

Papua New Guinea is a Christian Country

Hon. Jimson Sauk, MP

1. Media Statement of April 19, 1994

“BAN NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS IN PNG”

A call today, by a member of Parliament, is to ban all non-Christian religion in the country.

Member for Kandep, Jimson Sauk, said the government, and all the churches, should rally behind him, when he introduces a private member's bill, in the November session, to amend sections of the Constitution, which allows non-Christian religions to come into the country.

“This is a Christian country, and we cannot allow our Christian values and beliefs to be eroded by an influx of non-Christian groupings,” said Mr Sauk.

He said, “Those non-Christian religions are known to create strife and wars in the countries they influence, and we have reason to ban them from our country, before they get out of hand.”

“I want all the 109 members of Parliament, and the Melanesian Council of Churches, to support my call for the interest of this country,” he said.

He said we can allow any Christian religion to come into our country, but not the non-Christians.

“Whether these non-Christian religions like it or not, it is their problem, because our people do not like them, and it is only proper we leaders should legislate against it.”

Mr Sauk said the preamble of our Constitution recognises Christian values and ethics, but, the fact that it also allows for the exercising of religious freedom, has led to the abuse of that freedom.

“As elected leaders, we must specify on the types of religions that we want to freely take root in this country, because other so-called religious organisations also strive to promote political and cultural influences, which leads to serious conflicts around the world,” Mr Sauk said.

2. Interview with T. Aerts, held on 15-5-1994

Q. Recently, the newspaper reported that you intended to submit a bill to Parliament, in order to change the Constitution. Is this bill something new?

A. There are regularly proposals made in Parliament to change the Constitution, because this is the proper task of the elected members of Parliament. Judges and courts have to uphold the existing laws; we parliamentarians make these laws, and so make for a better living.

One other example of a proposed change in the Constitution regards the abolition of the provincial government system, found in the Micah Report, although this proposal is now going to be redrafted, and to be submitted again.

The proposal, I want to make in the next session of Parliament, is new, in so far as nobody before me has tried to discuss the issue of religious freedom, as found in the Constitution.

Q. In which way does the text of the Constitution cause problems for this particular issue?

A. There is ambiguity in the Constitution. On one part, the Constitution claims that Papua New Guinea is a Christian country, and this corresponds with the facts. There are Catholics, Lutherans, United church, Apostolic church, and so on, who add up to well over 90 percent of the people in this nation. Maybe not all of these Christians are active and outspoken believers, but they do come from Christian families, and maybe 75 percent of them (like Michael Somare, Paias Wingti, and myself) were trained in Mission schools. Deep down, we all are, and feel, like Christians.

Q. What is, then, the problem with the provisions of the Constitution?

A. The preamble of the Constitution rightly says that we are a “Christian country”, but there is also Section 45, which allows for religious freedom, in general, and this section is nowadays used to allow Muslims, Baha’i, Hindu, Shinto, Mormons, and others, to enter freely into Papua New Guinea.

My proposal for a special Bill views, more precisely, the latter group of people, which are now made particularly welcome, since the government of the day has launched its “Look North” policy. Thus, instead of only maintaining the old links with Australia and New Zealand – down South – the attention is nowadays, rather, turned to Malaysia and China, and other countries to the North, which all do not share our Christian heritage.

Q. Still, apart from Section 45, the preamble of the Constitution makes also provision for PNG’s age-old traditions, and these traditions were not specifically Christian either.

A. That is true. But the meaning of the Constitution is to respect the religion of our people, as seen at the time when the Constitution was drafted. The intention was, then, to include, for instance, traditional worship, or, also, its newer forms, as cargo cults. It did not, however, include an influx of non-Christian religions, none of whom were here in the early 1970s. The situation today is completely different.

Q. What do you mean by “completely different”?

A. I am a politician; I have to see that we have good laws. I am not a pastor, or a minister of religion. But I am a Christian, too, and our laws must uphold our Christian principles. Hence, I have to defend the name of Jesus, my Saviour. He is the one who died for us. He is the one who gave His blood for us. We are saved by His blood only, and not by the blood of Mohammed, or Baha’u’llah (whom the Baha’i venerate).

It is not good to allow other people from other countries in PNG, so that, in the end, we are burdened with the problems they experience now. By this, I mean the hardships of religious wars between different religions, as we see them happen in the Middle East, and elsewhere, too. We are a Christian country, and it should stay like that.

Q. If we are a Christian country, we must be tolerant and respect other people's beliefs. Therefore, religious freedom is part of our Christian faith, and not something completely foreign.

A. We must be clear about our values and priorities. As Christians, we do not object that other people believe otherwise. Whatever they do privately, or in their houses, is OK with us. But this does not apply to public life, for which our laws are made.

Q. How can you believe and say one thing, and do another thing?

A. We are not talking here about private matters only. But there are problems of internal peace. Let me give you three examples.

1. When preachers of foreign religions apply to come to PNG, there should be specific *migration laws*, which do not allow them to do so, to conduct different religious services, and cause unrest.

2. Even if outsiders were allowed by NIDA (National Investment and Development Authority), or now, by IPA (Investment Promotion Authority), to start a *business enterprise* only, but this front acts as a religious agency, then they should be stopped, whenever they upset the internal peace and good order of the country.

3. There is a problem, too, when adherents of foreign, non-Christian religions want to build their places of worship, and ask for *plots of ground*. Such requests should not be approved, and the Lands Department should be obliged to follow the appropriate legislation.

Q. Would such legislation not jeopardise the position of Papua New Guinea on the world scene of the nations?

A. Not at all. We all know of Russia, which, at least, at one stage, forbade the selling, and even the free distribution, of Bibles. We know of India, which does severely restrict the entry of new Christian missionaries into the country; if they come to study, OK, but after two years they must go. And, of course, you must not try to build a Christian place of worship in a Muslim nation. Why should we allow them to do what they do not allow us to do? What is so special about PNG, that we cannot show our true colours, just as other nations do?

Q. Do you think that this is the right time to act? Do you have the numbers to pass a Bill, restricting religious freedom?

A. Right now we are at the talking stage; we are investigating various possibilities; we are seeking opinions about the interpretation of the Constitution. But the time is ripe to act, now that the numbers of foreign believers are still small, about one percent, expatriates included, as the census figures of 1990 make clear.

If we talk about numbers in Parliament, we must start from the 109 elected members. We, thus, need 73 favourable votes to have a two-thirds majority. The problem we face is, after all, a problem of the people whom the Parliamentarians represent. If part of the Constitution is not good for the people, then it has to be changed, and this is not impossible. Actually, there are many influential people in PNG, who think like that. If the PNG Council of Churches, the successor of the older Melanesian Council of Churches, and which represents about 85 percent of all Christians in PNG, would speak out against some sections of the present Constitution, then that part of the Constitution is going to be changed, and PNG can truly be a “Christian country”.