

Bougainville presidential candidates (2010 – 2015)

This is a brief commentary on the main candidates vying for President in the second ABG and Bougainville parliamentary elections. The views expressed are opinions based on my own observations as well as views deduced from others from conversations on my recent visits to the Island. These views and comments should not be taken as gospel truth. They may assist voters in making considered choices and preferences.

- 1. James Tanis, incumbent President:** Mr Tanis has served as a transitional President following a bye-election 13 months ago; took over at a difficult time at the height of questions and suspicions about Invincible and BRDC and when reconciliation and issues of unsundered arms needed political guidance and dealt with decisively to get leadership back on track and restore confidence and trust in ABG; Tanis chose Ezekiel Massat from Buka Island as his Vice President and this has provided a strong, loyal and highly committed political team in discussions with the National Government and many donor countries and agencies.

Tanis won his last election through a very condensed, savvy and tactical campaign in villages and communities. He is all too aware that the race to the end is determined by all votes cast; that is to say the second and third preferences are absolutely significant in determining the final outcome.

A summary of President Tanis' achievements in his short Presidency include:

- a) Proactive involvement by ABG in enabling Panguna landowners to recommence and complete 90% of their reconciliations. Tanis's personal involvement at community level was a marked departure from the lip service and empty promises by his predecessor and other provincial and national leaders from the area in responding to requests to get ahead with reconciliations in Panguna. His personal involvement and approach supported by frequent visits and engagement with the people brought a lot of comfort and success to reconciliations in Panguna and many other areas.
- b) Wide consultations with all ex-combatant factions in pursuit of arms disposal which has resulted in reconciliations between warring factions. Tanis delivered on his promise to travel extensively and his visits to many areas in the southern region that previously had no visits from the leadership in Kubu was a welcome encouragement in restoring trust and confidence in ABG leadership.
- c) Also visited and consulted widely with people in remote and disadvantaged areas and made personal assessments of their needs such as better transport and communication services. The delivery and installation of Vissat projects by Telikom PNG is a practical example resulting from these visits.

- d) Built closer ties, trust and confidence based on honesty, openness and regular consultations with the National Government compared to his predecessor.
- e) Actively promoted and established closer ties, better communications and understanding with traditional donors and other development partners as President of Bougainville as well as in consultation with the National Government leading to political impetus to rebuild Bougainville with donor countries and genuine investors as partners.
- f) Instrumental in doubling the efforts of ABG in pursuing Bougainville's position and benefits accruing from arrangements under JSB. Brought a greater focus in achieving practical results and benefits coming out of JSB meetings. In a short 13 months, the draw-down of powers was pursued with more vigour and determination than had been the case previously and cases in point are mining powers and review of Bougainville Copper Agreement.
- g) Tanis has displayed energy and youth that appeals to those that often express a desire in changing of the political guard in Bougainville.

2. John Momis, former priest, former MP and recent Diplomat: No Bougainville leader or personality can boast a more illustrious political career than John Momis. His name in Bougainville politics is synonymous with right to political self determination as it is also synonymous with decentralization and provincial governments in the rest of the country. He is one of the founding fathers of PNG Constitution, decentralization and impetus for Bougainville self-rule – regarded by some as a contradiction in principles.

There is little doubt in the minds of many voters and outside observers alike that Momis will be a formidable opponent. He is a formidable campaigner. Already he is attracting the largest crowds in the campaign rallies so far.

In quick summary and for the purpose of this exercise the achievements of John Momis that cannot be ignored:

- a) His political longevity speaks for itself; he has outlasted other political vintages from his day until he resigned his Parliament seat to contest the first ABG presidential elections in 2005. At the time he lost to late Joseph Kabui.
- b) Momis remains a living statesman, recognized internationally, respected nationally and honoured recently by the award of PNG Order of Logohu. He is enigmatic of the respect Bougainvilleans have for their elders, a singularly important bonus in closely fought elections which this one might turn out to be.

- c) Regarded, respected, and held in high esteem by many as the architect of decentralization and father of provincial government system in PNG.
 - d) A major player in the lead up to the Panguna Landowner's crisis with the launch of his 1987 "Bougainville Initiative" at the forefront of his political campaign that year.
 - e) Outspoken critic of BCL and its mining operation in Panguna in relation to mining benefits accruing to Bougainville. Many have said that as regional member he had the mandate and the avenue to address this issue by way of a review of the BCA through the Parliament but did not do so. Nevertheless, as regional MP Momis was uncompromising as a voice and defender of his Bougainville people's rights and interests.
 - f) Brokered a ceasefire in mid December 1988 in Guava with Francis Ona and the National Government team led by Akoka Doi as Deputy PM at the time. The actions of the PNG riot squad at the start scuttled any political attempts to resolve the landowner conflict still in its early stages. One thing led to another and including torching of Pakia and other villages in the mining area. Momis became a critic of the National Government in many aspects of its intervention in the conflict.
 - g) As Regional Member, Momis played an integral role in the Bougainville Peace process leading to the signing of the Bougainville Peace Agreement in Arawa in August 2001.
 - h) Momis remains vocal and committed to the aspirations of Bougainville as envisaged in the Bougainville Peace Agreement. He has been quietly critical of the ABG leadership in the implementation of the BPA.
 - i) Maintains strong political contacts nationally and strong contacts regionally and internationally.
- 3. Martin Miriori:** Miriori is elder brother of Joseph Kabui and comes from Guava Census Division. He is an Accountant by profession. Has had a successful career in PNG and in regional organizations in the south pacific.
- a) Catholic seminary educated and one of the first university graduates in the 1960's from the Guava census area.
 - b) Joined the Bougainville movement as spokesman and main liaison person from a base in Honiara, Solomon Islands. Left Solomons base after the house he was staying was torched and he was evacuated to Australian and onto Holland under UN program for refugees where he succeeded in being granted Dutch citizenship.

- c) During the Bougainville Peace negotiations between PNG, Martin played a major role as advisor to Kabui's Bougainville Interim Government in "exile" (after suspension as B'ville Provincial Government) and to the BRA faction.
- d) Returned to Bougainville from Holland with enormous repatriation expenses met by ABG and Invincible when his brother was the President.
- e) Lives and operates a business in Buka where his wife is from.

4. Ruben Siara, self employed prior to the Crisis: Siara is of Kieta and Siwai parentage and maintains a strong tie in both regions. He is a graduate of UPNG Law School in the 1970's when the university was a reputable institution of learning. Like most young Bougainville graduates Siara returned home and landed a job in BCL but ventured out of BCL and out the mine to persue a practice in law.

- Ruben was a partner in a very successful law firm, Ruben and Zesus, based in Arawa up until the crisis.
- He remained very close to the people in providing legal services and extended his service in the form of support, advice and guidance to those who could not afford legal fees to pursue cases in a rapidly changing environment that came with the advent of mining in Panguna.
- During the crisis he was asked and joined the BRA and the Bougainville independence movement as advisor. He was co-opted by Francis Ona in a multitude of advisory roles at a difficult time for those rebelling against injustice and against the status quo which was seen as inequitable and unfair to landowners at the time.
- The highlight of Ruben's involvement with Francis Ona was when he was enlisted to act for aggrieved landowners to pursue a class action case against Rio Tinto. The case is a long, elongated, confusing, even futile that is still going through the complicated and highly litigious court process in the U.S.
- Ruben has moved on. He was a legal officer with Department of Personnel Management. He resigned the position to contest the presidential bye-election in 2008. He ran an admirable third in the election that James Tanis won.
- Ruben is a no nonsense lawyer, very close to the issues that have affected Bougainville and is amicable to discussions, changes and alliances for the betterment of Bougainville.

5. Robert Atsir, an Accountant by profession. He hails from Suir area across the Buka Passage on the northernmost tip of mainland Bougainville.

- Robert Atsir served a successful term as EO to the Buka Business Association.
- He came to prominence as head of a micro-bank scheme CDA when it established strong links and acquaintances with ABG under Joseph Kabui.
- CDA was touted as the future Reserve Bank of Independent Bougainville. It attracted both prominence and suspicion when it was allegedly being used as a “clearing house” for foreign funds of some K20million brought in by Invincible Resources. Despite the former President’s attempts to defend the arrangement, the deal made Bougainvilleans, PNG and donor countries and agencies very cynical and suspicious of ABG and the Bougainville Parliament. Robert Atsir was and is still involved as an active and direct supporter, promoter and office bearer in the whole deal and arrangement.
- Contributors to CDA are asking questions about what has happened to their savings. It is question reverberating in the minds of many Bougainvilleans during the campaign leading to this ABG election.

6. Sylvester Niu, a refrigeration mechanic by trade. Comes from the Haku area on Buka Island.

- Niu has a political passion for elections; He has been a perennial contestant at all elections for political office in the PNG Parliament and in Bougainville.
- He is a true believer in the game of chance and is convinced the day will come when he might just romp in. He quips the chances have never been any better now that all elections in the country and in Bougainville are held under limited preferential voting system.
- If Bougainvilleans are looking for a “never say never, and never say die” candidate, Sylvester Niu may be your man. He pleads his candidature by letting it be known that if you can succeed in business, it is a good springboard to politics and the idea of succession is important as countries need different leadership styles to accommodate changing circumstances.
- Sylvester is settled back in Buka with his family after many years in business in Port Moresby.

7. Ms. Magdalene Toroansi, sitting MHR: She is the only female candidate among men, vying for President. Many Bougainvilleans, including many women, have questioned her decision and audacity to run when it is obvious that the odds of a woman being elected president over men at this time are starkly stacked in favour of men.

- Many voters point out it would have been best for Ms Toroansi to run for the same reserved women's seat or in her local constituency where she would have a fighting chance to win and thus maintain women's presence in Parliament.
- Others are pointing out that she is being unduly influenced and misguided by foreign women gender lobbyists who refuse to accept that the political and cultural symmetry of women's role and place in Melanesian society is diametrically opposed to that in western society. Hence the poor performance of women to elective office, including as MPs.
- Toroansi is a graduate from UPNG. She left the PNG public service after a successful career in Foreign Affairs Department for over 20 years.
- Has served in PNG diplomatic service with overseas diplomatic postings in the U.S. and Republic of Korea.
- She is the sitting member representing women in the reserved seat for women in Central Bougainville.
- Toroansi has held ministerial appointments as Minister for Education and as Minister for Local level government during the Kabui presidency.
- She became a stern opponent of Invincible Resources' inroad and influence into the Kabui presidency after the President's admission his campaign was funded and footed by Invincible.
- She was terminated as Minister for voting against and expressing opposition to the BRDC/Invincible deal that went through the Bougainville Parliament.

This presidential contest will come down to a horse race between the first four candidates (Tanis, Momis, Siara, and Miriori). At this stage it is not game to predict a clear win by any candidate, although on both form and substance it is likely to be a contest between Tanis and Momis. This will become clearer as the early counts of voting across the Island trickle into and get tallied and registered at the main tally room in Buka after the conclusion of polling on 21 May 2010.

Whoever is elected President will be a popular choice of the majority, thanks to the LPV system that Bougainville has also chosen to adopt. Of this the voters can be rest assured.

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