THE 2007 ELECTION IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

In June-July 2007 Papua New Guinea held its seventh post-independence national election. Papua New Guinea remains one of the few post-colonial states with an unbroken record of national elections held on schedule and producing popularly accepted overall results. In 2007 the country maintained this record, successfully completing its seventh election and producing yet another broadly-based coalition government, under the continuing leadership of Sir Michael Somare. As in previous elections in this geographically challenging and socially fractious country, the election in 2007 was marked by problems of logistics, electoral irregularities, and sporadic violence, but less so than in 2002. As outlined below, Papua New Guinea has made a smooth transition to preferential voting, although a number of issues need to be addressed before the next election in 2012.

The previous national election in Papua New Guinea, in 2002, had been widely described as the worst in the country’s history, with a good deal of electoral irregularities, intimidation and violence. This was especially the case in the populous highlands, where voting in six Southern Highlands electorates was abandoned, necessitating supplementary elections. Between 2002 and 2007 considerable time and money was expended in efforts to address problems which had arisen in 2002, prompting questions about how the 2007 elections compared to the 2002 elections, and what problems remain and require action before the next elections in 2012. The 2007 election was also notable in two other respects:

First, the election provided an opportunity to test the impact of the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) on party development after a full term of parliament and two elections. The OLIPPAC had been introduced shortly before the 2002 election and was primarily designed to strengthen political parties and promote greater stability in the National Parliament. The Somare government, elected in 2002, subsequently became the first government since independence to last a full five-year term in office.

Second, 2007 was the first national election under the new limited preferential voting (LPV) system, which replaced the previous first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system after the 2002 elections. Although ten by-elections were held between 2003 and 2006 under LPV, there has been much interest in evaluating the impact of LPV on a national election.

Campaign posters in Wewak
Some electoral statistics
Nominations opened on 4 May 2007 and closed a week later. A total of 2760 candidates nominated (four of those died before the election) – on average just over 25 per electorate, with a high of 69 in Oro Provincial. This was slightly less than the number of candidates in 2002, making 2007 the first election since independence in which the number of candidates did not increase. The total included 101 women – a small figure but a record nonetheless. The majority of candidates stood as independents – with 1284 candidates (46.5 per cent) having endorsement from one of the 34 registered political parties.

Voting commenced on 30 June, with one-day polling in most Highlands’ electorates, and was completed on 20 July. There were 3.9 million registered voters (from a population of around 6.3 million), and although turnout figures are not very reliable due to the inaccuracy of electoral rolls, voter turnout was, as usual, high.

Electoral administration and the poll
Prior to the election, the Electoral Commissioner, Andrew Trawen, initiated the establishment of an Inter-Departmental Electoral Committee (IDEC). The IDEC, chaired by the Registrar of Political Parties, Paul Bengo, coordinated the various state agencies involved in the election through a whole-of-government approach. Provincial election steering committees, chaired by the provincial administrators, were also set up in each province. These generally seem to have provided a useful function in fostering cooperation and coordinated action between agencies.

In the lead-up to the polling, the Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission (PNGEC) and civil society groups supported by the AusAID-funded Electoral Support Program (ESP), conducted campaigns to increase public awareness about the electoral process, particularly to help people understand the LPV system. In some provinces HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns were conducted along with election awareness. Although awareness campaigns seldom reached more remote communities, most voters seemed to cope with the new system. Informal voting was generally low, at less than 3 per cent nationally (though in some electorates a low informal vote may have been due to assisted voting, sometimes pressed on voters by interested parties, or bloc voting along clan lines).

A major problem in the 2002 election was the electoral roll, which was hugely inflated by the names of deceased persons, under-age voters, multiple listings for the same person, and fictitious characters (collectively referred to as ‘ghosts’). In September 2005 it was decided to compile a completely new roll. This ambitious exercise was completed in time for the election, but preliminary rolls were not available for checking in most districts until January 2007.

Compiling the electoral roll has always been a difficult task in Papua New Guinea, partly because of the demanding logistics posed by terrain and poor infrastructure. In addition, some candidates and their supporters manage to manipulate the enumeration process, and some communities – disenchanted with the political process – have refused to be enumerated.

The 2007 roll was a definite improvement on its predecessor, but there were inevitably still instances of duplication, omission and ghost names, and in a number of cases villages were listed in the wrong ward, making it difficult for voters to find their names. Based on personal observations, in East Sepik Province fewer than 10 per cent of voters were unable to find their names when they turned up to vote. In some other provinces the percentage was said to be much higher.

Campaigning
In most electorates, the political campaigning period was fairly quiet. Some candidates made an event of their nomination, turning up with groups of supporters in traditional dress, and the major parties staged rallies across the country. In a few communities, several candidates were brought together to ad-
dress gatherings of people and answer questions. Most candidates, however, seem to have concentrated on small gatherings of potential supporters and the use of *komiti* networks (networks of supporters) with agents operating at village level, while a number did little or no campaigning. Broader policy issues, such as development, law and order, and corruption, were aired during the campaign, particularly at party rallies, but most candidates concentrated on local issues and local credibility.

Parties were not strongly in evidence, but the leaders of the larger parties toured the provinces, and party-endorsed candidates were identified as such on their campaign posters, which were well in evidence on urban shop fronts and village houses. Many endorsed candidates complained that they had received little or no material support from their parties, although there were allegations that the National Alliance was using its position in government to disburse large sums of money. Some candidates were said to have spent several hundred thousand kina in feasting and making payments and gifts to potential supporters, as well as in transportation (including helicopter hire) and maintenance of their campaign teams. Others got by on small amounts from their own savings and contributions from their kin. Those who spent large amounts of money did not necessarily win, but there is little doubt that money helped gain election.

Security

A heavy security presence – comprising 11,700 police, Papua New Guinea Defence Force and Correctional Service personnel – was deployed before, during and after polling. In most electorates local auxiliary police also accompanied polling officials. Compared with 2002, the 2007 election was generally an orderly affair, notwithstanding a number of clashes between rival candidates and a number (estimated at around 40-50) of election-related deaths. In the highlands, where tensions are always greatest, the decision to hold elections first in the volatile Southern Highlands, under tight security, proved to be a good decision – elections proceeded fairly smoothly in the province and this set something of a precedent elsewhere.

Voting

In a number of electorates voting was briefly delayed by bad weather, transport problems, or the late arrival of electoral materials (which, in at least one case, was the fault of private helicopter contractors), and in several electorates voting was extended by a day or two. As in previous elections, there were instances of under-age and multiple voting, intimidation of voters (especially women), bloc voting, and tampering with ballot papers. In a few instances polling officials were said to be in the pay of certain candidates. Although these problems were greatest in Highlands’ electorates, they were not exclusive to the Highlands.

Despite the problems mentioned above, electoral abuses seem to have been significantly lower in 2007 than in 2002. This can likely be attributed to a range of factors, including the heavy security presence, better coordination amongst electoral officials and others, the efforts of dedicated polling officials, and perhaps better public awareness. Unlike 2002 (when in one instance ballot boxes secured in a metal container outside a police station in Enga were ‘bombed’ with 44-gallon drums of aviation fuel), there appear to have been few attempts to hijack ballot boxes.

Counting

Notwithstanding some disagreement over where counting of ballot papers should take place, spoiling tactics by losing candidates in some electorates, and the complexities of the new LPV system, counting was completed with a brief extension of time. The writs for all 109 seats were returned by 8 August, in time for the first meeting of the National Parliament. To date, however, only 23 of the 109 results have been posted on the PNGEC’s website and the team putting together the 2007 election study has not been able to obtain results for a number electorates.

Some 55 challenges were referred to the court of disputed returns – this is less than the number of challenges in 2002, although that may be a reflection of the higher cost of disputing a result rather than greater satisfaction with outcomes. Of these, more than twenty were withdrawn or dismissed; the remaining cases are before the courts.
The results

There is always a high turnover of sitting members in Papua New Guinea elections: between 1972 and 2002 the rate of turnover was around 50-55 per cent; in 2002 it reached almost 80 per cent; and in 2007 43 sitting members were returned (an attrition rate of 61 per cent). Among those who were not returned in the 2007 election were former prime ministers Rabbie Namaliu and Paias Wingti. Although Namaliu led on the first preference count, he lost in the distribution of preferences. Wingti was also leading on first preferences but lost on the twenty-fourth exclusion – he challenged the result and a recount has been ordered. Namaliu and Wingti were amongst eight party leaders who lost their seats. Another former prime minister, Sir Julius Chan, was re-elected after losing his seat in 1997. Only one woman – sitting member Dame Carole Kidu – was returned.

Of the 109 successful candidates, 21 were independents, although some of these were known to have party alignments and joined parties soon after their results were declared. Of the party-endorsed candidates, the Somare-led National Alliance (NA) – the senior partner in the outgoing coalition government – won 27 seats. Its nearest rival was the Papua New Guinea Party of Sir Mekere Morauta, which won 8 seats. Pangu Pati was a big loser, gaining only 5 seats. The New Generation Party (NGP), established by former Finance minister Bart Philemon shortly before the election (following his split with Sir Michael Somare) could only manage 4 seats. Among the 34 parties registered, 21 won seats, but 10 of these had only one or two MPs. Of the 21 independents, 13 joined the NA before parliament sat. The party status of elected members is summarised below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party status of elected MPs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Alliance</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papua New Guinea Party</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People’s Action Party</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANGU Pati</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>People’s Democratic Movement</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Resources Party</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People’s Progress Party</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Generation Party</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>People’s National Congress</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural Development Party</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People’s Party</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNG Country Party</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>People’s Labour Party</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Melanesian Liberal Party</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Party</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNG Labour Party</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanesian Alliance</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNG National Party</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People First Party</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Advance Party</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNG Conservative Party</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>109</td>
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In accordance with the OLIPPCAC, as leader of the party with the most seats, Sir Michael Somare (the member for East Sepik Provincial) was invited to form government, and was elected prime minister by a vote of 86 to 21. He heads a coalition of 14 parties. In 2008 Somare celebrates forty years in parliament, fifteen of those as prime minister. The member for Abau Open, Dr Puka Temu was appointed deputy prime minister. Former prime minister Sir Julius Chan was initially nominated as opposition leader, but, as the provincial member, he stepped aside to take up the role of provincial governor. Instead, another former prime minister, Sir Mekere Morauta, became leader of the relatively small opposition.
Assessing the outcome
There is little doubt that the 2007 election was a better managed, less corrupt, and more peaceful election than that of 2002. This is notwithstanding the fact that candidates, voters and officials had to deal with a new system with which they were not familiar. This improvement was in part due to the substantial and generally well-organised and well-disciplined presence of the security forces. It is also due to the groundwork laid by the PNGEC and the ESP, and to improved coordination through IDEC’s whole-of-government approach.

Continuing Problems
Despite this improved result, some of the problems evident in earlier elections remain:
- the electoral roll needs to be further cleansed, perhaps with greater input from the council ward level if that can be done without politicizing the process;
- there needs to be greater effort to ensure the impartiality of returning officers and other electoral officials, most of whom are seconded temporarily from their jobs as teachers or public servants, and increased training to ensure that they fully understand their tasks;
- it is clear that bloc voting is deeply entrenched in some communities; however, in accordance with the Organic Law on National and Local-Level Government Elections, the secrecy of the ballot needs to be better safeguarded, particularly for women, to ensure that voters are not being pressured into voting for someone they do not want to support (in 2007 it was decided that there should be separate polling booths for men and women, but this seems to have been observed in very few electorates);
- recurring problems of late arrival of funds and (alleged) non-payment of allowances to polling officials and security personnel need to be addressed; and
- some nine months after the declaration of candidates, full results of voting (showing first preferences and preference distributions) have been made publicly available for only 23 electorates, allegedly because some provincial returning officers are yet to submit their returns. This is a relatively new problem, and requires serious attention.

Strengthening Parties?
With respect to the OLIPPAC, while it almost certainly contributed to the fact that the Somare government of 2002-2007 was the first to survive a full parliamentary term in office, it did not prevent parties from splitting over a significant parliamentary vote, nor did it entirely eliminate the propensity for votes of no confidence during the 2002-2007 parliament. More importantly, it is doubtful whether it has to date achieved much in relation to the strengthening of the political party system. In 2002, 43 parties were registered with the registrar of political parties. Of this number, 24 won seats in the 2002-2007 parliament. Subsequently, a number of the smaller parties merged with larger parties or languished and were deregistered, bringing the number down to 17 in 2006.

However, on the eve of the 2007 election, as in previous elections, new parties emerged, bringing the number back up to 34. As before, a number of these parties appeared to be essentially ‘one-person’ parties. Thirteen of the 34 parties were unsuccessful in 2007; six won only 1 seat and four won 2 seats. Mergers on the part of some of the smaller parties again seem likely. The registrar of political parties, with support from the National Research Institute and the Australian National University-based Centre for Democratic Institutions, is encouraging political parties to develop clear policy platforms, to review (and familiarize themselves with) their constitutions, and to build up their organisational structures. Under amendments to the OLIPPAC in 2003, all parliamentary parties now have public funding for a secretariat. But there is still a long way to go: in April 2008, nine months after the election, not one party had submitted its report on electoral funding, as required under the OLIPPAC.

There is concern in some quarters about the continuing large numbers of independent candidates, and discussion of ways to eliminate them. A requirement that all candidates be affiliated with a party, however, is unlikely to curb peoples’ enthusiasm for contesting (it is more likely to cause a proliferation of one-person parties), and it would probably adversely affect women: in 2007, 65 of the 101 women candidates stood as independents.

Impact of LPV
Regarding the impact of LPV, it is difficult to reach firm conclusions about its impacts, with only partial figures available on polling outcomes. It is not yet possible even to say what proportion of candidates who were leading on first preferences came out as eventual winners – certainly a number of candidates who were leading on first preferences eventually lost. Anecdotally, many candidates, polling officials and observers claimed that the 2007 election was
more ‘accommodative’ and ‘friendly’ than previous elections under FPTP – which was one basic objective of the reform. However, observers reported little evidence of systematic alliances and preference swapping amongst candidates (although, as in previous elections, a number of minor candidates seem to have been encouraged to stand in order to split the local vote of a rival candidate). Rather, many candidates were wary of preferences and, if they did not feel obliged to urge voters to vote first for a local son or daughter and give them their second preference, they quietly suggested that their supporters give their preferences to minor candidates who were unlikely to frustrate their electoral ambitions – which is certainly a rational strategy. One potential benefit from LPV lay in the possibility that a preferential system would benefit women, who might hope to pick up a good share of women’s second and third preferences, but this does not seem to have happened.

Prior to the election, it was frequently claimed that LPV would produce a better outcome since – unlike FPTP which had produced large numbers of MPs who were elected with less than 20 per cent of the vote (prompting Sir Michael Somare to once refer to the National Parliament as a ‘house of rejects’) – all elected candidates would receive at least 50 per cent plus 1 of the vote. This was of course misleading since, with large numbers of candidates and only three preferences, many ballot papers become ‘exhausted’ before a winning candidate emerged – as was evident in the by-elections held prior to 2007. From the figures so far available, it is evident that many candidates won with only 30-35 per cent of the total votes cast, and some with less – an improvement on FPTP, but less impressive than the proponents of LPV might have hoped for. In general, the figure seems to be higher in those electorates which had experienced a by-election under LPV, suggesting that preferences might have been used more effectively a second time round.

**Conclusion**

Papua New Guinea remains one of the few post-colonial states with an unbroken record of national elections held on schedule and producing popularly accepted overall results. In 2007 the country main-

tained this record, successfully completing its seventh election and producing yet another broadly-based coalition government, under the continuing leadership of Sir Michael Somare.

As in previous elections in this geographically challenging and socially fractious country, the election in 2007 was marked by problems of logistics, electoral irregularities, and sporadic violence, but less so than in 2002. A number of issues need to be addressed before the next election in 2012, such as further strengthening of the role political parties play in its democratic system, but Papua New Guinea has made a smooth transition to preferential voting.

This briefing note was written by Ron May, who spent six weeks as an observer in the East Sepik Province during the elections.

**References**


