

In May–June 2015, the third Bougainville election since the establishment of the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) was held. The ABG, inaugurated in 2005, is a result of the peace agreement that ended the decade-long Bougainville conflict in 2001. There was a great deal of interest in the 2015 election within Bougainville and internationally, as it marked the beginning of a five-year window during which the peace agreement mandates that a referendum on independence from Papua New Guinea be held. The government sworn in on 15 June will have much responsibility in a crucial period for Bougainville, Papua New Guinea and the wider region.

The election was also significant in terms of women's representation. There were 35 female candidates, higher than in either the 2005 or 2010 elections; a record 12 stood in open seats, where they contested races against men, with the other 23 candidates standing in reserved seats. The Bougainville House of Representatives has three reserved seats for women, along with three seats reserved for ex-combatants, and 33 open constituencies (the president is also a member of the house). A persistent question has been whether the reserved seats system leads to greater participation by women in decision-making, or whether it places a ceiling on women's representation and limits women to competing against each other.

The 2015 election marked the first time a woman won an open seat. Josephine Getsi was elected in Peit constituency, ahead of 11 male candidates including the incumbent member. Her victory, joining the three women elected in reserved seats, brought women's representation in the House of Representatives to 10 per cent. Getsi was then appointed to cabinet. This In Brief looks at key aspects of her election campaign and how they may have contributed to her success.

Networks within the Constituency

Josephine Getsi entered politics after a long career as a teacher in Peit, a constituency in Buka Island, North Region. Peit is a mountainous and relatively

poor area with a large population dispersed in small hamlets, unlike the dense roadside villages of the coastal constituencies. Its dominant language, Solos, is not mutually intelligible with nearby languages. Peit was the main stronghold of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army in Buka, a fact that still has political effects today, notably in the high vote for hardline independence candidates in the presidential race. Solos speakers are jokingly referred to by coastal Halia and Haku as their 'poor cousins', and Getsi herself commented on this shortly before her victory was announced: 'they think we are backwards, but now we will lead them', in electing a woman.

According to her campaign coordinator, strong networks meant that wherever they campaigned in Peit, 'we were not strangers'. Getsi decided to run at the beginning of 2014, more than 12 months before the election. In making the decision to stand, she consulted with women's groups and communities, emphasising her reputation as a teacher and her community involvement with women's organisations, notably her roles as president of the Catholic Women's Association in Peit and as the Peit representative for the Bougainville Women's Federation (BWF).

Leading up to the election, the BWF prioritised support for women candidates. Assisted by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives and the International Women's Development Agency, it hosted workshops for women candidates and their campaign managers, as well as a mock parliament in Buka. Aspiring candidates were explicitly encouraged to consider standing in an open seat. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) also provided training for women candidates, and the BWF with support from the UNDP provided women candidates with some campaign materials. Getsi attended training with her campaign coordinator. As 2015 was the first political campaign for both candidate and coordinator, they considered the training useful in terms of planning the campaign.

Campaign and Party Support

Getsi was the first woman candidate in Peit, and there was some resistance to her candidacy, with claims that women should not be involved in politics: 'Women are for the kitchens only, not for the parliament'. Her team attributed this attitude to customary beliefs about gender roles. She campaigned against a headwind of male opinion that women should contest only the reserved seats. It was also argued that the 2015 election was too important with regard to the upcoming independence referendum, and so it was not the right time for women as leaders. During the campaign, Getsi and her team worked to promote women's leadership, using international as well as local examples.

She nominated as an independent, but had extensive support from the New Bougainville Party (NBP), headed by the re-elected president John Momis, which fielded more than 64 candidates, including at least 9 women. Exact figures are difficult to estimate because many candidates were in a position similar to Getsi, as de facto endorsed candidates. Getsi and her team approached the NBP for support, as they saw party assistance — financial, but also advice and guidance — as useful.

The campaign emphasised messages of service delivery and good governance. She characterised Peit as the 'most corrupt constituency', and criticised the records of previous members. Campaign events included discussion of NBP policy, women's leadership and issues relating to the Peit constituency.

Getsi's connection with the NBP and Momis was important in the post-election period, when she was appointed as minister for community development. Cabinet selection is a critical aspect of Melanesian politics — 'the election after the election'. The presence of at least one woman in cabinet is mandated in the constitution, although there is debate over whether this provision effectively acts as a ceiling on women's representation at the executive level. Many women leaders hoped that Getsi's election would mean that more than one woman would be included, but ultimately only one woman was appointed.

What This Means

Getsi's win in an open constituency marks a milestone in Bougainvillean politics. Her victory was widely applauded. In the counting room there was a palpable sense of history being made as she was declared the winner. The closeness of the result must be noted, however; hers was a narrow victory overcoming a third-placed primary vote, after the distribution of 10 candidates' preferences. The election used a limited preferential voting system, in which voters ranked their top three preferred candidates. Second and third preferences played a critical role in her victory.

While she was the only woman to win in an open seat, another woman candidate, Ismenia Ketsin in South Nasioi, placed second. For many women candidates, however, the results were disappointing. Over half the women running in open seats placed last or second last. This is similar to the outcome of other recent elections in Melanesia, including the 2014 Solomon Islands election, where 40 per cent of women candidates placed in the bottom two. Despite success stories like Josephine Getsi's, the political environment in Melanesia remains hostile for women candidates. This is also reflected in the perceived barrier to appointing more than one woman to cabinet.

An important part of improving women's future political representation in Melanesia will be establishing methods to help aspiring women candidates be more competitive. The stories of successful (and near-successful) women candidates can shed light on potential pathways to parliament for aspiring candidates. Furthermore, they can contribute to the design of effective and context-specific women candidate training for future elections in the region.

Author Notes

Kerryn Baker and Thiago Cintra Oppermann are research fellows with SSGM. Their research on women's political leadership in Bougainville was part of a Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development-funded research project entitled Improving Women's Leadership, Political Participation and Decision Making in the Pacific. They participated in the international observation delegation for the 2015 Bougainville election; this In Brief was written in an individual capacity and not as members of the delegation.

