



State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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Political Instability Reforms in Melanesia — Addressing a Problem or a Symptom?

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Political instability, in the form of frequent motions of no confidence, has become a major source of concern in the years after independence in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Constitutional and statutory reforms to reduce the incidence of such motions have been developed in PNG (2002) and Solomon Islands (2014), and have been considered in Vanuatu since early 2016. But are the constitutional and legal frameworks supposedly conducive to instability the key factor, or is political instability better seen as a symptom of deeper problems of social accountability not readily susceptible to constitutional remedies (Regan 2010)? This *In Brief* focuses on PNG experience to examine whether the reforms so far attempted or considered are likely to make positive contributions, or will instead intensify deeper problems of which instability is but a symptom.

Political Instability and Reform

Political instability flowing from frequent motions of no confidence (actual or threatened) in a prime minister or cabinet is usually blamed on members of parliament (MPs) 'jumping from party to party' (Okole 2012). Instability is said to be caused by the ease of motions of no confidence, tempting MPs without ministerial office to support leaders offering such offices, and political parties being too weak to maintain the support of MPs. The threat of such motion forces governments to focus on maintaining political alliances, contributing to a lack of coherent policy, to poor economic management, and to corruption (see Chan 1988:247; Chand and Duncan 2010:35–36). It also hollows out the public sector by politicisation of employment and contracts, reinforcing patronage networks.

In response, reforms have involved measures to restrict periods within which motions can be entertained; restrict MPs from changing allegiances when voting on such motions; and provided incentives and penalties to strengthen political parties. Governments also seek to discourage motions of no confidence by establishing large 'electoral development funds' (EDFs) that

give MPs control of discretionary finance sufficient to distract them from seeking ministerial office.

What is the Real Problem?

Political instability is a symptom in that it has been fuelled by competition for access to wealth and power through control, or becoming part, of the political executive. This competition explains why MPs so frequently shift allegiances. The complex interaction of political and economic forces involved here began even before PNG reached independence, when few indigenous people had access to wealth through commercial activities. When 'indigenisation of colonial administration occurred (in the mid-to-late 1960s), legal and other barriers to straddling state positions and private commercial activities were lowered' (MacWilliam 2013:229–30). Political office then became attractive as an avenue for wealth accumulation, one that a high proportion of MPs have grasped ever since. Wealth and power came through control of contracts, EDFs, bribes, and the allocation of other public funds. Over time, state control of access to natural resources and land made rent-seeking behaviour a critically important additional means of personal enrichment. Control of the political executive became essential for access to wealth. The incentives to gain office are so great that bribery, coercion, forgery (of signatures on motions of no confidence) and many other kinds of malpractice have become part of the 'game'.

Making the Real Problem Worse?

Reforms intended to reduce instability have intensified the real problem because they greatly strengthen the incumbent leaders, freeing them from the pressure of the threat of motions of no confidence. Impacts of PNG's 2002 reforms are instructive. They undoubtedly reduced political instability; few motions of no confidence have been moved since 2002, and none successfully. But this has been at the cost of accountability. Power and resources are concentrated in the hands of an executive left largely free from political accountability,

and increasingly resisting or seeking control of other forms of oversight and law enforcement (for example, the Police Fraud squad, an anti-corruption task force or the Ombudsman Commission). Problems of bad governance, corruption and patronage networks are intensified.

Largely denied any opportunity to access ministerial office through motions of no confidence, political opposition groups seek alternatives. This has involved strenuous efforts to influence, and — reportedly — even to fund, the activities of accountability mechanisms. One outcome is the politicisation of accountability agencies and their functions. This has dramatically increased reliance on, and pressures for, court services. Further, the executive distributes much increased EDF funding, but limits how it flows to opposition MPs, ensuring that most fund recipients become members of the government, which serves to severely diminish the size and influence of the Opposition. The speaker's position has come under heavy executive control. The net effect is reduced accountability and dramatically increased opportunities for accumulation by ministerial office-holders and their patronage networks, and significant pressures on the constitutional underpinnings of the state.

What about Strengthening Political Parties?

In general, political parties in 'developed' countries emerged by representing, and mobilising political support from, interest groups (ethnic, regional, class, economic, religious and so on). By contrast, in the periods since independence of these three Melanesian states, many mainly small political parties have emerged that mostly represent the interests of politicians — they are little more than loose alliances, useful for mobilising electoral funds and gathering members in post-election struggles for the control of government.

Assumptions are widely made that the state political institutions established under the independence constitutions — institutions largely based on 'developed' country models — require strong political parties to operate effectively. PNG and Solomon Islands reforms directed towards strengthening parties assume that despite parties not having a basis in representation of interests, they can be strengthened by constitutional and/or legal measures providing them with resources, protection and incentives. This form of 'reverse-engineering' is expected to reduce numbers, and increase the strength, of political parties. It is unlikely to succeed as there is limited supporting evidence from other parts of the world.

In PNG following reforms, no reduction in numbers of parties has occurred, nor have ideology, principles and policy platforms emerged as bases for mobilising voter support. Rather, numerous small parties continue to be the rule, still the

vehicles for the same political and economic forces discussed above. MPs, or groups of candidates, use parties primarily to seek access to public office, for narrow constituency interests, and to facilitate the accumulation of wealth.

Conclusions

If legal frameworks are not the central problem that drives political instability, as is so often asserted, but instead intense competition for access to wealth, then measures intended to reduce political instability through legal reform may only intensify these pressures. Both governments and donors should reconsider their support for such measures. Indeed, there may be good reason to reverse heavy restrictions on motions of no confidence, as increased availability of such motions may have advantages both as a means of accountability and a 'safety valve', relieving the pressures flowing from competition for ministerial office. At the very least, much more effort needs to be made to strengthen the capacity (and independence) of accountability mechanisms, such as ombudsman institutions, auditor-general offices, financial intelligence units and so on.

Author Notes

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