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The Papua New Guinea elections

Rowan Callick

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We do not want to be involved with their dirty politics. We have to consider the wishes of the people. They were totally against the activities and decisions of Pangu and the People's Progress Party (Bill Skate, July 13).

Politics is a funny game. I have put my foot down to prove that I can be a leader. We have been accusing leaders and destroying them. That time is over (Bill Skate, July 22, on forming a coalition with Pangu and PPP).

In most democracies, elections are a matter of periodic pulse-taking. In Papua New Guinea they have superseded tribal conflicts, sporting contests, and even the display of wealth, as the supreme arena for acquiring and testing status.

The process, as in much of traditional Papua New Guinea life, is itself the focus, taking primacy in parliamentary politics over policy. When it came down to forming a government, in the small hours of July 22, current issues, election pledges and past associations were all, predictably enough, junked. And after initial unfocused activism, the Skate Government settled back into a similar rut to its predecessors: unchallenged authority within a

diminished area, heavily circumscribed by limited executive capacity, a full diet of rhetoric that is sporadically impressive, a well-intentioned but inept struggle to provide basic services, energetically and ingeniously conducted personal rivalries, and patriotically-garbed rent-seeking from foreigners.

Yet this time the electoral process had been launched with especially high expectations of forcing, finally, systemic change and a return, after almost two decades, to sober concentration on delivering schooling, health care and roads, to retrieve living standards that in many areas have actually declined during the 1990s.

The scene for such a sea change was set impressively: first by the constitutional reforms of Sir Julius Chan in 1995, which returned responsibility for parish pump spending from provincial governments to national parliamentarians, and second, earlier in 1997, by the popular support for the army in rejecting the use of mercenaries on Bougainville, and for the ensuing outcry against corruption that led to Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan standing aside.

Widespread, unprecedented cynicism about public life was put on hold as the country plunged hopefully into its

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customary, feverish five yearly election—its hopes built on the emergence, at the national level, of a selfless, skilled leadership, and at the constituency level, as ever, of a relative or friend.

A record 2,368 candidates (almost 50 per cent up on the 1,645 at the previous election in 1992) stood for the 109 seats—an average of 22 per constituency; each paid K1,000 deposit, only refunded to winners. With Papua New Guinea's first-past-the-post system, this translated into more than half the winners gaining less than 20 per cent of the votes in their seats. Sixteen parties stood candidates. Local issues, as previously, dominated the campaigns—except in Port Moresby, where the election of four new MPs (Skate, the first Papuan Prime Minister, being the sole MP to be returned in the capital following a stint as governor, during which the city spruced itself up) appears to have been partly attributable to overriding concerns about corruption, which the citizens of the capital are most closely acquainted with. They observe the limousines with darkened windows, the extended banquetting, the comings and goings at Jacksons Airport.

At each of the post-independence elections, increasing numbers of sitting members had lost their seats, culminating in 1992 when 62 fell. In 1997, this slipped back to 52, though the losers included for the first time two Prime Ministers—Sir Julius and Paias Wingti. Fifteen Ministers lost in all, just as in 1992.

But Sir Julius' last Government, for all its eventual unpopularity, did see a return to a semblance of sound macroeconomic management. His experience, attention to detail and love of control ensured a degree of administrative competence that his successor lacked: Skate, who vowed 'God is the Prime Minister, I am only His executive officer', sacked his first Finance

Minister, Roy Yaki, then discovered the budget was too far behind schedule for the calendar financial year—so the Government will instead merely extend supply for the first quarter of 1998.

Every post-independence parliament has changed prime ministers once, mid term. This is usually the signal for jostling and fund raising for the next election to start in earnest. The 1997 campaign was no exception, effectively being launched by Sir Julius' unseating of Wingti in August 1994. Then the war chests of the coalition partners, PPP and Pangu, and of the other major parties—Wingti's People's Democratic Movement and Skate's People's National Congress—began to fill. Despite a constitutional ban on contributions from non-citizens, powerful anecdotal evidence suggests that candidates solicit and obtain millions of kina from foreign businesses kept dependent on political patronage and approvals for licences, quotas and contracts.

Some parties deploy resources to sponsor candidates. Sir Julius' PPP has traditionally opted instead to back winners—repaying the election expenses of successful candidates, to lure their votes in the all-important vote for Prime Minister. When Sir Julius defended this practice near the end of the campaign, *The National* newspaper responded: 'Vote buying in Parliament is at the centre of Papua New Guinea's political instability and corruption.' A long-standing dispute over control of Pangu's own investment company, Damai—whose chief original aim was to fund election campaigns—was the final trigger in the split of founder Sir Michael Somare from the party. Leader Chris Haiveta, who had been Finance Minister, and who was to stay on as Deputy Prime Minister under Skate but now as Planning Minister, effectively pushed out Sir Michael—who formed his own National Alliance Party.

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The campaign saw issues about political fundraising and patronage presented through Papua New Guinea's thriving branch of Transparency International, the anti-corruption agency founded by former World Bank staffers angry at seeing their work undone by venal leaders—whose Papua New Guinea president is Sir Anthony Siaguru, a lawyer who has been head of Foreign Affairs, a Minister, then deputy secretary of the Commonwealth. Its slogan: *Pasim Pasin Nogut*. The Catholic Commission for Justice, Peace and Development warned: 'Do not sell your country to the dogs' (unnamed). Another prominent campaign message, displayed near Parliament House, was a text from Proverbs: 'When the righteous are in authority the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule the people suffer.'

Between such apocalyptic concerns and the more traditional electoral factors of pork-barrel promises, antipathies and, most importantly, of course, relationships, little room was left for debate about the stagnant economy. The commitment of the Chan Government to introduce a value-added tax on 1 January 1998 was, extraordinarily, scarcely raised. Correspondingly, its abandonment by the Skate Government was equally met with a shrug. Skate issued the customary assurance to the World Bank, however, that he would adhere to the deal on policies (including tax reform) and implementation struck with the international donors group the bank coordinates, in return for a structural adjustment program.

For two months from the start of voting, which took place from June 14–28, there was a 10pm to 4am curfew, and for one month a liquor ban. Campaigning was nevertheless as rambunctious as ever—a national letting-off of steam and a chance to display fervent local loyalties. The inroads in this very visceral process

made by EM TV, owned by Australia's Channel 9—its audience considerably widened since the 1992 poll—were modest. The mass media played only a supportive role in the main electoral game. No significant market research was conducted, either for the parties or for the media.

A 16-member Commonwealth observer group invited by the outgoing electoral commissioner to follow the campaign reported 'serious problems' including children being allowed to vote and anomalies in the common roll, but said these were not sufficient to cause the overall result to be invalidated. The large number of candidates; the diminished alternatives for prestigious careers or for making money; the palpable success of the political élite in acquiring assets and educating their children expensively—albeit in both cases substantially in Australia (Skate's own family have lived for years in Cairns, refugees from PNG crime); the surge of millenarian, pentecostal sects, influencing also the mainline churches with their melodramatic rhetoric; the confusion over responsibilities for prioritising and delivering local services, following the provincial government shake-up; all these ratcheted up the stakes during the election. It was not surprising that dozens of deaths were reported, chiefly in the Highlands, despite the deployment of thousands of police, and also soldiers—the latter brutalised by the decade of ill-equipped, swinging assignments on Bougainville, especially poorly equipped for such civic duties. Major Walter Enuma was to be charged with deploying his own troops for the cause, in Enga, of lawyer Rimbink Pato—who lost. A further 14 people died in post-election fighting as Highlands clans whose candidates had lost sought satisfaction in a more traditional manner.

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The results indicated a geographically dispersed desire to punish high profile figures associated too long with the corrupt *ancien regime*. Sir Julius, an MP for 29 years, lost to his cousin Ephraim Apelis; Wingti to human rights crusading Catholic priest Father Robert Lak. Sir Julius' chief lieutenant and fellow New Irelander Ben Micah fell. So did big-talking Port Moresby MP David Unagi, despite his having encouraged the migration of thousands of fellow Chimbus into squatter settlements in his constituency. Two of the best-performing members of the outgoing Cabinet also lost: Mines Minister John Giheno, the brightest hope for a Highlands leader for Pangu, and businessman Peter Barter, whose energetic leadership at Health and Provincial Affairs, and his Bougainville peace-making, had given the Government its best moments.

The newcomers included Sir Mekere Morauta, the best economist Papua New Guinea has produced—a former head of the Finance Department, of the PNG Banking Corp and of the central bank, and now setting a rare example by investing in and managing an added-value, export business: snap-frozen prawns for Japan; two women MPs, the first elected for 15 years—Lady Carol Kidu, the Australian-born widow of much-loved Chief Justice Sir Buri Kidu, a teacher and a lively campaigner on welfare and rights issues, and Dame Josephine Abaijah, who had campaigned long and hard for a separate Papua in an earlier incarnation as Papua New Guinea's first woman MP; Arthur Somare, returned for Angoram, fulfilling the hopes of his father Sir Michael for a Somare political dynasty; Ted Diro, returning comfortably for Central province after a spell out of public life when, as Deputy Prime Minister, he was found guilty of 83 counts of corruption; and three youngish Highlanders, associated with the

radical but erratic Melsol group, who had caught the public eye in the campaign against corruption: Father Lak in Western Highlands, fellow Catholic priest Father Louis Ambane in Chimbu, and Peti Lafanama in Eastern Highlands.

The Melanesian Alliance, founded by then Catholic priest John Momis and civil rights lawyer Bernard Narokobi, lost its hold on Bougainville, with Michael Ogio winning in the north for Wingti's People's Democratic Movement (PDM) and the leader of the anti-rebel resistance movement, Sam Akoitai, in central.

Immediately after the election, the parties stood—according to the affiliations registered with the Electoral Commission—as: Independents, 43; PPP and Pangu, 14 each; PDM, Diro's People's Action Party (PAP) and Skate's National People's Congress, six each; Melanesian Alliance and Sir Michael Somare's National Alliance, five each; People's Resources Awareness Party (seeking bigger returns for people living near mines or oil fields), and the United Party (before Pangu's rise, Papua New Guinea's biggest), three each; and the Indigenous People's Movement, the National Party (the vestige, via Paul Pora, of the late Sir Iambakey Okuk's powerful vehicle), the People's United Party, the Christian Democratic Party, the Movement for Greater Autonomy (via Stephen Pokawin, the charismatic Manus MP, a former political science lecturer), and the League for National Advancement, one each.

There followed the usual game of musical chairs, the independents—and even those elected as affiliated party members—jostling to join the groups that seemed most likely to form government. Micah Wes, elected as an independent for Vanimo-Green River, joined Pangu, which he had formerly denounced as corrupt, explaining: 'No one should claim to be

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righteous, because we are all sinners.'

The parties, as has now become traditional, rented whole hotels or resorts for a week to which they attempted to attract the maximum number of newly elected MPs. And it was at the PDM–PNC camp alongside the lovely Tufi fiords in Oro province that the decisive break was made. The two parties made a pact, following Wingti's demise, to support Skate for PM as a condition for forming a coalition with Pangu and PPP, who did comparatively well despite their pre-poll battering as corrupt. Sir Mekere, associated with PDM, was the first choice for PM but he would not deal with Pangu and PPP.

Key newcomers, such as the 'clean three' in the Highlands—Lak, Ambane and Lafanama—would not back the only clear alternative, Sir Michael Somare, who had aroused concern through the 1990s over his association with Taiwan, which funded the multi-storey Somare Haus in Waigani whose ownership and future remained cloudy.

On the day Parliament opened, youngish Highlander John Pundari was elected Speaker, confirming that Skate's coalition would win. Pundari is a Pangu member. The numbers then slipped even further from Sir Michael, handing Skate a comfortable victory by 71 to 35. Narokobi emerged surprisingly quickly as Leader of the somewhat shell-shocked Opposition. Sir Michael had now lost, from a position of considerable strength, twice—in 1987 and again ten years later. In between, in 1992, his public attacks on his successor as Pangu leader, Sir Rabbie Namaliu, did much to undermine Sir Rabbie's chance of returning as Prime Minister in 1992, when Wingti won against the odds. Wingti and Sir Julius remained key influences behind the scenes, despite losing their own seats—demonstrating that the 'numbers game' approach to PNG politics, with patronage

as its engine, remained central despite the Sandline affair and its aftermath. Two parties split between Government and Opposition, another novel PNG parliamentary tradition: Sir Mekere voting against Skate before sitting on the cross-benches, and historian Dr John Waiko taking a Government position while the rest of the PAP followed Diro into opposition.

The 1997 election did mark one significant shift in Papua New Guinea's polity: following the 1995 revision of the provincial government structure granting regional MPs—elected by an entire province—the choice of becoming governors, with considerable power over the administration of budgets, all except for Skate and Pangu leader Haiveta chose to do so rather than become Ministers. This arguably rebalanced the leadership structure to deploy more talent in the provinces.

Towards the end of 1997, numerous electoral appeals by losing candidates were winding their way through the legal system, though none had succeeded yet in forcing a by-election. Gabriel Dusava, elected for Yangoru-Saussia in East Sepik, appointed Education Minister, was ousted however on charges of corruption from his time as Foreign Affairs head. And former PPP Health Minister Yaip Avini, returned for Finschhafen Open in Morobe, was jailed for eight years for stealing K95,000 in public funds.

The Skate Government is constitutionally guaranteed 18 months in office—or at least, Skate himself is. He can reshuffle his support as he likes, as long as he can ensure supply. But by mid-1998 the first post-election campaign of this parliament will be hectically under way: to win the numbers for a successful no-confidence challenge. Opportunists—and who is not, in Papua New Guinea's extraordinary political world?—will always manoeuvre to make the most of such opportunities.