ELECTIONS & TRIBAL WARFARE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA’S HIGHLANDS
words by Johnny Langenheim.

Papua New Guinea’s Minister for Environment & Tourism is sitting on a litter fashioned from jungle roots and leaves. His retinue includes a troupe of young boys caked in green mud, the tops of their heads shorn so that they resemble dwarves - a good omen in these parts. There’s a warrior with a porcupine needle through his nose and three old women with painted faces are stamping on the ground, ululating as if ready to do battle. Twelve roasted pigs lie splayed under the hot sun, alongside three goats and too many chickens to count. Welcome to the campaign trail, PNG style.

Besides his ministerial post, Thompson Harokaqveh is the incumbent MP for Goroka, capital of the volatile eastern highlands region of PNG, and a key parliamentary seat. He’s visiting this remote rural outpost about two hours out of town to drum up support for his 2012 election campaign. He’s also opening a new road so the farmers up here can get their produce to market, a factor that may help his cause - though heavy rain has turned it to slurry. If the road doesn’t do it, the crates of SP lager in the back of his pick up hopefully will.

Judging by his reception (Pan himself couldn’t have caused more of a stir) – you’d think he’d be a shoe-in, at least among this crowd. But despite the antediluvian posturing, politics in PNG is as crafty and convoluted as anywhere else in the world. The swine are ostensibly gifts and generous ones at that (it’s said that highlanders only go to war over three things – pigs, land and women). “But I’ll have to compensate everyone who donated,” Harokaqveh confides after he’s finished the delicate task of dividing the meat fairly amongst his followers. “And I’ll end up having to pay far more than the market price when they come knocking at my door,” he laughs.
Despite the sweeteners, loyalties could well shift dramatically when Harokaqveh’s opponents begin their campaigns in earnest. Politics in PNG is not predicated on creeds, but on the power and charisma of the individual, his clan affiliations, political allegiances and ability to satisfy the immediate interests of his supporters (of the 109 parliamentary seats, only one is currently held by a woman). ‘Big Man’ syndrome, which the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins delineated in his seminal work Poor Man, Rich Man, Big Man, Chief, is deeply embedded in traditional social structures here and extends into politics too.

When Harokaqveh’s pick up finally succumbed to the mud about 50 metres short of his destination, he gamely hopped into a JCB and started clearing the topsoil himself. As Sahlins tells us, “the attainment of Big Man status is the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd.” The acquisition of power and material wealth – ‘cargo’ in the local parlance – also brings with it a responsibility to administer and distribute both fairly amongst your wantok (literally ‘one talk’ – your people). It can be problematic when this perception extends into politics however. After all, it wasn’t Harokaqveh who paid for the road for these villagers, but taxes.

PNG is a Constitutional Monarchy, having inherited the venerable Westminster system thanks to its colonial history as a British and then Australian protectorate. But in a country governed by complex clan structures, in which more than 800 distinct languages are spoken, the parliamentary template plays out in a radically different way. For a start, Australia and Britain are effectively two party systems. PNG has more than 40 registered political parties. Since achieving independence in 1975, the country has been governed by a series of unstable coalitions, subject to frequent votes of no confidence. MPs will simply cross the floor to join another party if it serves their own ends. Only Michael Somare, the country’s first Prime Minister, has yet seen out a full term, serving from 2002 till 2011, when he was forced to retire due to ill health.

Harokaqveh himself was rewarded with his ministerial post when he crossed the floor to join current Prime Minister Peter O’Neill’s coalition, which had called a vote of no confidence in the ailing Somare’s government. The elder statesman recovered however and quickly returned to the political maelstrom, sparking a constitutional crisis in January when he claimed O’Neill’s government was unlawful – a challenge O’Neill managed to quell. “PNG politics has nothing to do with ideology…we haven’t got to that yet,” Harokaqveh tells me as he toboggans the pick up back down the muddy slope. “It’s not about parties, it’s all about individuals.”

And there’s no shortage of ambitious contenders ready to vie for the capricious allegiances of the voting public. Five years ago, there were a total of 2,600, running the gamut from kooky stoners to wealthy businessman to Seventh Day Adventist preachers. This year there will likely be many more, as PNG’s resource wealth reaches unprecedented levels – not to mention the promise of annual PGK10 million (US$4.7 million) in the shape of a District Support Grant.

In the highlands, where tribal conflicts are pretty much an everyday affair, the election race is an incendiary mix of traditional sing-sings, violence and fraud, fuelled by cash, guns, beer and marijuana. Wealthy candidates set up notorious campaign houses, where their supporters are plied with alcohol, drugs and women. In 2007, a study led by anthropologist Philip Gibbs recorded a sudden spike in HIV infections and other STD’s in the immediate aftermath of that year’s election.
Harokaqveh claims that many of his opponents are encouraging their followers to stockpile automatic weapons, which are alarmingly commonplace throughout the highlands. Simple subsistence farmers often have AK47’s and A2 rifles stashed away - weapons that have found their way here from conflict zones like neighbouring West Papua and the autonomous region of Bougainville. “They’re traded for cannabis,” says David Seine, the embattled looking Provincial Police Commander. “We’re totally understaffed – in Goroka, the ratio of police to citizens is one to 500 - it’s just not enough.”

In March, an article in the country’s leading daily, The National, quoted a source in the police intelligence unit claiming that security measures were not yet in place for the election and that, “…from intelligence reports, we are aware of heavy gun smuggling in exchange for marijuana and cash.” None of this bodes well for the elections.

In October last year, 15 men were massacred in the town of Kainantu about an hour from Goroka, following long-standing tensions between two ethnic groups - violence on an unprecedented scale for the region. Population pressures have led to the growth of migrant ‘settler’ communities throughout the highlands, particularly in major cities like Goroka and Mount Hagen, capital of the Western Highlands. There is often deep mistrust between local people and the newcomers. With the elections, underlying tensions tend to spill into violence, as groups accuse one another of everything from land grabbing to petty theft to witchcraft. “During the 2007 election a candidate died in a car crash,” says Kenneth Manove, one of Harokaqveh’s supporters. “His followers were convinced it was witchcraft and killed three young guys from a rival tribe.”

Natural resources could well prove the most significant factor in the way the elections play out. PNG’s economy is driven by vast resource projects, many of them highly controversial. The Bougainville copper mine, an Australian company majority owned by British mining giants Rio Tinto Zinc, was a major catalyst in the island’s bloody secessionist struggle. Now Exxon Mobil is developing a US$15.7 billion liquefied natural gas (LNG) project in the southern highlands, set to open in 2014. It will be PNG’s biggest ever resource project, potentially boosting GDP by a staggering 20%. PNG LNG has been plagued by land disputes, however, and work was halted in March due to threats to workers by disgruntled landowners. “Life hasn’t changed in that area for generations,” says Manove. “And now suddenly they’re being catapulted into the 21st century.”

Disputes and schisms are so normal that mechanisms for dealing with a crisis - known in pidgin as a ‘heavy’ - are deeply woven into the culture. Walk through Goroka’s central park and you’ll pass large groups sitting under trees or shaded by umbrellas. These are not social gatherings, but mediations. “The mediator’s goal is to prevent conflict or revenge cycles,” Manove explained to me. “It always comes down to compensation - money is important to people and this initial gesture demonstrates remorse.” In the context of the highest stakes election the country has ever seen, however, mediations may not be enough to stem a tide of violence – though it is difficult to predict. In any case, the Australian Defence Force has put measures in place to evacuate 15,000 expatriates in the event of a bloodbath.
Mama Kinanoh, a traditional healer from Goroka district.

What’s clear is that there is more riding on this election than any before it, with the promise of overflowing coffers once the landmark project and others like it come online. But historically, little of this wealth has filtered down to local people. Public infrastructure in PNG struggles to cope with the demands of a growing population, due to a mixture of “corruption and incompetence”, according to Manove. During my time in Goroka, running water was an occasional luxury and power cuts a regular occurrence. With an under resourced police force and spiraling crime rates, multinationals rely on private security firms, many of which have themselves been implicated in serious human rights abuses.

Despite the relative poverty of many of its inhabitants, PNG is expensive, its economy catering almost exclusively to the corporate interests that sustain it. You’d be hard pressed to find a secure hotel in the capital Port Moresby for less than US$250 per night. An emerging middle class is struggling to establish itself, whilst much of the electorate remains short term and partisan in its expectations, happy with handouts and less concerned with long-term policy. “The problem is, we’re trying to cram 300 years of development into 25,” Manove tells me. “But many of us are still just three generations from the stone-age.”

For a complete edit of photographs see:
http://james.photoshelter.com/gallery/Papua-Elections-2012/G0000XNbUww_tbPw

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