

Fighting for a fair deal in national politics

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Introduction

When two of my male cousins asked me if I would consider contesting the East Malaita constituency parliamentary seat in the next national general elections, I gave a big laugh, looked at them and told them they were crazy.

‘Why not?’, they asked, not amused.

‘Because’, I replied, ‘it is such an absurd idea.’

First, I am a woman and the idea of a woman contesting the East Malaita constituency parliamentary seat was unheard of, and would probably be irritating to a lot of the people. Second, the constituency was dominated by two of the most conservative churches, the South Seas Evangelical Church (SSEC) and the Seventh Day Adventists and both were very clear about where a woman’s place was!

Third, I come from a very influential religious family in the area. My uncles and dad were the pioneers of the SSEC in East Malaita and other parts of Malaita and Solomon Islands. My sisters and many of our family members held responsible and respected church positions, and some were local and overseas missionaries. I was the opposite. I did not live according to the church rules and never attended church. Labelled the ‘black sheep’ of the family, I was the only one who had attended a government primary and high school.

Fourth, I had never lived in my island village long enough for people to consider me for anything as serious as representing them in parliament, and the majority of the constituents were bush people from the mainland who did not even know of my existence.

Last but not least, I was divorced, an unforgivable sin according to the beliefs of the SSEC. Furthermore, I was living in a de facto relationship with a partner from another province, of a different religion and race, whose customs were frowned upon by my kin. My infamous status was no secret. Those who did not know me personally had heard about the ‘wayward’ daughter of the Reverend Ariel Billy.

That conversation with my cousins happened in 1998. In 2001, it was announced in the local media that I was standing as a candidate for the East Malaita constituency parliamentary seat. Why did I change my mind? There were several influential factors.

Influential factors

In 1999, two months of extended leave with my retired parents on the island made me realise that I was accepted and even respected by many relatives and the saltwater people. It was as if everyone was relieved to see the return of their prodigal daughter to her roots.

The national and local environment seemed right. The major political, economic and social crisis being experienced by the country was blamed on the unwise decisions and corrupt practices of a male-dominated national and provincial leadership base. The ‘staleness’ of the one-man reign that had existed in the East Malaita constituency for five consecutive parliamentary terms, with no visible and tangible developmental benefits, relaxed people’s biases to the extent that they were prepared to take a gamble and support a woman.

The position in question was neither a church nor a customary one, supporters argued, and even the prime minister of Solomon Islands and some parliamentarians were divorced. I had to convince potential supporters that I had sufficient knowledge of government and parliamentary affairs. My educational background and my experience working for non government organisations had enabled me to serve at the local as well as the grassroots levels. My association with aid donors and my personal and professional networks, both local and external, were also persuasive. Supporters saw an approachable woman who seemed to be fair, honest and simple, factors that were now overcoming the traditional and religious biases.

People’s attitudes were changing: the idea of a woman representing their needs, and those of their families, at the national level became appealing. Despite this, I was still uncertain about entering politics. I had the welfare of my family to consider. A parliamentarian’s salary is low. I thought about the loss of privacy and the constant hassles that a member of parliament usually has with voters and wantoks who expect monetary gains in return for their votes. It was a period of uncertainty.

My turning point

In early November 2000, my dad died. The turnout of mourners for his funeral from all over East Malaita and many other parts of Malaita and Guadalcanal was overwhelming. People showed the respect and love they had for my dad by attending the funeral, and by contributing food, money and labour to help my family ensure that the continuous stream of mourners was fed and accommodated for nearly a month. That was when I decided that my family owed these people something more than the customary exchange of gifts. I knew also that it was my turn to pay this debt. It would be impossible for me to carry on from dad as one of the great spiritual leaders of the area. However, it was not impossible for me to represent the needs of these people in parliament. I knew I could do it, and that I could do it well if I was given the opportunity, their confidence and their trust.

A visit to my island by a state delegation comprising the governor-general, his wife and several government officials, not long after my dad's death, helped to put my doubts aside. Our member of parliament was abroad and the provincial members weren't around, so, after the member of parliament for the neighbouring East Kwaio constituency asked me to organise the delegation's visit, I did so with assistance from the church leaders and chiefs of my island and the neighbouring sister island.

I was given the honour of making a speech on behalf of my island community. The ceremony was held in the island church. In a borrowed dress (my clothes were never appropriate church wear, according to my mum) and from the church pulpit—the 'holy men only' territory—I let this important person and his delegation know about what mattered to the people of my island, and what they wanted the government to hear.

Both the official delegation and the islanders were impressed. People were now openly approaching me to stand for the elections, and the governor-general's delegation was not secretive in telling the islanders that I would be a good choice for the East Malaita constituency parliamentary seat. I decided to take the risk. I resigned from my very good job and commuted between Honiara and my island home on a regular basis to touch base with the locals.

Opposition

Things were progressing well until a very close in-law, married to my niece, decided he too wanted to contest the East Malaita constituency parliamentary seat. The leaders of the island communities had approached him to be their chosen candidate for the national elections several times in the past. He had declined each time, saying he was going to undertake further studies overseas. His course ended and, by June 2001, he had confirmed his participation in the coming elections.

My traditional obligation as a woman in a situation where a very strong in-law, and an older man, also wants what I want is to surrender it to him, as a sign of respect. In practice, it was not easy to conform. I had resigned from a very good job and a replacement had been recruited from Australia. Had this dear in-law of mine accepted the island leaders' initial proposals, I would never have decided to run in the elections, because I would not have expected to have a good chance against him. From a cultural and religious perspective, he was the perfect candidate. He was all that I was not. He was a man, a religious and dedicated SSEC follower, and a part of my known and respected family through his marriage to my first cousin's daughter.

The situation placed me in a rather awkward position but I decided that, as much as I would like to fulfil my cultural obligations, there was no way that I could now give up. Personally, I felt that culture was being used to promote the male ego and as an excuse for a lack of consideration, bad planning and last minute preparations, at great inconvenience to me.

This new development placed a permanent black cloud on my efforts. The two island communities' support was halved. My opponent easily obtained the support of those from the other

island, because he was from that island. Close relatives of his on my island turned their support to him. My family was in a dilemma, because of my in-law's strong connection to us. For many of my family members, custom already had the answer. My niece was already married out of the family, so voting for her husband would mean voting outside of the family. With other members of my family there was a sharing of votes, so that some would vote for him and others would vote for me.

In addition, there had always been a mild competitiveness between the two islands and this was an important chance to prove which island had the better candidate. There was no turning back for me, and I still retained strong support from my island and from the bush folk. The religious biases against me resurfaced as the opposing supporters began their attempts to prove these points and to gain numbers, and didn't they try!

Preparations

It was hard work, but the support of the islanders and also of a growing group of bush people, made things bearable. A network was formed throughout the constituency that had been initiated by writing personal letters to influential community women and men, informing them of my decision to run in the elections and asking for their support and assistance during the official campaigning period.

A base committee was also formed with fair representation of men and women.

Introductory visits to the bush communities were made to enable people to meet this crazy woman who was going to contest the East Malaita elections.

Money had to be raised in preparation for campaign expenses. A successful 'dine and dance' at the Honiara Hotel raised about \$8,000. A week later the money was stolen, and the invitation cards were photocopied and circulated in East Malaita communities, with an interpretation of the function as immoral, and as having involved dirty dancing and naked girls. As if that was not enough, this material finally asked, 'Is this the kind of person the people of East Malaita want to represent them in parliament?'

Starting to campaign

During the first week of the campaign period, a major gathering of approximately 100 bush and saltwater people was held on my island. For many it was the first time they had seen me or heard me speak, so I was strongly advised by my campaign managers to give it my best shot. I gave a speech emphasising why I wanted to represent the people of East Malaita constituency in parliament.

I spoke about how I thought development in East Malaita should address the real needs of the rural people, which should be communicated to me and a committee that would be representative of the people of the constituency. I told them that I would also be making personal needs identification visits to their villages. I was preaching about development resulting from the increased participation of rural people, during initial consultations and

throughout the developmental process. Such development was to be fairly distributed, and its allocation and administration transparent and accountable.

I was affiliated to the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change (SIAC) Coalition, led by former Prime Minister, Bartholomew Ulufa'alu. I spoke on the SIAC platform, mainly addressing the deteriorating economic, political and social situation in Solomon Islands. The credibility of the previous SIAC government was emphasised, as was its excellent performance during its short period in power. The coalition had a good record of positive urban and rural developments, and it had produced honest leaders, and sound policies and practices based on good governance principles.

It was the kind of government I wanted to be a part of, and which I believed would do a lot for the people of Solomon Islands, including the people of East Malaita. The locals identified well with the platform because copra prices rose when SIAC was in power, and some of the prominent SIAC members were from the SSEC.

The campaign trail

Our campaign began in mid-November 2001 with a team comprising an island chief and a mainland chief, two elders, several young men, two young women and a dear old grandmother from the bush, who could walk better along the mountain tracks than any of us islanders.

The campaigning trail was tough, both physically and mentally. For two whole weeks, my team and I travelled to all the major villages in the East Malaita constituency. We climbed steep mountains, crawled down valleys and crossed rivers on precarious tree trunk bridges. Slipping and sliding in the mud, we trudged on.

Our meetings had to be held early in the mornings after church services, or late in the afternoon when the women and men returned from their day's field work. I was careful about what I wore, how I positioned myself when speaking, and how I addressed chiefs, elders and church leaders. Speaking in my mother tongue, I used simple examples to ensure their understanding of words such as the 'economy'.

Right from the start, I began receiving long shopping lists of what everybody wanted. It was difficult, as the wantok system in Solomon Islands does allow for the giving of money and other gifts to relatives—this is the practice that we grew up with. However, it was time to be frank with people and to tell them that being a member of parliament is not about giving money to wantoks and supporters, but about bringing constituents' concerns and needs to the government to be addressed.

I also had to tell them that it was their democratic right to vote for the person of their choice and that I, as well as the other candidates, would be presenting my ideas to them during meetings so that they could make informed decisions about who to vote for. No promises were made to the people. It was made clear right at the beginning that the government of Solomon Islands was facing major economic and financial problems, and that there would be very little money around when the next government came into power.

Constant hurdles

The opposition was also working hard. Misinterpretations and distortions of my comments and ideas lost me many votes, and stopped my team speaking in one village. On another occasion, a letter was written by major landowners to those living on and off their land instructing them to vote according to the landowner's wishes or else. Dirty campaigning and defamation was rife, and it was quite hard to repair any damage because it was difficult to go back to villages already visited.

I would be told in the meetings that never in East Malaita traditions had a woman sacrificed pigs to the ancestral spirits. My answer was already prepared, as I had been coached by a supportive male elder. Standing tall, I would say that, although the women did not do the actual sacrificing, there would not be any pigs to sacrifice if there were no women to raise and feed the pigs.

Another favourite statement was, 'You are married to a man from another province. Custom requires that you follow him to his province, so it would be of no use for you to stand for East Malaita, when you will be living somewhere else.' I replied, 'I agree, but that is the Malaitan custom. My partner is not from Malaita and has different customs, and in any case such determinations are influenced more by other factors such as employment opportunities and good schools for the children, and not necessarily by custom.'

They said, 'Your father was a great man. You could never replace him.' I would agree, but say that his was a religious calling while mine was not, although both reap benefits for the people of East Malaita in different ways.

Yet others asked how many times I had been married. The men in my team would answer on my behalf, saying it was more important to have honest leaders who are hard working and willing to represent the people well. My marital status was a personal issue between me and God, they said, and only God is allowed to judge people.

In other villages I would still be speaking when a verbal fight would erupt because another candidate's supporters did not want the village to attend my meeting. The support from ordinary village women in such situations was great. They would stand up and say, 'She is only a woman. Why are you men so frightened of her?' Such shows of bravery landed them in trouble sometimes. I learned from some of these women that they hadn't voted for me or had not bothered to vote at all, because landowners had threatened that they would lose their gardening land if they did vote for me.

Election eve

The Solomon Islands Electoral Commission had announced earlier in 2001 that people living in Honiara were allowed to return and vote in their home villages. This meant that people were arriving from Honiara on the day before the elections to vote.

On the eve of election day, a very big meeting was organised on my island to confirm people's support and for last-minute

questions. That night I lost a good number of my voters, as their Honiara relatives visited them later and said they would be forgoing the bags of rice and flour they received regularly from Honiara if they voted for me and not for the candidate of their relative's choice.

Election day

The Solomon Islands national general elections took place on 5 December 2001. A day later, the counting of the ballot papers began at the police station on the mainland. The results were announced at 9.00 pm. The winner was my in-law: he beat me by two votes. I did pretty well, everyone consoled me, considering the fact that I contested the seat against nine men. My island mourned the loss. The village women did not go to their gardens. The men did not put their canoes to sea. A year after the death of my dad, our home was again filled with mourners.

The petition

I learned later about alleged irregularities and corrupt practices happening during the elections, and I was urged to challenge the election results. The mother in me told me to forget it, but I was told that such practices were common in many past national and provincial elections. However, no one had been game enough to challenge the results or, if they were, they had been offered substantial amounts of money to shut up.

I returned to Honiara, taking the allegations with me. I spoke to people in high and low places, to friends, relatives, my children and professional acquaintances. The majority backed the idea of challenging the election results, because the allegations looked solid enough for a petition. However, I could not afford a lawyer:

the affordable ones were not interested. Help came through: a lawyer friend soon drew up the petition which alleged that under-aged voters had participated, that someone voted in another person's name, and that a ballot paper stuck in the keyhole of one of my in-law's ballot boxes was validated and counted. I was asking for a recount.

Somehow the \$3,000 petition fee was paid and soon the news was announced in the local media. The people on the two islands organised a reconciliation service, but it was a flop when the other side learned that I was not going to drop the petition. The national head of the SSEC was called to the island to sort out election-related problems. However, his supporters would not allow my supporters to join in the major Easter church convention on the mainland, because mine had not yet been cleansed after voting for a sinful woman.

Conclusion

The petition was heard from 4 June 2002 to 9 June 2002 in my provincial town of Auki, Malaita province. My nephew, fresh from law school, sat next to me in court as a 'learned friend', to take notes on my behalf.

The High Court has not yet announced its decision. Maybe it was not for me to pay the family's debt to the people of East Malaita. Who knows, it may even be my in-law who is to carry out this obligation on behalf of his wife's family. Whichever way it is to be, my involvement in the elections had a huge impact on my people and I can no longer say that I am not known in the East Malaita constituency. I may even be remembered as that crazy woman always fighting for what she thought was right, and the one who tried to put a stop to all the dishonest practices that occurred in elections.