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**DISORDERLY DEMOCRACY: POLITICAL TURBULENCE AND
INSTITUTIONAL REFORM IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA¹**

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Papua New Guinea is one of the few post-colonial states that has managed to maintain an unbroken record of democratic government. Parliamentary elections have been held regularly on schedule (the latest in June 2002), and although no government has lasted a full parliamentary term, every change of government has followed constitutional procedures. All changes of government (most of them by parliamentary votes of no confidence against the prime minister) have been accepted by both defeated members of parliament (MPs) and the general public. The judiciary has maintained its independence. Notwithstanding occasional tensions in relations between successive governments and elements within the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF), Papua New Guinea has not experienced a military coup. The Freedom House index ranks Papua New Guinea as 'free'.²

Yet despite this, both within Papua New Guinea and outside, commentators tend to portray Papua New Guinea as a country marked by political instability, if not chaos, with a state on the verge of collapse. In 1999, for example, Papua New Guinea's first prime minister, in the context of debate about electoral reform, referred to the country's National Parliament (of which he is still a member – and in 2002 again prime minister) as a house full of 'rejects', lacking a mandate to govern³, and on the eve of the 2002 national elections, the then prime minister, Sir Mekere Morauta, suggested that Papua New Guinea was 'on the verge of collapse'.⁴

¹ A version of this paper was published as "Turbulence and Reform", *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 14, Number 1, January 2003, pp. 154-165.

² For most of its history Papua New Guinea has had a rating of 2,2 or 2,3; between 1993/94 and 1997/98, however, it was rated 2,4, 'partly free'.

³ Reported in *Post-Courier* 7 September 1999.

⁴ See *The National* 22 May 2002. For a recent academic statement along these lines see Ben Reilly, "The Africanisation of the South Pacific", *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 54(3) 2000: 261-268.

Not only does Papua New Guinea exhibit many of the signs of a weak state⁵ - notably limited capacity to deliver services and a poorly developed sense of national identity – its political institutions seem to be becoming increasingly vulnerable to non-democratic pressures, from long adjournments of parliament and increasingly disorderly national elections to persistent unrest within the defence force. In a region which has given rise to such terms as ‘guided democracy’ (Sukarno’s Indonesia), ‘elite democracy’ (Post-Marcos Philippines), and ‘disciplined democracy’ (Burma after Ne Win), Papua New Guinea might perhaps be described as a ‘disorderly democracy’. The question posed by recent trends is whether the disorderly nature of Papua New Guinea’s politics is simply a reflection of the ‘Melanesian Way’ of doing things, and consistent with the maintenance of a democratic political system, or whether there is a growing disorder which threatens the continued viability of the country’s democratic system.

This paper examines the apparent disparity between the broad indications of successful democratic government and the widespread perceptions of governmental failure; reviews ongoing attempts to consolidate Papua New Guinea’s democratic institutions; and, in the light of the recently conducted national election, speculates on the prospects for democracy in the country which is commonly referred to by its own citizens as the ‘Land of the Unexpected’.

A brief political history⁶

The territories of Papua and New Guinea – the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, to the immediate north of Australia – became independent, as a single political entity, in 1975. The transition from colonial administration by Australia to independent statehood was achieved smoothly, with goodwill on both sides, though the comparative recency of localization and relatively low levels of education and administrative experience ensured that Australians and other foreigners continued to play an important role in both the public and private sectors in the early years of independence.

⁵ See Joel S Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). Elsewhere, I have argued that Papua New Guinea is a case of a weak state and weak society (R.J. May, “State, society and governance: reflections on a Philippines-Papua New Guinea comparison”, in P. Dauvergne (ed.), *Weak and Strong States in Asia-Pacific Societies*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, in association with the Department of International Relations, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1998, 60-76).

⁶ For more detailed accounts see Hank Nelson, *Papua New Guinea: Black Unity or Black Chaos?* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1972), David M. Lipset, “Papua New Guinea: the Melanesian ethic and the spirit of capitalism, 1975-1986”, in L. Diamond, J.J. Linz and S.M. Lipset (eds), *Democracy in Developing Countries. Volume 3 Asia* (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1989), Mark Turner, *Papua New Guinea: The Challenge of Independence* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1990), Sean Dorney, *Papua New Guinea. People, Politics and History Since 1975*. Revised edition (Sydney: ABC Books, 2000), and R.J. May, *State and Society in Papua New Guinea. The First Twenty-Five Years* (Adelaide: Crawford House Publishing, 2001). Also see Bill Standish, “Papua New Guinea in 1999-2000”, *The Journal of Pacific History* 36(3): 285-298.

Prior to substantive European contact towards the end of the nineteenth century, Papua New Guinea was an isolated and highly fragmented region. There was only limited contact amongst its 800 odd language groups, and warfare between neighbouring groups was endemic. Change came slowly. At independence Papua New Guinea had a population about three million, upwards of 85 per cent of whom lived in rural areas and were at least partly dependent on subsistence agriculture. (Twenty-two years later, population exceeds five million, but the other figures have not significantly changed.) In many parts of the country substantial contact with the outside world was quite recent: in the heavily populated highlands of the interior, first contact patrols were conducted in the 1930s and in the more remote areas a continuing administrative presence was not established until well into the 1950s.

On the eve of independence, the unity of the country was threatened by two separatist movements. In Papua and in Bougainville there were unilateral declarations of independence. Neither movement had great impact on the inevitable transition to independence, the leaders of both groups becoming members of the National Parliament in the independent state of Papua New Guinea. Provisions to accommodate the demands of the Bougainvilleans, however, provided the basis, after independence, for a system of provincial government (see below).

The independence constitution, which provided for a Westminster-style parliamentary system with a unicameral parliament, was drafted by a wholly Papua New Guinean Constitutional Planning Commission (CPC) which looked primarily to African models, but also appealed to a somewhat romantic notion of a 'Melanesian Way' characterized by egalitarian values and consensual decision making.⁷

Since 1977 the National Parliament has comprised 109 members: 89 of these represent single-member, geographically-defined 'open' electorates; the other 20 represent 'provincial' electorates coinciding with the country's twenty administrative divisions (nineteen provinces and the National Capital District). With the exception of the small Manus Province (which contains only one open electorate), each province contains between two and nine open electorates, and every voter thus has two votes: one for a provincial candidate and one for an open candidate.

At the last election before independence, in 1972, an embryonic party system had begun to emerge, and the development of a two-party-dominant system was seen

⁷ On the Melanesian Way, see Bernard Narokobi, *The Melanesian Way: Total Cosmic Vision of Life* (Boroko: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1980), papers in R.J May (ed.), *Priorities in Melanesian Development* (Canberra: The University of Papua and New Guinea and the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1973), and Tony Deklin, "Culture and democracy in Papua New Guinea: *marit or giamin marit?*", in R. Crocombe et al. (eds), *Culture and Democracy in the South Pacific* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1992), 35-48. For accounts of the process of constitution making, see A.J. Regan, O.Jessep and E.L. Kwa (eds), *Twenty Years of the Papua New Guinea Constitution* (Sydney: Law Book Company, 2001).

as being encouraged by the adoption of a single-member, first-past-the-post electoral system. In fact, however, a coherent political party system has not developed (see below).

Following his election in 1972 as chief minister in the pre-independence parliament, Michael (later Sir Michael) Somare became Papua New Guinea's first prime minister in 1975, heading a coalition dominated by the Pangu Pati, of which Somare was parliamentary leader, and the People's Progress Party (PPP) of Julius (later Sir Julius) Chan. The Somare-Chan government was returned in 1977, but in 1980, following a split within the governing coalition, Somare lost a vote of no confidence and Chan succeeded him as prime minister.

In 1982 Somare was returned as prime minister, heading a coalition in which Pangu initially had fifty seats, but the party split twice during the 1982-1987 parliament and in 1985 Somare lost office in another vote of no confidence. Former Pangu deputy leader Paias Wingti – who had formed his own party, The People's Democratic Movement (PDM) – succeeded him. Wingti remained prime minister after the elections of 1987, as head of another coalition government, but lasted only about a year in office before losing a vote of no confidence which named as prime minister the new Pangu leader, Rabbie (later Sir Rabbie) Namaliu, who had replaced Somare shortly before the vote. Namaliu remained in office for the rest of the parliamentary term, but following the election of 1992 narrowly lost the vote for prime minister to Wingti. In 1993, in an attempt to gain a reprieve from votes of no confidence, Wingti staged an unannounced resignation and immediate re-election as prime minister. The following year, however, the Supreme Court ruled Wingti's action unconstitutional; Wingti resigned and in a coalition reshuffle Chan returned as prime minister. In the election of 1997 Chan lost his seat (see below), and in the election aftermath was succeeded as prime minister by Bill Skate. Facing strong challenges to his leadership in early 1999, Skate resigned. In the ensuing parliamentary vote, former finance secretary and central bank governor Sir Mekere Morauta became prime minister. Morauta, who had become parliamentary leader of the PDM after Wingti lost his seat in 1997, led the country into the 2002 election, but PDM candidates fared badly in 2002 and Sir Michael Somare was returned as prime minister, heading another coalition government.

In short, between 1975 and June 2002 Papua New Guinea had eleven governments and six prime ministers; every government since independence has been a coalition, and no government to date has lasted a full parliamentary term. In the elections of 2002 all six former prime ministers stood for re-election, seemingly with hopes of again becoming prime minister.

The broader social and economic context in which these political shifts have taken place has been characterized by patchy but generally low levels of growth in an economy heavily dependent on the mining and petroleum sector and overseas development assistance; escalating problems of rural and urban lawlessness (including extensive intergroup ['tribal'] fighting in the highlands) – which have further discouraged foreign investment; and generally declining levels of government service delivery, reflected in adverse movements in a number of

social indicators. Beginning in 1988, Papua New Guinea was also faced with a virtual civil war in Bougainville, which resulted in substantial loss of life and displacement of people, massive destruction of local infrastructure, and the closure of one of the world's largest gold and copper mines (which was a major source of export earnings and government revenue).

Political parties

Despite expectations in the early years of independence that political parties would develop as a major element of the political system, parties remain generally weak.⁸

At independence the main point of substantive difference between the emerging major parties concerned the pace of movement towards independence. Pangu Pati, predominantly a party of the lowlands, led by relatively well educated and progressive young nationalists, favoured early independence; the United Party (UP), a predominantly highlands-based party, whose membership, for the most part, was more traditional and influenced by conservative expatriate planters, favoured a slower transition (allowing the more recently contacted highlands areas to 'catch up' with the better educated coastal people); a third major party, the [Papua New Guinea] National Party (NP), was generally seen as a highlands equivalent of Pangu. The other significant party, the People's Progress Party (PPP) was somewhat more business-oriented and based largely in the New Guinea islands. Once independence was achieved, however, the substantive differences between the parties narrowed. Having been outmanoeuvred in the formation of government in 1972, the UP subsequently faded out as a major political force.

Over the years, other parties have come and gone, but with a few exceptions their manifestos have been broadly similar, with emphasis on economic (and particularly agricultural) development, delivery of government services to rural areas, respect for traditional cultural values, and, increasingly, good governance and an end to corruption. In the absence of significant ideological divisions, parties have tended to revolve around prominent leaders and, in some cases, to draw disproportionate support from particular regions. Further, no party has a significant mass organization, and party discipline is generally weak (though there may have been a strengthening of party discipline in recent years). As a result, within parliament, party membership has tended to be fluid, with members not infrequently 'party hopping' in the expectation of advancing their careers or being otherwise rewarded.

Such behaviour is exacerbated by a situation in which coalition politics, together with the institution of votes of no confidence, provides the opportunity for party

⁸ See David Hegarty, "The political parties", in A. Amarshi, R., K. Good and R. Mortimer, *Development and Dependency: The Political Economy of Papua New Guinea* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press), 187-204; R.J May, *State and Society in Papua New Guinea*, chapter 6; and Ben Reilly, "Political engineering and party politics in Papua New Guinea", *Party Politics*, forthcoming 2002.

leaders in opposition to persuade members to switch allegiance and so form new coalitions to challenge for office. Although constitutional amendment has reduced the scope for no-confidence votes,⁹ a good deal of MPs' time and energy is consequently expended on manoeuvring to launch, or to avoid, votes of no confidence. In the early 1990s, as noted, Prime Minister Wingti attempted, in the long run unsuccessfully, to avoid votes of no confidence by resigning and gaining re-election, and the Wingti, Namaliu, Skate and Morauta governments all adjourned parliament for lengthy periods to avoid facing votes of no confidence.

Not only does such parliamentary behaviour distract the parliament's attention from the more important tasks of debating and legislating policy,¹⁰ it also poses a serious constraint on the country's political leaders, who must continuously maintain the loyalty of their party members and the support of their coalition partners, or risk losing office.

A further aspect of the fluidity of the party system is the number of candidates at national elections standing, and being elected, as independents. In 1992 about 74 per cent of the 1655 candidates stood, at least nominally, as independents; in 1997 the figure was about 70 per cent of 2372 candidates. In part, the large number of candidates standing as independents is a by-product of the large number of candidates standing. Additionally, however, given the inducements which party leaders offer in their efforts to put together a winning coalition after the elections (and the meagre resources which all but the major parties have to offer aspiring members during the elections), many candidates see advantage in standing as independents and, if elected, in effect offering their loyalty to the highest bidder.

The weakness of the party system, and the increasing numbers of candidates, have been a subject of growing concern in Papua New Guinea over recent years. In 2001 this led to the introduction of legislation intended to strengthen the party system (see below).

Elections

As befits a robust democracy, elections are lively affairs in Papua New Guinea, even though voters nation-wide appear to be becoming increasingly cynical about politicians and their accountability to voters. Figures of voter turnout suggest a consistent figure of around 65 per cent, though due to the unreliability of electoral

⁹ At independence, the constitution granted "grace periods", of six months after an election and twelve months before the end of the parliamentary term, during which a vote of no confidence could not be moved against a prime minister. In 1992 the initial grace period was increased to eighteen months.

¹⁰ For example, in 1998 the parliament adjourned without passing the necessary legislation to exempt Bougainville from the provisions of the *Organic Law on Provincial and Local-Level Governments*, creating a potential crisis in the Bougainville peace process, and in 2001-2002 the amendments necessary to implement the Bougainville Peace Agreement were rushed through parliament ahead of another lengthy adjournment. About a decade earlier, then Prime Minister Namaliu commented that continued votes of no confidence "can be very destabilising because it takes your mind off everything, including governing" (quoted in Dorney, *Papua New Guinea*, 40).

rolls (see below), and on the basis of observation in the field, these figures almost certainly understate the actual turnout.

In 1977, the first election after independence, 879 candidates contested the 109 seats. By 1987 this figure had risen to 1513, and concern was being expressed about the large number of candidates. Before the 1992 election, the nomination fee for intending candidates was raised from K100 to K1,000 (then around \$US1100 and about equal to Papua New Guinea's per capita GDP). Notwithstanding this, the number of candidates rose to 1655 in 1992, 2371 in 1997 (when a proposal to double the fee was rejected by the Supreme Court) and 2875 in 2002, an average in 2002 of 28 per constituency. Although the record number of candidates, 62, was set in Oro Provincial electorate in the Southern (Papua) Region in 2002, in the highlands around 40 candidates in an open electorate is not uncommon.

In the absence of major social cleavages, and with political parties having limited capacity to mobilize voters, electors tend to vote very largely along clan or village lines, though winning candidates generally manage to secure a broader spread of votes.¹¹ One consequence of this, in a first-past-the-post system, has been an increasing tendency for successful candidates to gain election with a small proportion of the overall vote. In 1987, 41 winning candidates (37.6 per cent of the total number) won with less than 20 per cent of the vote in their constituency and 2 won with less than 10 per cent; in 1992 the corresponding figures were 54 (49.5 per cent) and 9; and in 1997, 63 (57.8 per cent) and 16. In 1997, the Electoral Commissioner commented that 'the representativeness or otherwise of many MPs could be called into question by their own electors'.¹²

With 28 candidates (i.e. the mean number per seat in 2002) competing for around 30,000 votes in an open seat, it is statistically possible for a candidate to win with a little over 1,000 votes. Since this figure roughly approximates the number of eligible voters a serious candidate might expect to receive from his local support base, the increasing number of candidates has produced a situation in which, in many parts of the country, candidates in national elections seek to safeguard their support base (generally a village or clan line), by preventing rival candidates from entering their territory, and attempting to enforce bloc voting along clan or village lines by coercion or bribery. Legally, voting is by secret ballot and there are sanctions against 'treating', but officials conducting elections in the field, even with the support of police, are not always able to enforce the legal provisions or guarantee individual voters' rights. Aspiring MPs may also set up minor candidates in a serious competitor's support base area, in order to split the vote for

¹¹ In three successive elections I have analysed ballot box votes for the Angoram Open electorate to measure the degree to which voting is localized, under varying conditions of party allegiance (see, for example, "The East Sepik electorates: the demise of Pangu", in R.J. May and Ray Anere (eds), *Maintaining Democracy: the 1997 Election in Papua New Guinea*, Port Moresby: University of Papua New Guinea Press in association with the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2002). In 1997 the top two candidates were both ranked first or second in about half of the 75 ballot boxes.

¹² *Report to the Sixth Parliament on the 1997 National Election by the Electoral Commissioner, Reuben T. Kaiulo*. (Port Moresby, 1997), 9.

their rival. Over recent elections such tactics have tended to discourage constituency-wide campaigning and to produce rising levels of election-related violence. This has been exacerbated by difficulties in producing an accurate common roll and problems in getting electoral officials and ballot papers out into remote areas and ensuring their safe return to the counting centres.

Decentralization

In 1975, Papua New Guinea faced regional separatist movements in Papua and in Bougainville (North Solomons) Province. It was also experiencing the proliferation of a variety of ‘micronationalist’ movements across the country.¹³ In part to appease the demands of separatist activists on Bougainville, in 1977 Papua New Guinea introduced a system of provincial government, with elected assemblies, based on the country’s nineteen administrative districts.¹⁴

Papua New Guinea’s experience with provincial government was mixed. Some provincial governments, especially in the New Guinea Islands region, worked well, but in others limited administrative capacity, nepotism and corruption undermined performance. By 1994, fourteen of the nineteen provincial governments had been suspended at least once, mostly on grounds of financial mismanagement (though in some cases political competition between national politicians and provincial governments contributed to decisions to suspend). From the latter part of the 1980s many national MPs, who saw their political support bases being eroded by provincial assembly members, were calling for the abolition of provincial government. They were frequently supported by members of local-level governments, who also saw their role being diminished under the provincial government system.

In 1995 the legislation under which the provincial government system had been set up was replaced by an *Organic Law on Provincial and Local-Level Governments*, which abolished the directly-elected provincial assemblies and replaced them by provincial governments comprising the national MPs from the province, representatives of the local-level governments in the province, and a limited number of appointed members to represent paramount chiefs (where such existed), women and other sectors. The 1995 reforms were presented as a move to further decentralize political decision making to the local level, though in fact the net effect was to give national MPs more power and, since most local-level

¹³ See Jim Griffin, “Movements for separation and secession”, in A. Clunies Ross and J. Langmore (eds), *Alternative Strategies for Papua New Guinea* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), 99-130, and R.J. May (ed.), *Micronationalist Movements in Papua New Guinea* (Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1982).

¹⁴ Detailed analysis of Papua New Guinea’s provincial government system may be found in R.J. May and A.J. Regan with A. Ley (eds), *Decentralisation in a New State: The Experience of Provincial Government in Papua New Guinea* (Bathurst: Crawford House Press, 1997) and Y.P. Ghai and A.J. Regan, *The Law, Politics and Administration of Decentralisation in Papua New Guinea*. Monograph 30 (Port Moresby: National Research Institute, 1992).

governments were in a state of advanced decline by the 1990s, to recentralize policy making to the national capital.¹⁵

Within five years there was a widespread feeling that the new provincial and local-level government system was not working well, and in 2000, with two provincial governments suspended and a third facing suspension, Prime Minister Morauta announced that the system would be reviewed.¹⁶

Civil-military relations and the Bougainville crisis.

In the lead-up to independence there was some debate over whether the independent state should have an army, or whether in fact a defence force might be more of a threat than a safeguard to democracy. In the event, the decision was made to retain the force set up by the Australian colonial administration in 1951 and to give it a role, under prescribed circumstances, in assisting the civil authority.¹⁷

Nine years after independence the PNGDF was called out to assist police in law and order operations in the national capital. This was the first of several such internal security operations.

The changing role of the PNGDF from a force whose principal role was one of external defence to one whose first priority was acknowledged in 1985 to be internal security coincided with the re-emergence of unrest amongst landowners around the Bougainville mine and eventual demands for Bougainville independence. In 1989 the PNGDF was deployed to assist police on Bougainville in countering the emerging rebellion.¹⁸

The Bougainville conflict clearly demonstrated the deteriorating capacity and morale of the PNGDF, and created tensions between the Defence Force – many of whom believed that a military victory over the Bougainville Revolutionary Army was possible if the government were committed to supporting the disciplined forces – and national politicians, most of whom recognized the need for a political settlement of the conflict.

In 1996-97 the government of Sir Julius Chan, frustrated at the inability of the PNGDF to achieve a military solution on Bougainville and facing an election, became involved in negotiations with military consultants Sandline International.

¹⁵ See R.J. May, “Decentralisation in Papua New Guinea: two steps forward one step back”, in Mark Turner (ed.), *Central-Local Relations in Asia-Pacific: Convergence or Divergence?* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1999), 123-148.

¹⁶ See *Post-Courier* 11 September 2000.

¹⁷ See R.J. May, *The Changing Role of the Military in Papua New Guinea*. Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No.101 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1993), and chapters in *State and Society in Papua New Guinea*.

¹⁸ See R.J. May and Matthew Spriggs (eds), *The Bougainville Crisis* (Bathurst: Crawford House Press, 1990) and Yauka Liria, *Bougainville Campaign Diary* (Melbourne: Indra Publishing, 1993).

Early in 1997 it was revealed that the government had signed a contract with Sandline, involving an operation, employing foreign mercenaries and PNGDF personnel, to capture or kill the BRA leadership and recapture the mine area. The revelation brought strong criticism of the Chan government from within Papua New Guinea and from overseas. Shortly after this PNGDF Commander Brigadier General Jerry Singirok (who had been a party to the Sandline negotiations) publicly denounced the contract, ordered the detaining of Sandline personnel, who were subsequently deported. He called on the prime minister, deputy prime minister and defence minister to resign.¹⁹

Though the PNGDF commander did not attempt a military coup, and was dismissed and later charged with sedition,²⁰ his action precipitated perhaps the most serious political crisis since independence. Singirok received considerable public support at the time, and in the face of mounting popular pressure Prime Minister Chan and his deputy prime minister and defence minister stood aside pending the report of an independent commission of enquiry. In the event, when the commissioner reported Chan declared that he had been absolved of any wrongdoing and resumed office on the eve of the election. He subsequently lost his seat, however, becoming the first incumbent prime minister to do so.

Paradoxically, Singirok's intervention and the change of government in 1997 proved to be something of a circuit breaker in the Bougainville peace process, and between 1997 and 2001 peace talks gained momentum, culminating in the Bougainville Peace Agreement of 2001 and the passage of the legislative amendments necessary to implement the agreement early in 2002.

A less fortunate legacy of the Sandline affair was a further politicization of, and deepening of factionalism within, the PNGDF. Since 1981 the commander of the PNGDF has changed regularly with changes of government. Singirok's immediate replacement held the command for only four days before being chased out of the barracks by rebellious soldiers. He was later replaced, by the outgoing Prime Minister Chan, by an officer who was known for his controversially hard line on Bougainville and his antipathy to Singirok. (The new commander was at one stage held under 'house arrest' at Murray Barracks by soldiers loyal to General Singirok.) Following the elections of 1997, Singirok was reappointed by the incoming prime minister, Bill Skate, but after Skate lost office in 1999 Singirok was again removed. Between 1997 and 2002 the PNGDF has had eight commanders/acting commanders; there have been similar numbers of defence ministers and defence secretaries.

¹⁹ The Sandline affair and its political context have been documented in Sinclair Dinnen, R.J. May and A.J. Regan (eds), *Challenging the State: The Sandline Affair in Papua New Guinea* (Canberra: National Centre for Development studies and Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1997), Sean Dorney, *The Sandline Affair: Politics and Mercenaries and the Bougainville Crisis* (Sydney: ABC Books, 1998), and Mary-Louise O'Callaghan, *Enemies Within: Papua New Guinea, Australia, and the Sandline Crisis: the Inside Story* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1999).

²⁰ As of 2002 the charge has not been pursued.

Instability at the top, and proposals to drastically reduce force size, have produced further factionalism and continued low morale. Proposals to downsize and reorganize the PNGDF, in particular, have resulted in several mutinous incidents. In 2000, celebration of the country's twenty-fifth anniversary of independence was disrupted when members of the PNGDF's second battalion burned down buildings at their Moem Barracks, and the following year troops in Port Moresby staged a tense sit-in to protest announced cuts in PNGDF force size. The latter situation was resolved only when the government agreed to withdraw the proposed downsizing (though the process is still ongoing).

In 1997 the PNGDF was called upon to provide additional security during the conduct of the national election. There were allegations, however, that soldiers had provided 'private security' to particular candidates and had physically assaulted supporters of the outgoing defence minister. Consequently, when the 2002 elections began, the PNGDF was confined to barracks and parades were held to check for absentees. Notwithstanding this, a number of soldiers, including senior ranking officers, and the Defence Department secretary, were seen assisting political candidates in the highlands.²¹ Subsequently, as election-related lawlessness escalated, the PNGDF was called out to assist police in parts of the highlands.

Most longtime observers of Papua New Guinea continue to see a military coup as unlikely, but one can no longer rule out the possibility of disgruntled soldiers and opportunistic politicians combining to challenge an elected government.

Institutional reform

The short-lived government of Bill Skate (1997-1999) was marked by new levels of nepotism, corruption and economic mismanagement. When Skate lost office in July 1999, his successor, Sir Mekere Morauta, announced that the new government of national reconstruction and development would work relentlessly to achieve five objectives: the first of these was 'to restore integrity to our great institutions of state'.²² A Constitutional Development Commission (CDC) was set up to organize public consultation and recommend action. Two principal measures emerged from this process.

The first was an *Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates* (OLIPPC), passed in 2001, which aims to strengthen the role of political parties.²³ The legislation provides for: registration of political parties; public funding of registered parties (on the basis of the number of their elected MPs); limitations (albeit somewhat generous limitations) on contributions to party funding from

²¹ See *Post-Courier* 5 June, 4 July 2002.

²² The other four were to stabilize the currency, restore stability to the national budget, and remove obstacles to investment and growth, and to continue the Bougainville peace process. See "Speech by Hon. Sir Mekere Morauta, Kt MP, Prime Minister, 'Papua New Guinea's Time of Destiny'", 14 July 1999.

²³ The constitution of 1975 mandated such an organic law, but no such law was ever submitted to parliament.

local and foreign sources;²⁴ financial incentives to encourage parties to nominate women candidates; and restrictions on ‘party hopping’ and the voting rights of independent members. The last two measures were intended to give some stability to political parties, and to discourage candidates from standing as independents in order to maximize their bargaining position if elected. Under the OLIPPC a candidate elected as an independent may not join a party until after the election of the prime minister, but if he/she votes for a successful prime ministerial candidate he/she cannot vote against that prime minister in a vote of no confidence, or against an amendment to the constitution moved by that prime minister’s government, or against a budget proposed by that prime minister’s government. Once affiliated with a party, if MPs leave that party their reasons for doing so must be investigated by the Ombudsman Commission, who may refer the matter to a leadership tribunal; depending on the outcome of this review, members may lose their seats, or at least be made to refund campaign expenses paid by the party and be barred from holding ministerial or other parliamentary office.²⁵

The OLIPPC did not have an easy passage through parliament. Critics argued that public funding of parties would advantage the existing major parties, and that restrictions on the rights of independent MPs and on ‘party hopping’ were undemocratic. Its impact on parliamentary behaviour remains to be seen.

The second important measure will change the electoral system from first-past-the-post to optional preferential voting in 2007. This proposal runs counter to the quite sensible opinion expressed by the Electoral Commissioner in his report on the 1997 election:

The re-introduction [of optional preferential voting] is premised on the need to reduce the number of candidates to ensure that the MP has a wider basis for support and endorsement, and also to promote collaboration among candidates and counter the surge in violence. Whether that system will be able to achieve all these, if it were introduced, is a moot point. What is very clear, though, from the point of view of administering the election process, is that it will be more costly, become slower and less tidy.²⁶

The twenty provincial electorates will also be abolished.²⁷

²⁴ The constitution in 1975 precluded foreign contributions to election campaigns. Draft legislation in 2001 allowed contributions of up to K100,000, but in the final legislation the figure was raised to K500,000.

²⁵ The provisions of the OLIPPC are detailed in “Explaining the Proposed Political Integrity Laws Prepared by the Constitutional Development Commission, Waigani, July 2000”, available on *The National Online*, at <<http://www.thenational.com.pg/0628/integrity.htm>>.

²⁶ *Report to the Sixth Parliament on the 1997 National Election*, 13.

²⁷ For a critical examination of the rationale for, and content of, these two sets of measures, see R.J. May, “Political change in Papua New Guinea: is it needed? Will it work?”. Keynote address to Conference at Divine Word University, Madang 2001 (publication forthcoming). Also see Ben Reilly, “Back to the future? The political consequences of electoral reform in Papua New Guinea”, *Journal of Pacific History*, forthcoming 2002.

Among other measures to restore integrity to the nation's political institutions, the Morauta government announced plans for a National Anti-Corruption Agency to coordinate the activities of the various government departments and agencies involved in addressing the problem of corruption. In recent years the government and, more particularly, churches, NGOs and the private business sector have mounted a massive media campaign against corruption. The government also proposed reforms to strengthen the independence of the public service (reversing measures introduced under the first Wingti government), and established a Central Agencies Coordinating Committee and a Consultative Implementation and Monitoring Council with a view to improving the processes of governance.

The 2002 national election

In June 2002 Papua New Guinea went to the polls in its sixth post-independence elections. To a limited extent, the election, and the process of government formation after the election, were expected to provide a test of the OLIPPC, though in fact the measures introduced in the organic law related more to the conduct of parliament after the election than to the election itself.

Even before voting began, there were indications that persistent problems remained. By the May 2002 deadline, some 43 parties had registered with the registrar for political parties, but many of these appeared to have very small membership, and on the eve of polling a number had not provided the registrar with the required list of their endorsed candidates. The number of candidates contesting again increased in 2002, by 17 per cent to 2875, and although, with the emergence of so many parties, the proportion of independent candidates declined, the number was still large: 1247 (43 per cent of all candidates). Despite the introduction of incentives to parties to nominate women candidates, the number of women contesting actually fell (from 55 to 41), and in the final outcome only one of the two women MPs in the 1997-2002 parliament retained her seat.

Moreover, as voting commenced, major problems of electoral administration began to appear. In 1997 there had been deficiencies in the common roll: some names were on the roll more than once, there were 'ghost' names, and the names of some eligible voters, who claimed to have registered, were missing.²⁸ In his report on the 1997 election the electoral commissioner, commenting on the difficulties posed by logistics, lack of cooperation from citizens, and intimidation of polling officials, concluded: 'Compiling an accurate register of voters in Papua New Guinea...continues to be a seemingly impossible task....Attitudes have to change in the country before satisfactory electoral rolls can be compiled'.²⁹ However, a visiting Commonwealth Observer Group commented that the undoubted problems of logistics 'appear to have been exacerbated by financial,

²⁸ Projections by the Electoral Commissioner in early 1996 realistically suggested a figure of around 2.2 eligible voters. At the end of the enrolment period there were 3.4 million names on the roll.

²⁹ *Report to the Sixth Parliament on the 1997 National Election*, 3.

management and organisational shortcomings'.³⁰ Between 1998 and 2002 a good deal of effort went into the updating of the common roll, deleting the names of people who had died, adding the names of new voters, and registering changes of residence. But on the eve of the election it became clear that there were significant errors in the roll, which Prime Minister Morauta] described as 'a mess';³¹ indeed there were calls for the election to be postponed.

When voting began in mid June 2002 it became apparent that faults in the common roll were widespread, and they became a source of tension in several electorates. In many electorates, also, including those in the national capital, the start of voting was delayed by lack of ballot papers or lack of funding to hire transport and pay the allowances of electoral officials and police. Subsequently, the counting of votes was delayed in several centres by electoral officials or police demanding that they first be paid allowances due to them. Voting was extended in a number of polling places, including the Southern Highlands Province, which was declared a 'fighting zone' and where the PNGDF was eventually deployed to assist police. From around the country there were reports of voters and electoral officials being coerced by candidates and their supporters, of (some) electoral officials and police colluding with candidates, of massive electoral fraud, and administrative breakdown. In the highlands particularly, intimidation, bribery, bulk-voting by candidates' representatives, and post-voting payback against those suspected of not delivering the desired vote were rife.³² Ballot boxes were hijacked and destroyed. In the Enga provincial capital, armed men broke into metal containers in which full ballot boxes were stored and fire-bombed the contents with drums of aviation fuel. There seems to be a general consensus that 2002 was 'our worst election ever'.³³

In 1997, 88 petitions were filed with the court of disputed returns, challenging the outcome of electoral results in the 109 seats; in two highlands electorates immediate post-election by-elections were held following serious disruptions of the electoral process. In 2002 both these numbers seem likely to be exceeded. Calls for the re-running of the elections in the Southern Highlands and Enga provinces were resisted by the Electoral Commissioner, but a "failed election" was declared in six of the nine Southern Highlands electorates, where new elections will have to be held – though inter-clan warfare continues. By early August more than thirty election-related deaths had been reported in the highlands, including two electoral officials.

³⁰ *The General Election in Papua New Guinea 14-28 June 1997. The Report of the Commonwealth Observer Group. Advance Copy* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997), 25-26.

³¹ Reported in *Post-Courier* 17 June 2002; also see *The National* 13 June 2002.

³² For a graphic account of electoral breakdown in the highlands see the report of Bill Standish, "Electoral governance in Papua New Guinea: Chimbu Poll Diary, June 2002" (<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia/pngresourcepage.htm>).

³³ See the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) report, 5 July, at http://abc.net.au/asiapacific/focus/pacific/GoAsiaPacificFocusPacific_597634.htm. The quotation is from Papua New Guinea National Research Institute director, Beno Beoha.

In August 2002, after an extension of the writs and with only 103 of the 109 seats declared, the National Parliament sat to elect a speaker and prime minister. As leader of the party with the largest number of seats, Sir Michael Somare was invited to form a government. As in previous years, the period before parliament met was marked by a scramble by major party leaders to cobble together a winning coalition.³⁴ Somare's National Alliance had won 19 seats; the PDM had fared badly (as had Pangu), but with 12 seats was the second largest party bloc. In the event, Somare succeeded in putting together a coalition of eight parties and in the vote for speaker the coalition's nomination, former prime minister Bill Skate, was elected with a clear majority. A group of twenty independents and members of small parties voted against Skate, but when it was clear that Somare had the numbers they crossed the floor, and the PDM and half of Pangu's six members abstained from voting for prime minister. Somare was thus elected with a vote of 88-0, which makes it likely, under the provisions of the OLIPPC, that he will be the first prime minister to survive a full term in office.

Papua New Guinea in 2002: is democracy under threat?

Despite the serious problems associated with the 2002 election, particularly the apparently steadily rising level of vote manipulation and election-related violence, Papua New Guinea appears to have survived another election and to have maintained its broad record of democratic politics. The questions arise, however, how does one reconcile Papua New Guinea's record of democracy with patterns of political behaviour marked by parochialism, nepotism, rising levels of corruption and violence, and administrative breakdown, and what are the prospects for continuing democracy?

Much has been made of Papua New Guinea's extreme linguistic – and to the extent that language is a marker for ethnicity, ethnic – fragmentation, and of the fact that prior to European contact interaction among its many communities was very limited. This fragmentation does not stop at language boundaries but occurs amongst clans within the same language group. Ethnic diversity is often taken as an indicator of potential political instability.³⁵ Arguably, however, while Papua New Guinea's ethnic divisions may be a source of local conflicts, and one reason for the large number of candidates standing for election, the extreme fragmentation and absence of any large, potentially dominant, language group or 'primordial' ethnic group has meant that, at the national level, ethnicity has not posed the threat to national unity which it has in many other countries around the world. In Papua New Guinea, language-defined ethnic groups are too small to be a force beyond local-level politics, and larger ethnic identities (such as 'Papuan' or 'highlander') are too fractious to provide a continuing basis for political mobilization nationally.³⁶

³⁴ For example see *The National* 12 July 2002, particularly the editorial, "Hoodwinked by professionals once again".

³⁵ See, for example, *Freedom in the World 2001-2002*, 7.

³⁶ I have elaborated this argument in an unpublished paper, "Ethnicity in Papua New Guinea". Also see R.J. May, "Harmonizing linguistic diversity in Papua New Guinea", in M. Brown and S.

The separatist movement which emerged on Bougainville in 1975 and again after 1988 suggests the need for some qualification to statements which discount the significance of ethnicity, but even in the case of Bougainville ‘ethnicity’ has limited explanatory value: not only does Bougainville contain some twenty-one language groups, some of whom have longstanding antipathies towards their neighbours, but at a fairly early stage of the Bougainville conflict Bougainvilleans were divided between the separatist Bougainville Revolutionary Army and the national-government-aligned Resistance. More recently, as the process of post-conflict reconstruction gets under way there has been a tendency for historic small-scale ethnic identities to reassert themselves.³⁷

Just as extreme diversity might be said to have dissipated rather than fostered ethnic cleavages in Papua New Guinea politics, it might be argued that the fluidity of party politics in Papua New Guinea has acted to mitigate the development of a more confrontational style of national politics. At every election since independence, slightly more than half the MPs (including a large number of cabinet ministers) have lost their seats. While this might partly reflect the fact that, with such large numbers of candidates, elections have become something of a lottery, it also means that most voters feel that if they are not successful in getting *their* candidate elected this time, maybe they will succeed next time. Beyond the heat of the elections and the immediate disappointment of losing, in other words, the unpredictability of electoral outcomes makes the electoral process (in Tokpisin, *resis* – ‘races’) somehow more acceptable. Further, while undoubtedly to an extent destabilizing, the constant reshuffling of coalition partners has given more MPs the chance to serve as ministers, and the possibility of changing a government mid-term through a vote of no confidence provides a safety valve against an unpopular government. To this extent, what are frequently identified as sources of instability, and therefore faults, in Papua New Guinea’s political system may have had a positive impact in diffusing personal and regional tensions and thus sustaining the country’s democratic institutions.

Such a positive ‘spin’ on Papua New Guinea’s disorderly democracy, however, should not obscure the fact that the wheeling and dealing which has come to be associated with coalition formation and parliamentary behaviour in Papua New Guinea’s political system does not normally make for good governance. Over the years, successive governments have had difficulties maintaining sound national policies, particularly economic and fiscal policies, due in part to the rapid turnover of ministers and departmental secretaries, and the tendency to place short-term expediency and the demands of individual MPs above longer-term national objectives.³⁸ This has impacted adversely on state capacity and fostered cynicism among ordinary people and frustration on the part of aid donors and financial

Ganguly (eds), *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia* (Harvard: MIT Press, in press).

³⁷ Personal communication, Anthony Regan, Canberra, 1999.

³⁸ In presenting the proposed integrity laws in 2000, Prime Minister Morauta said: “...Parliament has not worked as well as it should. In recent years instability within the system has brought about a paralysis in decision-making, in the implementation of policy, and in the delivery of basic and essential services to the people” (*Explaining the Proposed Political Integrity Laws*, p.10).

institutions. The problems experienced in the running of the 2002 election are a reflection of the declining capacity of the state even to reproduce itself. In the longer term, unless the provisions of the OLIPPC bring about the desired change in political behaviour, it is these developments which diminish the perceived legitimacy of the state and pose the most serious threats to democracy in Papua New Guinea.

AUTHOR NOTE

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