

In April, Papua New Guinea's (PNG's) Registrar of Political Parties, Dr Alphonse Gelu, suggested that current political stability points to 'the emergence of a new political culture' changing the face of politics for the better (Kenneth 17/4/15, 2).

It's tempting to dismiss that comment as political puff; Gelu wasn't speaking as a scholar but as an official supporting a Bill to reinvigorate the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC). Many familiar features of PNG politics clearly remain. But, given Gelu's expertise, and the [strange mix of sure-footed and wobbly moves](#) by Prime Minister Peter O'Neill's government since the 2012 election, it's worth giving the proposition serious consideration.

PNG's most distinct change in political culture unfolded after 1982, following the country's second national election since independence (Standish 2013, 8). Up until then, political parties' regional identities, policy differences, loyalty, and voter-identification with leaders had remained reasonably strong. By the early-mid 1980s, however, national politics was increasingly focused on gaining and allocating the spoils of office. Politicians' use of cash and promises of support to buy votes may have increased connections between leaders and some constituents, but, nationally, made the executive [ever less accountable to parliament](#) and parliament less responsive to the population.

Key causes of PNG's shift toward localism and patronage included social fragmentation; the abstract nature of notions of state, nation, and ideology compared to other calls on peoples' identity and allegiances; traditional leadership styles; the limited spread of the formal economy outside the resource sector; the country's brief and shallow colonial experience; the collapse of state services; non-emergence of issue-based political parties; and the expectations and demands of citizens themselves (Allen & Hasnain 2010).

At one level, PNG's political culture has seemed pretty resilient since then. It's easy to trace continuities in the to-and-fro between measures to restore a more nationally focused, Westminster-type, approach versus unplanned actions and deliberate policies that have deepened PNG's acutely clientelistic political

style. Introduction of the OLIPPAC in 2001 to [reduce MPs' party-hopping](#), and limited preferential voting from 2003, have had limited efficacy. Other attempted reforms have had mixed or opposite effects to those intended. The introduction of initially small discretionary funds in 1984 to increase MPs' relevance in their electorates, 1995 reforms that put national MPs in charge of the provinces as governors, and the 2013 extension of the grace period from parliamentary votes of no confidence to 42 months of a five-year term, all reinforced the incidence of [huge government coalitions](#) facing tiny oppositions, for example. Government ploys such as lengthy adjournments of parliament, misusing the parliamentary speaker's role, and [reallocating lucrative portfolios](#) to wavering ministers have become common too. It's tempting, then, to suggest there's nothing new under PNG's political sun.

Yet it's also difficult to escape a sense there's something stirring beyond just the acceleration and intensification of usual pressures. While it may not comprise a wholesale transformation, there are signs of a shift from the still fairly cautious accommodation of the reality of money politics toward embracing and harnessing its logic to try to deliver 'stability' (control) in Waigani and services to some of the rural majority — at least to those in successful candidates' voter strongholds and target communities. That's born of a decade of economic growth, plus [O'Neill's distinctive aims and approach](#).

In electoral terms, political gifting is now [evident in parts of PNG where there are no "big men" and where cultures of competitive exchange are largely absent](#)' (Haley 2014, 1). More significantly, O'Neill introduced legislation in November 2013 to bring all teachers, police, health workers, and other public servants in each district under authorities chaired by their MPs — giving politicians greater influence over appointments and spending (Wiltshire 13/1/14). Provinces and districts have received larger devolved District Services Improvement Program funds and other discretionary development project funds in consecutive budgets since 2008 (PGK10 million per district by 2013) despite lacking the administrative

structures to effectively purchase new classrooms, aid posts or roads or acquit that spending properly. Total discretionary funding had reached [PGK1.5 billion](#) each year — 12 per cent of the budget, and more than any single department — two years ago, and has [grown](#) since then.

Paradoxically, this radical decentralisation in administrative terms drastically centralises power in political terms. The response to the weak capacity of mainstream public service departments in Port Moresby and administrators in the provinces to fulfil Waigani's direction or the needs of rural people for service delivery is further eroding those agencies' capacity by appropriating their allocations and responsibilities. True, there aren't many effective levers to erode outside a few provinces such as East New Britain or organisations such as the Education Department. And at least more funds spent imprudently outside Port Moresby may trickle down to some rural communities than those spent unwisely in the capital. But devolving spending further politicises development decisions at the local level, while concentrating power in the hands of an executive frequently [accused](#) of withholding funds from its adversaries at the national level.

O'Neill 'rationalised his parliamentary majority into a political philosophy' during the 2011–12 constitutional crisis known as 'the impasse' and hasn't entirely discarded that stance since then (May forthcoming). He's also preserved PNG's statist model of development, despite devolving spending. He and former prime ministers will be trustees of the 'Kumul' [consolidated portfolio](#) of state-owned assets, while his government has borrowed to acquire equity in major projects that might be better [left in private hands if effectively taxed](#).

Meanwhile, there are signs the absence of a strong parliamentary opposition is spurring others to try to hold the executive to account. It's less clear, though, that such actors always assist the sort of stability Gelu predicts. Online civil-society voices seeking to fill the gap can be [reckless](#) as well as principled, while the courts, ombudsman, and administrators in place to prevent misconduct by leaders have been accused — especially by those being investigated — of bias and overreach. The institutionalisa-

tion of money politics could also intensify political competition already elevated by [strong economic headwinds](#), over two per cent population growth, rapid urbanisation, and social change. As neighbouring Solomon Islands shows, the [sky's the limit](#) for how much of a national budget MPs can spend once a patrimonial model becomes entrenched.

That might be *financially* sustainable given PNG's resource endowment. And the country's medium-term economic trajectory appears brighter than at many points in the last four decades, despite the looming short-term crunch. Yet it's unclear whether a polity deliberately built around money politics would be *politically* sustainable under a future leader lacking O'Neill's guile and steely resolve.

If he or another prime minister can ride that political tiger until oil prices recover and resource construction recommences, all may still be well. But a sustained decline in growth and stability would have serious security, diplomatic, and aid policy implications for Australia, as well as for PNG.

Author Notes

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