



CONNECTING YOUTH VOICES TO POWER

Submission to the Special Parliamentary Committee on the Inquiry into the 2022 National General Elections

The submission is made on behalf of the Youth Coalition, comprising members of 15 civil society organisations and community groups that work with young people or on issues that affect young people in Papua New Guinea. The National General Elections had widespread ramifications on the different sectors of society where young people live and work.

Studies suggest that young people under the age of 25 make up 58-67 percent of the country's population. This is an important population demographic whose views should be fully considered by the Special Parliamentary Committee in this Inquiry.

National General Elections are an important pillar of PNG's democracy that needs strengthening. This calls on the State to provide all resources possible to protect the rights and freedom of its citizens to exercise their democratic rights to vote in a general election free from corruption, violence, and ineffectiveness of State Institutions to deliver on their Constitutional mandates.

The Youth Coalition members consulted on the Public Call for Submissions on the Inquiry. We have identified key issues relevant to the Inquiry's TOR and hereby submit 20 collective recommendations:

Issues and Recommendations:

1. The powers, functions, and responsibilities of the Electoral Commission.

1.1. Under-funding: Year after year, the Electoral Commission seems to be getting limited or delayed funding despite calls made public through various sources for funding to be made every year and not just made available during Election Year.

Recommendation 1: Electoral funding should be prioritised in the Annual Budgetary Cycle through greater inter-agency collaboration (Department of Planning, Treasury, Finance, Electoral Commission, Royal Police Constabulary & Defence, etc.).

1.2. Malpractice in Recruitment: Recruitment and appointment of Election Officials seems to be politically motivated and lack complete transparency resulting in wide-spread public mistrust in the integrity of the elections process, violence and chaos during the campaign, voting and counting periods in all centres throughout the country.

Recommendation 2: Complete overhaul in the recruitment process of Election Officials, including outsourcing the recruitment process to be managed by a credible third-party recruitment agency with enhanced public transparency with complete independence from political interference or State control.

1.3. Election Declarations on Special Circumstances: Powers of the Electoral Commissioner to declare electorates based on special circumstances grounds are arbitrary and lack transparency and accountability.

Recommendation 3: Remove powers from one person, in this case, the Electoral Commissioner, and subject this process to a more accountable and publicly transparent process reviewed by an independent committee.

1.4. Electoral Commissioner's position subject to Executive Government Prerogative: The Electoral Commission Appointments Committee comprising the Prime Minister, Chairman of the appropriate Permanent Parliamentary Committee, Chairman of Public Services Commission and Opposition Leaders needs to be reviewed as the Executive Government has a greater say resulting in lack of independence of the Electoral Commissioner's position (e.g. Simon Sinai being confirmed months before the NGE 2022).

Recommendation 4: Review and remove Electoral Commission Appointments Committee Members who are subject to be controlled by Prime Minister or the Executive Government, e.g. Chairman of the appropriate Permanent Parliamentary Committee and Chairman of Public Services Commission[1]

1.5 Lack of Ongoing Monitoring and Reporting on Elections Preparedness or Readiness: The cyclic nature of General Elections makes it convenient for the National Government to drop the ball and not maintain consistent focus on election preparedness or readiness. This is compounded by the fact that there is a complete lack of transparency on state of General Election preparedness and that there is no central body empowered enough to put the National Government to task on its expected mandate on a yearly basis and not just at every Election Year.

Recommendation 5: Committee should request that the NEC make this Special Parliamentary Committee to become a Permanent Parliamentary Committee. There should also be a separate Civil Society Organisation Mechanism to monitor and publicly report on National Government's actions on Election preparedness or readiness almost on a 6 monthly to yearly basis.

[1] Section 6 Organic Law on National and Local-level Government Elections 1997

1.6 Worsening State of Public Mistrust in Ability of Electoral Commission to Make Decision on Election Matters: The integrity of the Office of Electoral Commissioner and Electoral Commission as an Institution has continued to be marred year-after-year by seemingly unresolvable issues that plague its ability to build any sense of public trust in its processes and decisions (e.g. unprecedented number of electoral disputes filed in Court following NGE2022 and which is only expected to worsen in the years to come).

Recommendation 6: Increase transparency at various decision-making levels of the Electoral Commission to rebuild public trust, for example by inviting Civil Society Organisations, Community Based Organisations and Faith Based Organisations to be members of the National Election Steering Committee and the Provincial Elections Steering Committee to maintain balance, increase transparency and re-build public trust.

1.7. Include Voices of Young People Living with Disability at Decision Making Levels: Voices of young people of voting age and presently living with disability throughout Papua New Guinea were not heard at the highest decision-making levels, resulting in under-representation or misrepresentation of issues affecting their needs during the election period and consequently denying this important segment of the population their constitutional rights to duly elect a representative of their choice.

Recommendation 7: There needs to be a review to ensure a fairer and more equal representation of all segments of the society at the decision-making level deciding National General Elections, to ensure the voices of the minority or marginalized are ably represented, especially the voices of young people of voting age and presently living with disability.

1.8. Completely Overhaul Electoral Commission's Public Communications Apparatus: Unreliable communication, miscommunication, ambiguous communications, misleading communication or simply no communication by the Electoral Commission regarding various aspects of the National General Election during the entire Elections Period was the main cause of public confusion and mistrust compromising the integrity of the election process and decisions emanating from the Office of Electoral Commissioner and the Electoral Commission as an Institution.

Recommendation 8: Increase transparency at various communications-level, for example at the public/community level, consider utilising Civil Society Organisations, Community Based Organisations or Faith Based Organisations in voter education campaigns and messaging, etc

2. The Process involved in the conduct of the general election, with a focus on updating the common roll, campaigning, voting, counting, declaration, disputed returns process and related matters.

2.1. **Lack of Preparation:** Young people were either turned away, not registered on Common Rolls, could not locate polling stations, or were prevented from voting due to widespread misinformation and security/violence issues.

Recommendation 9: Improve the planning, coordination, execution and communication with all stakeholders involved in delivering a free and safe electoral process. This should ensure a young person of voting age anywhere in PNG should know how, where and when to cast their vote in a free and safe environment.

2.2. **Common Roll Completely Out-dated:** A lot of young people of voting age were prevented from exercising their rights to vote because their names were not registered on the Common Roll due to inefficiency or wilful negligence of the Electoral Commission. The Electoral Commission's Voter Look-Up App had limited utility and could have been used as a good online tool to help young people to register to vote, etc.

Recommendation 10: Prioritise the National Census, and automate the Common Roll Update process

2.3. **Money politics fuelling Violence During the Elections Period:** We note that young people were also used as pawns by political candidates to fuel violence during the elections period with no repercussions on the part of political candidates funding the violence.

Recommendation 11: Enforcement of Laws for all Election Related Offences and Crimes by going after the main perpetrators, the political candidates.

2.4. **Declarations delays frustrating the resumption of classes:** Thousands of school-aged children, young people and families were impacted by the unjustified delays in declarations of Elections Results across the country occasioned by the incompetence of the Electoral Commission.

Recommendation 12: Drastically improve the counting and the declaration process by implementing an automated process that eliminates dragging out the counting process. Additionally, stop recruitment of teachers as counting officials as well as schools as counting venues to minimise disruption to classes.

2.5. Eliminate Barriers-to-Voting for People Living with Disability: Electoral Commission failed to eliminate stark barriers-to-voting during the 2022 NGE which denied the constitutional rights of a lot of young people of voting age and presently living with disability to duly elect a representative of their choice during the election period.

Recommendation 13: Increase funding to eliminate barriers-to-voting and increase equal opportunities for all young people of voting age and living with disabilities, by addressing their needs on an impairment-by-impairment basis (e.g. a blind person needs Braille, deaf person needs sign-language, wheel chair-bound person needs disability friendly access at voting booths, etc) to ensure they can freely vote during every elections.

2.6. Limited to nil social inclusion programs throughout the Country targeting young people living with disability. This results in this segment of the population being overlooked, disempowered and not valued as citizens of this country deserving of their constitutional right to vote for an elected leader of their choice.

Recommendation 14: Increase funding for social inclusion programs that promote opportunities for people living with disability to be empowered to fully participate effectively (without any barriers) as citizens of this country, not only during every elections but across all sectors of the society (socially, politically, economically)

3. The expenditure of electoral funds and related matters

3.1. No Action on Suspicious Transactions, Proceeds of Crime and/or Money Laundering During Election Period. Deafening silence by State Institutions like the Ombudsman Commission, Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates Commission, Bank of PNG Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) & Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in enforcing the Anti Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorist Financing Act and Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) in the lead-up to during and after the election period.

Recommendation 15: The committee needs to acknowledge that money-politics fuels election-related violence and corruption in this country. Large suspicious transactions at all financial institutions throughout the country during the election period, which would normally have been reported to BPNG FIU, need to be properly investigated for breaches of AML and POCA laws by relevant State Agencies, including unexplained large campaign financing of Political Parties to be subjected to such an investigation.

4. The security provided by Royal PNG Constabulary, the PNG defence force, and the PNG Correctional Institutional Services and related matters.

4.1. **Voting Venues Not Free from Intimidation and Violence:** Many young people of voting age, especially young women, were denied an opportunity to vote because of widespread fear, intimidation and violence at most polling centres nation-wide.

Recommendation 16: Increase security both internally (Police and Defence) and externally (internal security forces) to provide adequate support.

4.2. **Break-Down in Command-and-Control and Illegal Use of Security Force:** Young people have witnessed political candidates illegally using PNG Security Force during the election period for political mileage, including transporting ballot papers into counting venues, contributing to widespread public mistrust in the integrity of election outcomes.

Recommendation 17: Tighten Command-and-Control of Security Force during Election Period and substantially beefing up manpower so as not to subject only a few Security Personnel overwhelmed with significant capacity constraints and vulnerable to the lure of inducements and bribes to corrupt an electoral process.

4.3. **The massive build-up of Guns Undermining the Capability of the State:** Young people everywhere were not free in their own communities, especially in the Highlands Region, to exercise their constitutional rights to vote during NGE2022 due to gun violence.

Recommendation 18: Re-visit Major Gen (Rtd) Jerry Singirok Gun Control Committee Report 2005 and seriously consider the Recommendations for tabling in National Parliament and immediate implementation.

4.4. **Exploitation of Children During Entire Election Period:** Political candidates used young children during all processes of the Elections Period (either with campaign rallies, under-aged voting, or unsupervised public gatherings) with no consideration about their vulnerability in ensuring appropriate safeguards were in place for the protection of their welfare against illegal activities and sexual predators.

Recommendation 19: Strict laws be in place to monitor, regulate and ensure that all children are not involved in the election processes. The law should hold both the parents and the political candidate responsible for any crimes perpetrated against children during an election process where it is proved that the parents and political candidates have failed to implement adequate safeguards to protect the welfare of child victim.

4.1. No Whistle Blower / Hotline To Report Illegal Activities: Elections in PNG is everyone's responsibility to make safe, and for the Voter, sometimes it is impossible to know where to go to when witnessing an electoral offence being committed or to feel safe to report such a matter without comprising ones personal safety.

Recommendation 20: Improve reporting and enforcement of electoral laws by protecting the whistle-blower. This means implementing a whistle-blower hotline at all Provinces and Districts to ensure offences are reported and acted upon as and when they happen.

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