



'To Bear Witness to the Light' - Jn 1:7

The Catholic Reporter

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CHRISTIAN PEOPLE, YES! CHRISTIAN CONFESSONAL STATE, NO!

The Catholic Church opposes the Constitutional Amendments to declare Papua New Guinea a Christian Country and State for three reasons.

They are poorly written and hardly harmonize with the whole text of the Constitution.

They are inspired by a predominantly Jewish rather than a Christian vision.

They alter the nature of the State from secular (1975) to confessional and religious (2024).

A). THE AMENDMENTS ARE POORLY WRITTEN

Now that the proposed constitutional changes (*in brackets and italicized below*) have been made known in connection with the first parliamentary reading in February 2024, practically all of them appear to be highly problematic, in some cases even from the grammatical and syntactical point of view.

1) Preamble

Adoption of Constitution.

WE, THE PEOPLE OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA – united in one nation [*acknowledge and declare God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as our Creator and the Sustainer of the entire universe and the source of our Powers and Authorities, delegated to the people and all persons within the geographical jurisdiction of Papua New Guinea;*]

The first underlined text is inconsistent in punctuation. The commas make it seem like there are four persons in the Trinity. It should presumably read: "God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit".

The second underlined text is incoherent and unclear. With the amendment, the People of Papua New Guinea declare that the Holy Trinity is the source of the people's power and authorities. There is nothing wrong with such a claim (see Matthew 28:18 and Psalm 8:15) but it contradicts the statement already present in the next section of the Preamble which declares that the Independent State of Papua New Guinea was established "by authority of our inherent right as ancient, free and independent peoples". In other words, in the 1975 original version of the Constitution, the power and authority of the people is inherent not delegated to them.

The text is also inaccurate since only PNG citizens will have political authority "within the geographical jurisdiction" of the country not "all persons" as stated.

2) Fifth Goal. Papua New Guinean ways

Declaratory provision

We declare our fifth goal to be to achieve development primarily through the use of Papua New Guinean forms of [*Christian principles,*] **social, political and economic organization.**

The italicized words constitute the first amendment proposed for the Fifth Goal. It is ungrammatical and unclear. With the amendment, the preposition "of" now has two objects: "principles" and "organization". So, to be grammatically correct, the amendment should read *Christian principles and*.

Furthermore, only a very intrusive state and government would like to propose or impose a particular interpretation of the genuine meaning of "Christian principles".

Subsection (4)

and traditional villages and communities to remain as viable units of Papua New Guinean society, and for active steps to be taken to improve their [*Christian,*] **cultural, social, economic and ethical quality.**

Indeed, the great majority of PNG villages are made up of Christians of various denominations, but the existence and emergence of non-Christian villages cannot be ignored or ruled out in principle.

3) Basic Social Obligations

WE HEREBY DECLARE that all persons in our country have the following **basic obligations to themselves and their descendants, to each other, and to the Nation: –**

(a) to respect, and to act in the spirit of this Constitution; and

(b) to recognize that they can fully develop their capabilities and advance their true interests only by active participation in the development of the national community as a whole; and

[(ba) to respect, observe and protect Christian Principles.]

Does the obligation to observe Christian Principles violate section 45 (particularly but not exclusively 45.3) on the freedom of thought, religion and conscience? "No person is entitled to intervene unsolicited into the religious affairs of a person of a different belief, or to attempt to force his or any religion (or irreligion) on another, by harassment or otherwise." (45.3)

The supporters of the amendment will now deny it, not being in fact at all in their intentions. But one of the main tasks of a Constitution is that of formally preventing the rising of future, perhaps unexpected but possible acts of discrimination, prevarication and injustice.

4) Division 1. – The Nation.

Section 1 - Subsection (1)

1. THE INDEPENDENT STATE OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA.

(1) Papua New Guinea is a sovereign, independent State by the name of the Independent [*and Christian*] **State of Papua New Guinea.**

(2) The name of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea and its variants shall be protected by an Act of the Parliament.

With this addition, Papua New Guinea is effectively being turned into a confessional state (a practice largely confined to the past in the Christian world) with Christianity, or possibly one version of it, as the official religion, taking precedence over all other religions and belief systems including the national "combined heritage" and our "noble traditions" (Preamble); not to mention the question of what form of Christian faith will be officially recognized, considering the variety of Christian denominations existing in the country with their different beliefs, faith practices and preferred versions of the Bible.

Furthermore, the name of the State of Papua New Guinea is now changed into "Independent *and Christian* State of Papua New Guinea" but in the rest of the Constitution it maintains the same original name of "Independent State of Papua New Guinea" including Subsection (2) here: an evident editorial inconsistency.

5) National Symbols

Subsection (1)

Acts of the Parliament may make provision for and in respect of –

(a) a National Flag; and

[(aa) the Holy Bible;]

(b) a National Emblem; and

(c) a National Motto; and

(d) a National Seal; and

(e) a National Anthem.

(continues)

Subsection (2)

Until such time as other provision is made in accordance with Subsection (1), [the Holy Bible,] the National Flag, National Emblem and National Seal are those that were in use immediately before Independence Day.

Rather than an amendment, this regarding the Holy Bible is an addition to the list of provisions on National Symbols still expected to be finalized at Independence (16 September 1975) shortly after the approval of the Constitution (15 August 1975) and its coming into effect. The move is confusing and suspicious since the Holy Bible is one and same in time, but the editions and translations are different for several Churches with more than one in use prior to Independence.

B). PROGRESSIVE ATTEMPTS AT THE CREATION OF THE CONFESSONAL STATE

Successive PNG governments since 2007 have been advised by a few pastors and professionals with fundamentalist and Zionist beliefs.

On 26 August 2007, then Prime Minister Great Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare was, by his own admission, misled into signing a declaration of some sort which this group of pastors claim to be the "new covenant" with the State of Israel. It is a distorted theology which contradicts the fundamental Christian belief and faith where the new and final covenant is now in the person of Jesus Christ.

The same group used the 2007 declaration to convince the then O'Neill government in 2015 to bring in the 400 years old King James Version (KJV) Bible from Indiana, USA, and placed it in the chamber of Parliament.

They then advised the O'Neill government and then Speaker of Parliament, Hon. Theodore Zurenouc, for a parliamentary reform program which saw the demolition and destruction of traditional and cultural items, artifacts, totems and carvings in the House, claiming that these items were idolatrous. Fortunately, Sir Michael obtained a permanent court injunction to stop further destruction of the traditional items in the House.

The group went on to advise the O'Neill government to declare 26 August, the date Sir Michael signed the declaration in 2007 to be observed as the National Repentance Day.

The group advised and travelled with Prime Minister James Marape to Israel in October 2023 and opened the PNG Embassy in Jerusalem, breaking from the long-held position of neutrality and respect on the Israeli and Palestinian conflict.

It is the same small and unrepresentative group now pushing the Marape-Rosso Government to declare PNG a Christian state by the proposed Constitutional amendments, which will result in an alteration of the nature of the state created at Independence in 1975.

C). THE POSITION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The proposal to add "Christian Principles" to Goal No. 5 (Papua New Guinean Ways) contradicts and undermines the PNG Melanesian identity. This is dangerous and disconcerting. It obscures and even erases our unique Melanesian identity (values) rather than acknowledge, celebrate and perfect it (them) through the Gospel of Christ. Goal No. 5 refers specifically to PNG values, distinct from, though complementary to Christian (or Gospel) values. The proposed changes appear to deny our primordial self-identity. We are proud to be ethnically and culturally Melanesians who have freely embraced the Gospel of Christ and made it our own.

Furthermore, matters of faith and morals cannot be legislated and coerced or forced on people to accept by law. Church and State are two different, though cooperative entities. Faith and morals can only be shown by people's lives and not by law. While PNG already has the KJV Bible in the House since 2015 and boasts about being over 90% Christian, we see no reduction in corruption, violence, lawlessness, and offensive conduct of parliamentary debate.

We believe and accept that this parliamentary exercise genuinely and sincerely reflects for many Christians a frantic search for social cohesion and national identity in a time of dramatic changes and uncertainty over the future. But the solution does not lie in the rejection of our traditions, the transformation into a confessional state, the promotion of religious fundamentalism, Christian nationalism, or an ideology of that sort.

It rather entails a laborious process of education and discernment, in national harmony and unity, of what is best from the cultures of our ancestors, the Christian values introduced by the missionaries and the positivity that the modern world can offer to build the robust social, cultural and spiritual profile of the Papua New Guinean of the third millennium; a citizen who acts out of freedom and personal responsibility, not within the dictates of a predetermined ideological frame.

Fraternally,

+ **Sir John Cardinal Ribat, MSC, KBE**
Archbishop of Port Moresby
Chairman of PNG Council of Churches

+ **Bishop Otto Separy, DD**
Bishop of Bereina
President, Catholic Bishops Conference of PNG and Solomon Islands

Atty. Paul Harricknen, OL
President, Catholic Professionals Society of Papua New Guinea

Three reasons against the Constitutional amendments

The Catholic Bishops and the Catholic Professionals Society of Papua New Guinea reiterate their opposition to the Constitutional amendments presented to Parliament on first reading in February 2024 to declare PNG a Christian Country and a Christian State.

The first reason for the disagreement was unexpected till the changes were made public. The amendments in fact are poorly written, inconsistent in punctuation, at times challenging from the grammatical and syntactical point of view. For the sake of clarity, some should at least be re-written before being put forward for approval. They also hardly harmonize with the whole text of the Constitution which was conceived and formulated for a different type of State and government.

Here in fact comes the second reason of dissent since Papua New Guinea was born in 1975 as a secular State. It means that Churches and Religions autonomously regulate themselves within the democratic process and the general legislation of the State. Church and State cooperate but are different entities. The PNG Constitution of 1975 declares that the new independent country honours, preserves and will pass on to the new generations "our noble traditions and the Christian principles that are ours now" (Preamble). It stops there. The founding fathers chose not to make Christianity the religion of the State.

Opposite to the secular State is the confessional State. There were many confessional States in the past and there are still now; especially Muslim, but also one Jewish (Israel), and several Christian including England, where the King is the Head of the Anglican Church. Almost all the confessional States now include, accept, or frequently just tolerate religious minorities. The members of those communities do not occupy the highest positions of the State. In England, for example, the Prime Minister or the Chief of the Army, may not be Anglican; but never the King or the Queen will belong to a different religion or Christian denomination. Muslim and Jewish confessional States are even less lenient. Only members of the official religion occupy not only the highest positions of the State and the government but also of the judiciary and the army.

The confessional State by its nature effectively creates second class citizens. It is true that this is unlikely to be in the mind of the PNG Members of Parliament voting for the proposed amendments, but in so doing they effectively open the doors for this type of development at any time in the future. The Catholic Church considers obsolete, inadequate, and even dangerous any drift to the confessional State solution and model. Therefore, it opposes it.

The third point and reason of dissent by the Catholic Church is that the rationale behind the amendments appears to be inspired more by a Jewish and even Zionist vision rather than an exclusive Christian prospective. Without ignoring the Jewish heritage, Christians would now preferably refer to the "God and the Father of the Lord Jesus" (2 Cor 11:31) than to the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". Several Christian denominations and Christian leaders in PNG instead appear to pursue beliefs and practices that are more in tune with the Old Testament and the Jewish traditions than the new and final covenant in Jesus Christ and the teachings of the New Testament.

The fact that the proposed amendments will not threaten religious freedom is what the PNG government and members of parliament now say and almost certainly believe. But in its new version, the Constitution will say the opposite. And on that basis successive governments may be encouraged to take things to a higher level especially if influenced by religious fundamentalists. The Constitution is made to promote and to prevent. So far it has prevented religious authoritarianism in Papua New Guinea. By the time the amendments are in force, it will technically allow it. And some quarters will actively promote it.

We wish our people and our country to be strongly and genuinely Christian; but that the State remains secular and only concerned with the temporal wellbeing of our citizens as our founding fathers wanted it in 1975. The religious domain belongs to the Churches.

**Catholic Bishops of Papua New Guinea
Catholic Professionals Society of Papua New Guinea**