While there were no specific guidelines for election coverage in the Press, for the most part the industry did adhere to a basic code of conduct for election advertising. In the English-language papers efforts were made to distinguish editorial matter from paid advertising, and after campaigning officially ended no campaign advertisements were run in any of the papers.



Name recognition ... a candidate in Madang reminds voters of his name and, crucially, his number on the ballot paper

Radio

Radio is by far the most important channel of information in Papua New Guinea, given the country's difficult terrain and poor road system. The country's publicly owned radio network, the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), is therefore the most important source of election news, providing it in both English and Tok Pisin. Particularly in the months prior to the election campaign, the NBC was an invaluable source of voter education through its twice-weekly election awareness programme.

The NBC has suffered, and continues to suffer, serious funding problems which inhibit its ability to upgrade antiquated equipment and operate as a national and regional broadcaster. It has a national station as well as 19 provincial stations providing coverage in theory to 95 per cent of the country. At the time of our visit, however, some five provincial stations were off the air due to lack of funding and a sixth, in the Eastern Highlands Province, was only able to broadcast on a temporary basis when additional provincial funds were made available at the time of the count. Despite being publicly funded (albeit modestly), the NBC is an independent news-gathering organisation and not a government information bureau.

During the campaign it was alleged in the *Post-Courier* that one provincial station in the Highlands, which broadcast a long-running radio programme hosted by one of the candidates, was closed by the provincial Governor. The allegation exposed an anomaly in the functioning of provincial NBC stations. Since a restructuring of the provincial government system, day-to-day responsibility for running the provincial radio stations now rests with provincial governors who could, potentially, exercise undue influence over them during election campaigns. Political interference with the media was also suggested when it was reported that several election candidates and a government department head had asked the Electoral Commissioner to halt NBC's live reporting of the count to avoid influencing election results while voting was still continuing.

The lack of funding for the NBC, and the current climate of fiscal self-reliance, mean that NBC must now operate on a commercial basis to complement public resources. It therefore no longer provides free airtime to recognised political parties. The cost of purchasing airtime was felt by many to be prohibitive to all but the wealthiest political parties.

Given the important nature of the NBC in disseminating voter education at election time, as well as its ongoing role in a democracy, we were very concerned with the underfunding of the NBC, and hope that the next government will upgrade radio equipment as a national priority to ensure a properly functioning national radio network.

The other radio broadcaster in the country is PNG FM Pty Ltd which owns two music radio stations, NAU FM in English and Yumi FM in Tok Pisin. Although both are highly popular, only NAU FM, launched in 1994 and the older of the two, has national coverage while Yumi principally reaches the major cities. Unlike in the printed media, there was less careful division between 'editorial' and advertising here. One party, the People's Progress Party, regularly ran a musical campaign jingle on NAU FM which was never identified by the station as a paid political announcement.

Television

Although there is no public television broadcaster in Papua New Guinea, there is a privately owned television station, EM-TV. Launched in 1987, it is today still received only by a relatively small percentage of homes in the rural areas. It is owned by Australia's Network 9. Once a week it broadcast an Election '97 Update in English, and three times a week in Tok Pisin, spots paid for by the Electoral Commission. This was an important source of information and education for voters, particularly illiterate ones, and complemented the Electoral Commission's twice-weekly columns in the print media and other publicity on the radio.

Like its radio-station counterparts, EM-TV did not provide any free airtime to political parties or candidates; nor did it provide a televised leadership debate. The role of constructive criticism and commentary is less developed here than in the Press, despite the weekly commentary provided by its news editor, John Eggins.

On the rocks ... part of the earth's crust put to effective election use: this improvised advertisement stood next to an important road in Simbu province



In conclusion, our Group felt that the media on occasion exaggerated the negative aspects of the campaign: this might have been because the counting was slow, which allowed the Press more time to concentrate on election troubles. However, our feeling was that the media were generally professional and fair in their reporting of the elections.

Access to the media – whether print, radio or television – was never an issue amongst political parties. Some of them complained that only those with substantial funds could afford paid advertisements, though most accepted the prevailing climate of ‘user-pay’ with resignation.

Given that the prevailing levels of literacy and the availability of the media limited its reach, overall the Group found that the media played an important role in the 1997 election campaign. The Group noted with satisfaction that the media are free and not subject to political restrictions. We believe that this is an essential element in Papua New Guinea’s democracy.