Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste both have new coalition governments following mid-year parliamentary elections, but the processes that produced them and the outcomes could not be more dissimilar. While PNG's election was in the news for weeks for all the wrong reasons, the government that swiftly took office following the election is currently looking solid. Timor-Leste, in contrast, conducted a copybook election but government formation was slow and fraught and the minority government that was ultimately appointed is looking very shaky.

Voting in PNG was scheduled to run on a rolling basis from 24 June to 8 July. From the outset, the process went into meltdown. Tens of thousands of eligible voters were missing from the official electoral roll, voting materials were delayed, ballot papers fell well short of voter numbers, polling locations and dates were changed with little if any notice, and polling had to be extended in some districts. At some polling stations, voters whose names were not on the roll were turned away in large numbers; elsewhere, all those who presented were issued with ballot papers including the improbably young. Unsurprisingly, rumours of manipulation and malfeasance abounded. Part way through the polling period, the Electoral Advisory Committee resigned declaring that the PNG Electoral Commission had starved it of the information needed to monitor the election effectively and the Observer Group from the Commonwealth took the unusual step of calling for an immediate and thorough review of all aspects of the electoral process.

Vote counting was protracted and controversial. Although the original 24 July date for return of writs was extended to 28 July, over 20 per cent of seats were still undeclared at that point and counting in the final seat dragged into late September as officials struggled to find a safe location for it (Dorney 18/8/2017). In several parts of the highlands the count triggered rioting and violence, and by October the number of election-related killings had climbed to over 30, with some estimates suggesting a higher figure still (Blades 3/10/2017). The death toll included four police.

The voters of Timor-Leste went to the polls on a single day – 22 July – and voting was orderly and peaceful. Voting materials arrived before polling was due to start, the polls opened on time and voters turned out in force armed with their voting cards and were quickly identified and marked off the roll. At close of voting, votes were counted in the polling centres under the scrutiny of party officials and observers, the tally was formally recorded in each centre and the unofficial national results were circulating the next day. The provisional results were formally released by the National Electoral Commission a few days later. The EU observer group commended the election as ‘well-administered, credible and inclusive’, and conducted in a ‘peaceful environment’ (EU EOM 25/7/2017).

Post-election government formation in the two countries involves very different constitutional mechanisms. PNG has a Westminster-style constitution and the prime minister is elected by the parliament and formally appointed by the Head of State. The process begins with the return of writs following the election, when the Head of State invites the political party with a plurality of votes to form government. At the first meeting of the new parliament, the party approached by the Head of State puts forward its prime ministerial nominee. Under Timor-Leste’s semi-presidential constitution, the prime minister is nominated by the political party with the largest vote share or by the alliance of political parties with the majority of seats. The President proceeds to appoint that nominee after consulting with the political parties represented in the parliament. This process engages the party machines: the members of parliament themselves do not vote on the leader.

On the date fixed for the return of writs in PNG, only 88 of 111 seats had been declared, of which the Electoral Commissioner conveyed only 80 to the Governor-General, the lowest proportion in the country’s history (Tlozek 29/7/2017). There were suggestions that the delays in declarations advantaged the party of the incumbent prime minister, Peter O’Neill, which was duly invited to form government (May 9/8/2017). The ombudsman intervened to seek an extension of the deadline for writs to maximise the number of elected MPs able to vote for the prime minister (Tlozek 29/7/2017). When the parlia-
Intervenes after Election Ends in Controversy

What Next

Inclusive Political Settlements - Prospects for Stability or Instability

Author Note

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Endnotes

2. Constitution s.130A(e) and Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates 2003, s.63.
4. Ron May, personal communication.
5. The Opposition subsequently stonewalled discussion of the government’s additional budget proposal in parliament.

References

Dorney, S. 18/8/2017. Will the PNG Election Ever End? The Interpreter: A Lowy Institute Weblog.