

# Papua New Guinea government offers free education in election bid

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In a blatant pitch for votes in the approaching June election, Papua New Guinea (PNG) Prime Minister Mekere Morauta claimed late last year that his government would grant free education for primary and secondary school children if it gained another term. “No child in government or church schools will pay tuition fees,” he pledged. “These will be paid for by the national government”.

His promise was also a bid to demand support for the program of selling off public assets and services laid down by the International Monetary Fund and Australia, the former colonial power. Morauta linked the new education policy to the wholesale privatisation of government entities, including the country’s main bank. “We can afford to do so [remove fees], because of the success of our privatisation and reform program to date,” he stated, implying that continued opposition to the sell-off would block the education pledge.

In a public relations exercise, Morauta personally distributed PNG kina cheques totalling some K2.2 million (about \$US600,000) to National Capital District schools, saying that he was proving his critics wrong and that the policy would continue, provided that his government was re-elected.

His promises are a fraud on a number of counts. In the first place, the K150 million to be allocated toward the *Education Fees for 2002* policy would fall far short of providing a free education for all PNG children. The education system is vastly under funded, with staff-student ratios standing at 1:30. By comparison, in Australia—where class sizes in government schools are large—the national average is 1:15.

As many as half PNG’s children currently do not attend school. The removal of fees is likely to enable more parents to enrol their children, and resources will be totally inadequate for the increased intake. The

business consultancy Price Waterhouse Coopers noted: “The government has announced that it will provide free primary and secondary education although there would appear to be no significant increases in the funding of education infrastructure.”

Government officials have admitted that for at least the first quarter of the year, schools will be funded according to the 2001 enrollment figures. In the National Capital District, Gerehu High School principal Martin Kenehe said the school had 60 more students this year who were not covered by the first quarter subsidies. Coronation Primary School headmaster Gelai Enara said all classes exceeded the maximum number of 45 students, and some had over 70 students.

In the Enga province, many students face exclusion. The school board announced that it could not enrol students in Year Seven due to a shortage of classrooms and teacher accommodation. In the classes that will run, there will be one teacher to 50 students.

Likewise, several Western Highlands secondary principals said their schools were facing funding shortfalls, overcrowding and the prospect of turning away students. Anglimp High School required at least K90,000 for desks and text books for new Year 10 students, but was only allocated K64,500 as its first quarter subsidy.

Schools in the remote regions face particular problems, as their normal running costs are much higher due to transport costs. Gangang Karim, the outgoing principal of Aiome High School in the Middle Ramu District of Madang Province, said his school faced “a nightmare”. It confronted a budget crisis with students who had left school some years ago returning to re-enrol. The shortfall of K300 per student could force the school to send its 400 students home at the end of term three.

At least two provincial administrations have stated that the funding will be insufficient. Morobe provincial administrator Manasupe Zurenouc said prices of goods and services had increased dramatically, and many schools would need increased budgets to see them through the year. East New Britain education chief Boas Koro said parents would still have to pay fees to cover costs. He later withdrew his statement, no doubt under duress from the central government.

Enga Governor Peter Ipatas, who has allied himself to the ruling Peoples Democratic Party, initially described the policy initiative as an “election cheat,” apparently seeking electoral gain by distancing himself from Morauta. The national government did not have the resources to sustain its current policy, he insisted. At the end of January, Ipatas retracted his comments.

A Department of Education report revealed the extent to which PNG children are denied access to education. It estimated that about 2 million youth and adults—one third of the population—are out of school and unemployed in the 13-34 age group. Port Moresby, the capital, has a jobless rate of more than 60 percent. There are no unemployment benefits in PNG.

Education Minister Muki Taranupi admitted that an estimated 5 to 10 percent of school-aged children did not even get the opportunity to enrol in formal education. Of those who did commence primary school, nearly 50 percent dropped out before reaching sixth grade.

So inadequate is government funding that churches provide up to 60 percent of places, from primary schools to tertiary institutions. Both they and the government schools charge fees that are beyond the reach of many working class and rural families. In Madang, for instance, parents had to pay K800 per student for secondary education last year. As a result, most children receive no secondary or tertiary education and an estimated 55 percent of the population is illiterate.

Morauta’s proposals will not overcome these gross deficiencies. Moreover, any increase in education spending is already being offset by cuts to the provinces, resulting in a further decline in health and other services. According to economist Agogo Mawuli, from the National Research Institute, the government has reduced funding of the provinces to a level that fails to comply with constitutional requirements. Mawuli

said the allocations were half of what was expected.

The prime minister’s flagrant vote-buying exercise comes after a year of instability. The survival of his Peoples Democratic Movement coalition government was called into question twice last year by popular opposition to the IMF dictated program of economic restructuring. A military mutiny that won wide public support in March forced the government to postpone its downsizing of the army. Two months later government offices in Port Moresby were besieged for almost a week by a student led anti-privatisation sit-in.

In order to crush the second protest Morauta brought in riot police, who opened fire on demonstrators, killing at least four. For the past four months the government has refused to release the findings of a five-week inquiry into the deaths. All indications are the report will exonerate the police, sparking further unrest.

PNG’s first post-independence prime minister, Sir Michael Somare, who recently replaced another former prime minister Bill Skate, as opposition leader, offers no alternative. He and his National Alliance have attacked the education initiative from the right. “Don’t believe that education will come for free, as nothing comes for free today,” Somare declared. “We have to work hard.”

Underlying the lack of basic services is a worsening economic outlook. Since being granted formal independence in 1975, PNG governments have been largely reliant on the mining and petroleum industries to attract investment and generate taxation and export revenues. Many of the major projects are now nearing exhaustion and new investment has dropped sharply. According to one estimate, by Mike Manning from the Institute of National Affairs, the end of mining and oil operations could wipe out 26 percent of the country’s gross domestic product in the coming decade.



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