



PNG Speaker clarifies Parliament restoration and unity project

PNG Speaker Hon. Theo Zurenuoc says removal of two artifacts not an attack on culture and part of a bigger and more important process towards reforming and modernizing Parliament – as well as building national unity and identity.

The Speaker of the PNG Parliament Theo Zurenuoc has issued a stirring defence of his Restoration, Reformation and Modernisation of Parliament project firmly stating that it is necessary to develop and achieve national unity and identity.

Despite the criticisms and controversies that have surrounded his actions in removing two pieces of traditional artifacts from the national Parliament and seeking to replace them with a unifying Christian symbol – Zurenuoc remains undeterred.

He has also dismissed the furore over the removal of traditional artifacts saying the two items - the Totem Pole and Lintel - were divisive in itself, depicting indecent carved images that did not represent all of Papua New

Guinea – and needed to be replaced by a symbol that unites the whole country.

The Speaker further contends that the reaction to the removal of the artifacts is a sideshow that is deviating from the main purpose of a bigger vision to restore integrity and respect to Parliament, and build national unity and identity.

“When I was elected as Speaker of the 9th National Parliament in August 2012, I committed myself to restore the integrity and return the respect of our people to our national Parliament,” says Zurenuoc.

“As I contemplated the restoration of Parliament, I foresaw that the vision to restore the standard of Parliament would extend beyond the chamber and precincts of Parliament. This vision

would link to the national Government’s effort to restore and reform our nation.”

“I sensed that this vision would have a powerful effect to aid the transformation of PNG into a God fearing, modern and prosperous nation as envisaged by the Vision 2050. That national transformation would be realized in the restoration and reformation exercise of Parliament.”

Zurenuoc admits it has been a great challenge.

“We continue to clean up the filth, and remove the decay that exists in the attitudes of people working for our Parliament,” he says.

“We have been reviewing the infrastructure – both the systems and the physical assets. We have been working to restore this House by upgrading, modernizing and strengthening the support systems and restructuring the organizational units.”

“We will be reforming relevant legislations that will make the Parliament chamber function much better in the future.”



Not an Act against Culture

The House Committee and Speaker's initiatives have attracted both support and opposition.

Zurenuoc says the criticism has been based on lack of information and misunderstanding about their intentions.

"You may have been informed to believe that all our arts and cultural items adorning our House will be removed and destroyed but I assure you that it is not true," he says.

He says the artifacts removed has been confined to two items – the Mask Lintels at the main entrance of Parliament and a Totem Pole in the Grand Hall.

"Our effort was not an act against our culture. It is not my intention to destroy our culture and our unique individual heritage at all. The House Committee was very explicit in removing the two specific sets of objects to make way for other objects of greater national significance."

"Let me also state that our action was not intended to discriminate, demean and or insult any or one section of our people. To do so would go against our purpose to promote national unity. Our action was part of a national project that was based on careful deliberation and sound judgment by the House Committee."

Critics have maintained that the Speaker and the House Committee's actions are illegal and is a destruction of cultural properties.

Zurenuoc says the two artifacts are not cultural properties.

"The Totem Pole and the Lintels are not cultural properties. They are plain cultural artefacts depicting indecent carved images portraying part of a culture that is offensive, obscene and

inappropriate for the parliament. These items are not either "declared cultural property" or "proclaimed cultural property" by the Head of State."

"Further they are not duly registered under the auspices of the National Cultural (Property) Preservation Act 1965; for them to be recognized and protected as such."

According to the Speaker - a "national cultural property" means any property, movable or immovable that is of particular importance to the cultural heritage of the country that is declared to be national cultural property under Section 4 of the Cultural Property (Preservation) Act 1965. It may include artefacts as well as other items.

"Since they were not registered cultural properties; I formally requested the head of the appropriate government agency to come remove these items for preservation and safe keeping at the appropriate place- National Museum & Art Gallery. However, the request was turned down, so the will of the House Committee proceeded."

"In the Preamble to the Constitution; we committed ourselves to guard and

pass on to those who come after us our "noble customs" and the "Christian principles" that are ours now. Like the bold statement in the Preamble, the same sentiments are expressed elsewhere calling for the recognition of only the noble traditions and cultures. This is further articulated by the provisions of the Customs Recognition Act and the Constitution, which calls for the adoption, and recognition of a custom only to the extent that they are NOT inconsistent with the constitutional laws or statutes or repugnant to the general principles of humanity."

"Against this backdrop, the House Committee was of the view that any culture that encourages the depiction of naked images (indecent exposure) in any form was not a noble culture. Hence, it was decided that the carved images of naked men and woman placed at the National Parliament was inappropriate. It is repugnant to the generally accepted norms and principles and so it must be removed from Parliament and handed over to the appropriate authorities."





Acting within the powers of the Speaker



Zurenuoc is also adamant that the House Committee and he as Speaker acted within their powers in removing the items.

"The Speaker is the constitutionally mandated head of the house charged with the power to oversee the administration of parliament and the House Committee is the extension of parliament responsible for advising the Speaker on all matters concerning the House," he says.

Zurenuoc points out that in addition to certain executive functions given to the Speaker, the Speaker is formally vested with the responsibility for administering the affairs of the National Parliament,

and with the direction and control of an independent Parliamentary Service.

He says the above proposition was factored in the Constitution particularly section 108 (Functions of the Speaker and Deputy Speaker) which provides that: "The Speaker is responsible...for upholding the dignity of the Parliament, maintaining order in it, regulating its proceedings and administering its affairs, and for controlling the precincts of the Parliament as defined by or under an Act of the Parliament."

"Therefore, as the mandated leader responsible for the parliament and acting with the advice of the House Committee, I exercised

those powers bestowed in me as the Speaker of the 9th Parliament (with the advice of the House Committee) in commissioning the Unity Project that saw the pulling down of two items that were considered to be out of place and time," says Zurenuoc.

"So the move to remove the totem poles and lintels is legitimate, well founded and in order. There were no cultural properties damaged and there were no laws breached in the process. It is a legitimate act by the Speaker and the Permanent Parliamentary Committee responsible for the upkeep and daily administration of parliament.

Building national unity and identity

The Speaker is also pursuing the idea of Parliament as a unifying institution noting that it is the greatest assembly of the peoples of PNG.

"It is a unique place where 7 million people from a thousand tribes/nations who are divided by over 800 different languages in rugged mountain terrains and valleys, remote islands and far flung atolls come together through 111 representatives to become one people and one nation," Zurenuoc says.

He adds that apart from the Constitution – Parliament and its physical infrastructure is in itself the only physical monument of PNG's national unity – and this unity needs to be founded on ideals.

"How would you mould 1000 tribes into a single nation? What will be the basis to unite this nation – the common ideal?" Zurenuoc asks.

Zurenuoc answers his own question: "The Christian Faith."

"We naturally arrived at this because not a single Member of Parliament would deny that we, as an independent nation state, upon proclaiming independence declared and adopted Christian principles to be the guiding principles together with those of our ancestors noble traditions."

Zurenuoc then goes on to list the various aspects that he says cements Christianity as the Faith and ideological foundation of national unity: The Constitution acknowledges it in the preamble; the National Anthem acknowledges God; The Lords Prayer is recited before any official business; Officials swear on the Bible for the Oath of Office; Grace is said before every meal; and PNG children are



encouraged to learn to pray and pay reverence to the God of the Christian Faith.

"Papua New Guinea is a member of the global village as a result of advancement in technology and opening up our country to foreign interests. Consequently, we are now open to the varying and diverse social, political, economic, technological and religious forces that have the potential to negatively influence or even destroy the unity and ideological foundations and moral fabrics of our society," says Zurenuoc.

"In the midst of all the varying forces at play, this nation faces a real threat of disintegration. We know that PNG comprises 1,000 nations in one nation. The natural divisions are obvious. The risk for disintegration is real. Unless we as a nation identify and quickly embrace a common ideology that can form the basis upon which our people can come together, find commonality and embrace one another for our common good we are threatened by the forces of greed, disunity and poverty."

"We have resolved to promote the Christian faith as the ideology from which we must firmly establish our moral and ethical values. We have done this based on extensive research and having satisfied ourselves of the various beliefs and ideals on offer. These include naturalism, rationalism and postmodernism, being the chief competing ideologies. We have established that theism, which anchors our Christian faith, is the best we have on earth in which to establish our national unity and identity foundation."

"The House Committee noted that the Mask Lintels and the Totem Pole have been featured prominently in the architecture of the Parliament Building for many years. Although they were intricately carved and form part of this iconic infrastructure, they seem to carry offensive and inappropriate messages. They also occupied prominent positions at the main entrance and in the grand

hall, which are the most strategic places where we could put a symbol conveying the message of our national ideal, national identity and unity. Therefore, the Committee resolved that they be replaced with a more relevant and meaningful object that conveys the right message."

"It is the intention of the Committee to give prominence to the Christian faith, as the accepted ideal upon which the guaranteed and strongest unity of these diversified people will rest into the future. We intended to utilize the monumental building infrastructure of Parliament to promote the ideal to the Nation and give this Nation its true identity as a Christian Nation."

"In place of the Mask Lintel we intend to place a meaningful and relevant text from the Bible and in place of the Totem Pole a new monument will be built on a foundation of stone representing the infinite and eternal Word of the living God. On the column leading to the top – we will be inscribe the word – 'unity' in all the 800 plus language of our diversified nation. It will feature an eternal flame at the top representing the eternal presence and direction of the Holy Spirit of God over the nation of PNG."

Defining Moment

According to Zurenuoc – they want to build on an ideology that most, if not all Papua New Guineans can subscribe to as PNG has reached a defining moment in its history.

He also expresses doubt about whether the diverse customs, tradition, cultures and ideals of the past can hold the country together in the future.

"That is why we have opted for the ideals of the Christian faith from which we can truly unite our people and draw the virtues of integrity in order to manage our national affairs," he says.

"We want to inform the world from Parliament that we are a Christian Nation."

CULTURE EVOLVES

According to the Speaker we are the product of those who were before us. We can never be permanently the people before us. In fact we are what today is defining us and a bit of what those before us defined. Culture is composite of yesterday and today in its most comprehensive sense, as the following should remind us:

- Cultures are created – they have evolved.
- Culture is never static – it is continuously evolving.
- The Mind and Times determine and design cultures.
- Individuals design the tomorrow today.
- The island of Papua New Guinea contains the greatest cultural diversities of peoples on the planet.
- Carvings alone are not the entire culture – it is one part, and an expression of our culture and beliefs.
- Cultural object or Carvings are an expression of our cultures and beliefs. They carry messages and as many of us know represent something.
- Language is evolving – Pidgin is the proof (it evolved from a time and as a result of circumstances).
- Language diversity – a product of the curse (nothing to be boastful of)
- Even English is not your culture.
- Even the lifestyle we live today is not ours – we are the result of another influence.
- Culturally PNG is a divided nation – you promote traditional culture, you promote disunity and disintegration.
- Christian faith is our hope for a common national foundation – the common denominator.
- Christianity is the hope for an ideal today and a perfect future – eternity.