Papua New Guinea National Day Special

Reflections on the gift of independence

SAMUEL T. ABAL AMBASSADOR OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA



Today marks 48 years of independence for Papua New Guinea, or PNG, which received it graciously from Australia on Sept. 16, 1975. It was a gracious

giving ceremony on the Australian side, as well as a gracious receiving ceremony on the side of Papua New Guineans on this date less than 50 years ago.

On a personal note, let me add that I had just come down from the highlands to start university while the country was organizing itself for independence. My fellow students and I should have been going about our business of learning, but we were "highlanders" and this was war, or so it seemed at the time.

I was just starting my degree at the University of PNG in Port Moresby, after coming down from the highlands, and we students watched very closely the independence ceremony as it was happening in Konedobu, a Port Moresby suburb.

I must add that it was personal because my father the late Sir Tei Abal was the opposition leader at the time, while the late Sir Michael T. Somare was the prime minister receiving the country's independence.

As most Papua New Guineans of the time would testify, it was certainly a moment of great excitement because a very diverse nation of 1,000 tribes speaking some 860 languages was trying to decide how it could come together to form a unified nation. The moment truly exemplified our state motto of "Unity in Diversity."

Many may remember that the late 1950s and '60s was the time when "freedom" from colonialism and independence was being achieved, especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America. For PNG, independence was a foregone conclusion.

For us at the University of PNG, however, it was a confusing time. We were studying, but there was also uncertainty. Out of all the university students gathering from all over PNG that year, our group coming down from the highlands was quickly noticed.

At the time, my father was the leader of the largest political party, the United Party, which had strong support from many highlanders who said they believed PNG was not yet ready for independence. They felt that a few more years under Australian administration was necessary.

As we stand on this 48th year of independence, we could venture into some sort of review on whether we should have



Papua New Guinea is home to 14 active and 22 dormant volcanoes. GETTY IMAGES

waited longer under Australian administration for some five to 10 years before gaining full independence. Perhaps by then many could have finished university and worked with the Australians at least for five years. But as it is, we have come a long way, and this just allows us to review and realize at the end that it was of God that it happened as it did. All glory goes to God!

At the university there were debates and discussions on independence, but they were never fiery or regionalist. There was some sort of serenity there, and as a student at the time I can surely attest that there was never any animosity between the different groups.

God blessed our country by protecting us with our resources. Some 97% of PNG land remains with villages who own all of it. We are now opening up through different economic programs, including special economic zones where Japanese and other foreign entities can own or rent and establish their business. We welcome interested parties to contact the embassy for more information. Thank you.

This content was compiled in collaboration with the embassy. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the newspaper.









Left: The dingo is endemic to Papua New Guinea. Right: A Raggiana bird-of-paradise flutters on a branch in Varirata National Park. GETTY IMAGES

The wreckage of an airplane stands as a memorial to World War II on

the island of Bougainville. GETTY IMAGES

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to the People of Papua New Guinea on the Occasion of the Anniversary of Their Independence New Guinea impatiens hawkeri flowers are a national symbol of Papua New Guinea. GETTY IMAGES

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