

Papua New Guinea politics: Attempting to engineer the future

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Papua New Guineans have long recognised instability, inefficiency and corruption in their country's governance. People at the grassroots, activists from non-government organisations, church leaders, government ministers and aid donors all point to the failure by the political system to deliver the basic services which people need. In response, reformists have attempted to strengthen the operation of Papua New Guinea's (PNG) democratic institutions to improve governance.

This paper uses the recent PNG elections to examine aspects of the country's political culture and the interaction between its societies and the state. Can this help us to understand where the country is going, and whether constitutional reforms can achieve the goal of stability which governments deem necessary to improve the lives of their people? Here I try to show why I believe such an exercise has merit.

My ideas have been influenced by the experience of watching the mid-2002 general election in the PNG Highlands, where politics can be an ethics-free zone and candidates will do 'whatever it takes' in attempting to grab state power in the name of their traditional clan or tribal group (Standish 2002). Politics in the Highlands is seen as being more intense than in other regions of PNG, but elements of bribery and intimidation have been alleged in the elections in some coastal provinces and the capital, Port Moresby. Recent events fuel my scepticism about constitutional reforms designed to manipulate political behaviour. PNG's democratic constitution has been grafted on to highly fragmented Melanesian societies, in which local leaders, the modern 'big-men', compete for power, wealth and prestige for themselves and their clans.

Three scholars from the University of Papua New Guinea are working on these complex issues. Joe Ketan points to 'competing legitimacies', implying that loyalty to the clan and tribe is dominant, as against the requirements of the state and its laws (2000; in press). Alphonse Gelu (2000) argues that the colonially introduced liberal democratic political institutions are inappropriate in the context of PNG's 'traditional authoritarian political culture'. Henry Okole writes (2002, in this issue of *Development Bulletin*) of 'institutional decay'. Such ideas help us make sense of events surrounding the 2002 elections for the National Parliament and Local-Level Governments, and help us predict what might happen after recent constitutional reforms.

Gunpoint democracy

Events in Chimbu Province over the last decade indicate the intensity of political competition and conflict in the PNG

Highlands. In the 1992 election it became clear that the electoral rolls were stacked with bogus or 'ghost' names, clear cases of electoral fraud. Some people, including candidates, used firearms to pressure their clansmen to vote as directed. In the 1993 provincial assembly election, weapons were used in the presence of senior police to prevent certain people voting, and in many areas polling officers were forced at gunpoint to sign ballot papers and admit fraudulent votes. Local political activists predicted that future elections would be decided between 'armies' (Standish 1996:318).

In the 1997 elections, the numbers on the rolls grew dramatically, in some areas padded out by newly invented census places (which are known as 'ghost rest houses'). By 2002 the numbers of adults on the rolls in some Highlands areas were double the population figures in the 2000 census. More dramatically, it became unsafe for candidates to attempt to campaign outside their own clan or tribal 'base vote area'. Thousands of eligible people were denied the vote because their ballot papers were stolen at gunpoint. Across most of the Highland provinces, coercion to enforce bloc voting by groups was intensified, again with the use of firearms. In the years since 1997 there are credible claims that politicians and businessman have brought many more firearms into the Highlands.

Elections are a major test of administrative capacities in any country. In the June–July 2002 PNG elections, the administrative structures imploded. Candidate numbers grew over 21 per cent nationwide, to 2878 or about one per 1900 people. There were on average 26 hopefuls per electorate, which created enormous administrative complications. The Electoral Commission is responsible for running elections, but has little control over staff or funds. It relies on public servants borrowed from other departments and casual staff, with vehicles hired from the private sector. Delays and shortfalls in funding impacted upon the provision of logistics and security. Poor weather exacerbated problems caused by the bad roads. From the day the polls opened in Port Moresby on 16 June, the election was described as a 'shambles' and a 'national disgrace'. When voting commenced in the Western Highlands, it was clear that some people, in their desperation for power, were prepared to use extreme violence.

Across the Highlands provinces the elections proved chaotic. This enabled candidates and their supporters enforcing the vote to cause the abandonment of the procedural checks and balances designed to ensure a free and fair vote, such as the indelible ink intended to prevent multiple voting and the use of the electoral roll (Standish 2002). Ballot boxes full of unused votes were stolen

at gunpoint, and in the Western Highlands three polling officials were kidnapped. In the Eastern and Western Highlands polling officers were stabbed, while in Chimbu a policeman was chopped. In at least four provinces, officials were forced or bribed to sign and authenticate ballot papers which were marked en masse for particular candidates. In Enga, the wife of a returning officer was shot after her husband had refused to admit three tainted ballot boxes to the count. Counting was delayed for three weeks because police refused to provide security unless they were paid additional allowances. The delays may have rendered many elections unconstitutional.

In the midst of this upheaval, the experiences of women were diverse. Abby McLeod (2002) recently reported that Bari village women in Chimbu enthusiastically influenced their clan's internal politicking around elections. They campaigned with zest for their menfolk, but showed little interest in women becoming politicians. Television reports from the Western Highlands and Chimbu indicated that women were prevented from voting for their choice. This is reflected in the low tallies received by quite popular women campaigners. One Chimbu candidate, forced to withdraw from the contest on voting day, was visibly distressed when she told me this had been a *ganpoin vot*. Indeed, some women candidates were unable to vote for themselves, due to the 'consensus' enforced by their clans' dominant leaders whom they now label 'warlords'.¹

By July 2002 the situation had worsened. In two parts of Chimbu violence erupted during the voting with open warfare between factions supporting candidates from the same tribe, leading to over 10 deaths. In all, by September about 30 people had been killed in election or post-election violence in Chimbu, and many houses destroyed. Gunfire was a regular feature in the provincial capital Kundiawa, and in Enga at least 30 were killed by high-powered rifles in two election-related fights which continued to November (I have no figures for the Southern or Western Highlands).

Not only were armed groups fighting each other and coercing polling teams, but in the Southern Highlands they attacked state agencies. The police had been deprived of their weapons and vehicles in Tari township in 2000. By the time of the election, Tari had been vacated by banks and the national airline and even the police mobile squad dispersed. Many public servants had deserted the province in December 2001, when major fighting broke out in Mendi and the high school was burnt down in clan warfare. This was an election in a government-free zone, an area where the state had temporarily 'collapsed' (to use Zartman's 1995 term).²

In November 2002, some dozens of ballot boxes remain uncounted in remote areas of the Southern Highlands and Enga, filled with papers, futile symbols of the hopes of local candidates. More centrally located candidates and their supporters had created roadblocks (using boulders, wrecked vehicles and firearms), or pulled up the planks on strategic bridges in order to prevent the movement of their rivals' ballot papers. In Kagua and Tari, boxes stored in police stations had been destroyed. The shocking climax had occurred pre-dawn on 11 July 2002. In Mendi selected ballot

boxes containing thousands of votes were taken at gunpoint from storage in the police cells, and in Wabag (as I later witnessed) three shipping containers were firebombed after certain boxes had been saved for the count.

More subtle and insidious techniques were used in Chimbu, including the bribery of electoral officials, according to formal statements written and signed by polling officers and defeated candidates. Both senior and junior police in Highlands provinces have told me that the police were factionalised, with shots fired in public confrontations in Hagen city and Kundiawa town. In three Highlands provinces there are credible reports of police interference with the polling and counting. At times police chased away the polling clerks and took over the process, and, in one case, allegedly forced the declaration of a poll before all boxes had been counted. Some of these cases are the subject of petitions among the 83 lodged with the Court of Disputed Returns.

Constitutional crisis

By July 2002 it was clear that the elections across the Highlands were so delayed that the writs had to be extended, or else the parliament would not be able to meet. The advice of the Election Manager and Administrator in Mendi, repeated over national radio, was that the election was so corrupted that all nine Southern Highlands seats should be declared void and fresh elections held. However, the electoral law contains no provision to cancel an election once the writs are issued.

PNG's Attorney-General, Frances Damen, asked the Supreme Court to clarify whether the Electoral Commission could *deem* an election to have failed. He cited 'violence, intimidation, threats, destruction of ballot [boxes] and or/ballot papers, riots, sacking of polling booths, holding hostage people entitled to vote, spoiling of papers, tampering with ballot papers, forging of signatures, giving of false names and addresses (and) the prevention of voting of people entitled to vote' (*The Australian*, 22 July 2002:7). The court ruled that the Commission had the relevant power. Accordingly, on 29 July the Commissioner announced that the elections in six Southern Highlands seats had failed. Supplementary elections will be held in 2003. In addition, the overdue return of the writs may mean that elections for all six seats in Enga also failed, a matter currently subject to appeal. Clearly the PNG state has proved unable to manage elections in these conflictual societies, and they will be without representation for many months.

Government decline

The problems of declining state capacity and legitimacy, such that the state is ignored or is itself under attack in some Highland areas, have not appeared without warning. For 10 years it has been apparent that the PNG state lacks administrative reach, service capacity and the coercive power needed to maintain public order. It cannot deliver the goods that people have come to expect, or develop unquestioned public acceptance of its legitimate right to

rule. In fact, often the security forces act in ways almost calculated to undermine state authority (Standish 1993, 1994). The PNG state is frequently described as weak, but it also operates in a context where society is weak, divided by clan and tribal rivalries (May 2001). Such a potentially anarchic combination was identified, but not explored by Joel Migdal (1988).

Although reduced revenues have lowered state resources in both rural and urban PNG, much of the reduction in the state's capacity is self-inflicted. The quality of government in PNG has suffered from decades of rivalry between national Members of Parliament (MPs) and elected members of provincial governments. In 1995 the parliamentarians took over power within the provinces, gaining control over public expenditure. Since then, public services, already run-down in rural areas, have declined as provinces have received reduced shares of essential operating grants. Meanwhile, MPs continue to receive millions of kina in annual discretionary grants appropriately called 'slush funds'. This system increased the incentive for clans or tribes to seek to elect one of their own as an MP, in order to grab some funds for themselves, so as to have operative roads, schools and health services. With few exceptions, MPs redistribute little money to local level councils, yet they are themselves unable to spend it effectively. This process further antagonises those who miss out, and intensifies political competition and conflict. It was almost certainly contributed to 83 sitting MPs losing their seats in 2002.

In these elections, allegations of official bias, whether real or imagined, were made more believable by changes to the provincial administrations. Following the 1995 'reforms', MPs — especially the provincial governors — gained control over the appointment of senior officials (some of whom became returning officers). The ethos of public service, the idea of the common good across an electorate and the notion of a national identity have declined through the 1990s, along with state authority (Standish 1999). Such deeply rooted issues are not touched by recent constitutional changes.

The push for reform

Parliamentary politics has been the prime focus for discussion in PNG, rather than political culture and electoral behaviour. For years, observers have stressed the lack of strong political parties as the cause of the country's political woes. The major concern has been political instability, which leads to policy flip-flops and rotating elites ruthlessly exploiting the spoils of office. In PNG a vote-of-no-confidence is possible after a government has held power for 18 months, and Opposition MPs tend to think there should be one at that stage, regardless. Mid-term changes of government have served as a safety valve, and indeed led to Sir Mekere Morauta becoming prime minister in July 1999. Yet like his predecessors, even he had to adjourn parliament in 2001 in order to avoid a vote-of-no-confidence. Sir Mekere, with foreign encouragement, sought to rectify aspects of PNG's political institutions, using the Constitutional Development Commission to develop major constitutional reforms, hoping to create governmental stability.

The Integrity Law

For historical reasons Sir Mekere's main vehicle was called the *Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates* 2000, known as OLIPPAC. It seeks to strengthen political parties by funding them according to their number of elected MPs, and making party hopping (known as 'yo-yo politics') almost impossible for individual MPs. Once they vote for a prime minister, party members are now meant to be bound to vote the same way (for or against the prime minister) in key votes-of-no-confidence, the budget and constitutional changes. The aim is to create stability in parties and continuity in government, and ultimately to improve government policy and programs (Standish 2001).

Observers of these issues remain sceptical of political engineering, the notion that the country's entrenched political culture of localised and personalised campaigning and fluid party allegiances can be changed by constitutional fiat. There was no sign in the 2002 election that parties played a highly significant role. The number of parties rose to 43, but 19 of those parties failed to have any candidates elected. Seventeen winners were independents. Parties seemed irrelevant to most people, who instead followed clan loyalties or voted according to candidates' perceived qualities (rather than policies). The candidates of each of the leading parties received less than 10 per cent of the national vote. Nonetheless, the previously dominant party, the Peoples Democratic Movement (PDM), lost 30 of its 42 sitting members, including most ministers. Clearly the PDM government was unpopular, whereas the non-government National Alliance (led by Sir Michael Somare) lifted its numbers to 19. Under OLIPPAC, this meant Sir Michael's name was offered to the parliament as the new prime minister, and duly confirmed with a bandwagon vote of 88 to nil (the PDM abstained). The coalescing process to form government in August 2002 was less conflictual than the usual post-election 'horse-trading', which is seen as a plus, but once again was assisted by wealthy individuals who have since gained high office. Some new MPs and ministers are under investigation for corruption.

Critics raise several concerns surrounding OLIPPAC, aside from its compliance arrangements, which require administrative resources which the PNG state simply does not have. In one of his last statements as Chief Ombudsman in December 2000, Simon Pentanu questioned the way the Act might impinge on the rights of individual MPs to represent their constituents as independents, an issue which might need judicial review. There was also concern that the OLIPPAC might be too rigid, in that a poor or even dangerous prime minister is just as likely to be entrenched in office for five years as a good one. Media commentators said the legislation would make small parties vulnerable to losing their members to bigger ones, which has started happening. Apparently MPs can change their loyalties under OLIPPAC, if they do so collectively, as a party. Indeed, the PDM caucus in August collectively voted to dissolve and reconstitute itself with a new name and leader. This has not happened, but they had spotted an unforeseen loophole in the

new law. By November 2002, MPs were said to be plotting the first vote-of-no-confidence against the Somare government. The real impact of this constitutional law on the performance of voters, politicians, parties and governments will not be known until late in this parliamentary term, in 2007.

Preferential voting

The second major reform is the reinstitution of preferential voting, which had been dropped from the independence constitution in 1975. Since then, first-past-the-post voting has delivered parliaments in which most MPs gained less than 20 per cent of the votes in their respective electorates. Not surprisingly, these few voters become their de facto constituency, with the rest often ignored. In January 2002, the constitution and electoral law were amended so that in future elections (including by-elections) a limited preferential voting (LPV) system will be used. The proponents of LPV assert that it will encourage broad-based campaigning in a cooperative manner, so candidates can gain each other's preferences. They predict that LPV will lead to the election of parliamentarians whose wider support bases will enable them to be more representative and thus serve the entire electorate (Reilly 2001).

This would require a major shift in Papua New Guinean ways of doing politics. Competition will continue to be intense. Local clans and tribes are likely to continue to compete and nominate their own people, so high candidate numbers are likely to continue. The process of counting to achieve a winner will be complex. If there are 26 candidates per seat, as in 2002, then there are likely to be 24 counts before someone gains a majority of remaining votes. Only three numbered preferences will be allowed, which means that the distribution of preferences will eliminate almost all candidates, to the confusion and anger of their supporters. This count will be very slow and expensive, and the problems of maintaining public order will be immense. As in 2002, most of those elected are still likely to finish up with less than 17 per cent of the vote. MPs will still owe their support to localised groups, and seek to advantage them rather than the entire electorate. The benefits may be restricted to those women who wish to vote for someone outside their husband's clan.

The future?

Changing established political behaviour is not easy, unless it benefits the political actors. PNG's democratic reforms are likely to follow the pattern seen in the 1990s efforts to redemocratised Africa, namely 'path dependency', the continuation of tactics which have succeeded in the past. To be effective, political reformers need to understand the political culture and local ways of doing politics. The PNG researchers cited earlier have, by implication, foreshadowed the intensity of inter-group conflict, the imperative of clan loyalties and authoritarian political behaviour, and the decay of state political institutions so vividly displayed in the latest national elections. In the Highlands, especially, people have shown they are prepared to corrupt, defy and even attack agents of the state in their efforts to gain control of its resources. They will not

change these patterns of behaviour unless the rewards are reduced, and that includes the possibility of being elected by what the candidates themselves call 'foul means'.

There is a chilling logic behind the weakness of PNG's political institutions described in this article, and the breakdown in trust essential for a polity to thrive. Aside from the better known issue of Bougainville secessionism, there remains the wider problem of the Islands region feeling alienated from the rest of the country. Some observers see signs that the rough tough politics of the Highlands are being copied in some coastal provinces and Port Moresby. Well-informed people across the country were deeply shocked by the breakdown of democratic voting procedures in the Highlands in mid-2002. Had a Highlander been elected prime minister in August 2002, then the dangers of the PNG state fragmenting would have been increased. In most mainland provinces, the problems of governance identified in this article are systemic and not readily amenable to reform.

The Papua New Guinea state faces hard times. The kina is slipping in value and inflation is making survival harder for ordinary people, especially in the towns. Real wages are dropping. Declining state incomes are likely to increase pressures on the political system, which with reduced resources will have difficulty satisfying public demands and those of MPs. Political instability and increasing crime will reduce investment and hence employment. The economy is heavily dependent on the minerals and petroleum sector, which is shrinking. PNG will need to reinvigorate its agriculture to feed its people and increase export incomes, despite low world prices for its agricultural commodities (Baxter 2001).

Papua New Guinea has many dedicated NGO activists, but their anti-corruption campaigns had little impact on how most people voted in the 2002 elections. The dominant forces were those mobilising traditional group loyalties, marching to a different drum. Many idealistic and impressive new MPs were elected, but others were elected who appear to lack credibility as leaders. The country will need the sustained efforts of courageous leaders and committed citizens to improve its governance. In attempting institutional reforms, they will need to think politically as well as legally. Constitutional engineering is always problematic. Simply changing the rules of the game is not enough.

Notes

- 1 EMTV (PNG) News 4 July 2002 and film by Robyn Clarke, ABC TV, *Foreign Correspondent* 21 August 2002. The current use of the term 'warlord' in PNG is similar to that of William Reno (1998), who in describing West African politics uses the name for private businessmen who seek to gain control of the state.
- 2 By November the state had started to recreate a presence in Tari and Mendi.

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