

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Challenges in Management of Electoral Rolls in Papua New Guinea

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Introduction

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a South Pacific Nation located north of Australia sharing common border with Indonesia, Solomon Islands, Guam and Australia. PNG was initially known as the Territory of Papua and New Guinea with an invisible boarder line separating the land mass and islands which were then known as German New Guinea on the northern side while the southern end was managed by British and later taken over by Australia and was referred to as British Protractorate .The two territories finally merged on the 16th of September 1975 when Papua New Guinea attained her political independence. PNG is a Melanesian country with a population of over six million people speaking 800 different languages and distinctive cultural values.

Challenges

PNG is a young democracy with cultural diversity but solidly united. This diversity makes the job of producing an accurate and sustainable electoral roll more challenging. It is the reality people of PNG must live with.

The Chief Electoral Commissioner Mr. Andrew Trawen once said that the Electoral Roll is the corner stone of any election because if it is not accurate or is perceived not to be to be accurate, it greatly increases the prospect of the entire election being considered invalid. Mr. Trawen continued by saying that at the very least an inaccurate Roll is viewed with a high level of suspicion by candidates, political parties and the public at large. It is therefore imperative that the roll be as accurate as possible.

The roll used during the 2002 National Parliament Election in PNG was widely regarded as being in a very poor state, with many names missing, multiple entries of the same name,

voters placed into the wrong electorate, under-age voters, phantom electors etc. In preparation for the 2007 National Parliament Election the Electoral Boundaries Commission was faced with 2 options- update the 2002 information to improve its integrity or start a fresh and prepare a completely new roll, carrying out data collection “ door- to-door” in every Ward in the country.

Enumerators were appointed and trained, then armed with sufficient quantities of “ Claim for Enrolment” forms they spent many months attempting to get every eligible citizen in the country registered on the new Electoral Roll. After processing all enrolment forms received on or prior to 4 May 2007 (the date writs were issued and therefore the date set for Roll closure), the number of persons enrolled across the whole country for the 2007 National Parliament Election stood at 3,938,893- a figure which many commentators said was much closer to the number that should be on the Roll in PNG (as the total population was nearly 5 million in 2002).

The culture of attempting to enroll and vote as many times as possible; intimidating voters; resorting to violence in order to cast multiple votes or to compel people not to vote; removing or by-passing formally appointed election officials and hijacking the voting process etc, is a major concern for the PNG Electoral Commission. Through public awareness messages and face –to-face meetings a special effort was made in 2007 to encourage voters to understand the principles of “fairness “ and “one person, one vote” but the reality was that this was largely ignored when it came to the polling period. Further work on how to bring about a change of thinking will be included as part of the Electoral Commission’s public education and awareness planning for the 2012 Election.

The PNG Electoral Commission conducted a number of post-Election Workshops around the country with election officials, observers, civil society groups and academics, and a number of areas for improvement were suggested with regard to the Roll. They were:

- More time should be allowed for the public and political parties to check the roll well before they close, and on a regular basis;
- Enrolment forms should be more readily available but need close monitoring to ensure only eligible persons enroll ,and once only ;
- Continue to use properly trained enumerators with knowledge of the local area and individuals within it when updating the Roll;
- Headquarters needs to liaise more closely with field staff about Roll policy changes;
- Printed Rolls should continue to be available for Returning Officers in multiple formats and within wards to ensure they are as “user friendly” as possible.
- The Roll should be updated and maintained on a regular basis.

It must be stated that no country in the world has “ perfect roll” , but PNG still has a long way to go to get theirs up to what might be considered a more acceptable “ international best practice” standard. There are many ways of doing this and the Electoral Commission is evaluating options based on their cost and their effectiveness. Even though not much funding was made available this year some work on roll maintenance will commence.

While many of the problems associated with the roll are confined to some provinces only, there is still a high level of concern about the state of the entire roll. The PNG Chief Electoral Commissioner has identified the Roll as the highest priority to address before the National Parliament Elections. To kick start the process the Electoral Commission had already staged a Stakeholder Consultative Forum towards the end of November last year where input from cross section of the community including international speakers and IT companies were received . Recommendations from these presentations are being evaluated and will be finalized to form the basis of a major Electoral Roll update Program.

The question of the application of new technology such as Photo Roll, Voter ID, Biometric and so forth is still up in the air. What PNGEC is more concerned now is to improve its present system of voter registration and later venture into technologies to consolidate it.

PNG Government Stand Point.

While the Electoral Commission insists on improving the current Voter Registration system, the PNG government is adamant on involving new technology to conduct Electoral Roll update. The government is pushing for the introduction of electronic voter identification and registration system to end the culture of double voting through inflated roll. It has suggested the use of Smart Cards and Finger Prints to be applied to voter registration to improve the accuracy of the roll which would in turn reduce social upheaval which occur during polling or after election results are declared.

Conclusion

While technology is available in the country , the decision to use them would depend very much on their cost and effectiveness. The PNG Electoral Commission is cautious of IT companies’ drive to convince the government to commit the commission to tap into their expertise. To date no decision has been reached as yet for various reasons. First the PNG Electoral Commission has the firm believe that it must effectively manage the current voter registration system successfully before attempting to use new technology both for voter registration and polling. Second no IT companies had discussed their cost factors thus scaring the commission to pursue the matter. Third the effectiveness of technologies in the compilation of Electoral roll has never been tried in the country therefore the commission is skeptical of its success. PNG Electoral Commission is prepared to adopt any IT system so long as it is cost effective, user friendly and sustainable.

Thank you