

Calls for state of emergency in Papua New Guinea elections

Will Marshall
7 June 2002

With polling in the national elections due to begin on June 15, a series of calls have been made in Papua New Guinea for the government to impose a state of emergency in response to reports of campaign violence.

On May 21, the *National*, one of the two main English-language newspapers, issued a strident editorial, declaring: "It is ridiculous to pretend that people who are involved in hostage-taking, the widespread use of illegal weapons, and the slaughter of rivals at every available opportunity can put these activities on hold and cast a mature vote in a vital national election".

Reflecting broader concerns in ruling circles about the unstable political situation, the editorial made clear any state of emergency would not necessarily be temporary. "The emergency might well continue for a year or longer. If necessary, it could cover a whole province," it stated.

The newspaper was immediately supported by Peoples Action Party leader Ted Diro, a former armed forces chief, who insisted on May 22 that the defence forces had to be "called up straight away" to put an end to the "anarchy" in the Southern Highlands Province. "My information is that three electorates, Tari-Pore, Koroba-Kopiago and Komo-Magarima, are totally out of control," he said. "The police are being overpowered by the situation. The range of armaments is substantial. Police cannot act against them alone".

Prime Minister Mekere Morauta ruled out any military involvement but has called up the entire 10,000-strong police force, including reserves, for a major security deployment ahead of the elections. At the same time, he has cast doubt on the outcome of the elections, saying that the public was entitled to have "serious doubts" about the validity of the electoral roll.

In April, Morauta attempted to defer the election by seeking an injunction in the National Court preventing the governor general from issuing writs on the basis that the electoral roll was inadequate. But Justice Sevua ruled that the application was "frivolous and vexatious," declaring: "In my view, the State cannot complain about the state of the Common Roll when, on the evidence of the Chief Electoral Commissioner, it failed to allocate sufficient funding to update the Common Roll".

Morauta has continued to raise the issue, indicating that he may not accept the result if he loses the election. He has

declared that he would win "a fair game" implying that any loss will be put down to foul play. The declaration of a state of emergency would give Morauta wide powers to clamp down on any opposition, including the detention of MPs, and to extend the term of the parliament. Given that Morauta's chances of winning the election or even retaining his own seat appear shaky, he may be considering using the ongoing violence to justify such a move.

A number of violent incidents involving electoral candidates have taken place over the past month. In one instance, a government MP was attacked with a knife, his daughter injured and his Toyota Landcruiser overturned and stripped. Local villagers were angry that he had only provided services for his immediate supporters and not the rest of the district.

The most serious incident involved the shooting of a policeman and the kidnapping of a candidate, Benias Perry, and two other police in the Southern Highlands. The three were seized on May 18 by villagers loyal to Perry's opponent for the Koroba Lake-Kopiago electorate—Environment and Conservation Minister Herowa Agiwa. The hostages were only released after the intervention of former provincial governor Anderson Agiru.

A Strategic Intelligence Assessment issued by the PNG Defence Force in January warned of the impending violence in the Highlands and in the two main coastal cities—Port Moresby and Lae—during the elections. It stated that political candidates might resort to using illegal private armies to garner electoral support and intimidate opponents and proposed the imposition of a state of emergency in the troubled provinces.

The political violence is, however, the direct product of the social tensions fuelled by the policies of successive PNG governments that have slashed jobs, wages and social services in line with the demands of the IMF and World Bank. Political patronage resting on tribal and language loyalties has always been a prominent feature of official politics. Politicians, many of whom are independents, come to power promising benefits for their "wantoks" or tribal groupings, at the expense of other rivals.

Voters, particularly in impoverished and remote areas such as the Southern Highlands, have increasingly come to rely on these small handouts as other sources of income have shrivelled

and services have deteriorated or been ended completely. As a result, winning the local election has become a process fraught with sharp tensions and rivalry. Last year, on the orders of the World Bank, Morauta slashed the District Development Program Grants or “slush fund” available to MPs to disperse in their electorates from 1.5 million kina (\$US450,000) to just 500,000 kina—making the competition for a piece of the shrinking pie even fiercer.

At the end of last year tribal fighting near Mendi in the Southern Highlands resulted in the deaths of more than 120 people and many more injuries. The clash between Ujumap and Wogia villagers stemmed from unresolved issues involving political allegiances in the 1997 national elections. According to the 1999 Pacific Human Development Report, the Highlands have some of the worst conditions in the country: the illiteracy rate was 71.8 percent and 76 percent of the population lacked access to safe drinking water. Health and education services are rudimentary or non-existent.

A record number of 3,200 candidates and 46 parties are standing in the elections. Last year Morauta pushed through new legislation, known as the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates Act, in a bid to prevent MPs shifting their allegiances and severely restricting the registration of political parties. Those deemed to have “divisive policies that seek to challenge national unity” are barred.

But from the standpoint of the ruling elites and the IMF, which demanded the new law to end the country’s chronic political instability, it has proven to be a dismal failure. The majority of candidates in the present elections are independents who are likely to win at least one third of the seats and will trade their votes to the highest bidder. A huge turnover of MPs is predicted—60 percent or higher—and no party is expected to gain the 30 seats required to form government outright.

“I doubt if this was what the Political Integrity Bill was designed to create, and, in fact, we face the possibility of an even more fractured government,” Port Moresby Chamber of Commerce and Industry President David Conn declared in frustration.

Morauta himself did not win office through the 1997 election but only came to power after Prime Minister Bill Skate was ousted under strong international pressure. The World Bank, IMF and the former colonial power, Australia, all strongly backed Morauta, a former head of the country’s central bank, as the means for implementing economic restructuring measures.

He launched a program of wholesale privatisation, including the PNG airline, water and electricity utilities, and the national bank and harbour facilities, despite meeting widespread opposition. In March 2001, a report calling for thousands of retrenchments in the PNG army was the catalyst for a military mutiny that forced Morauta to back down and grant an amnesty to all the soldiers concerned.

Only a few months later, after police shot and killed three

students protesting against privatisation, he clamped down on public outrage by imposing a dusk-to-dawn curfew in Port Moresby. As a result Morauta’s own re-election is in doubt as his seat in Port Moresby covers the University of Papua New Guinea and nearby squatter settlements where many anti-privatisation protesters came from.

Morauta has nevertheless pledged to continue with the IMF’s restructuring program. Significantly, the *National*, which called for a state of emergency, has spoken glowingly of the prime minister’s commitment to economic reform, saying: “He is not prepared for one minute to abandon privatisation nor the structural adjustment programs. Nor should he.”

Morauta has strong support from business circles in PNG and internationally. According to the Australian Export Finance and Insurance Corporation, “Apart from Sir Mekere, no politician is apparently anywhere near the same commitment to reform”. The *Asia Times* noted that “international development agencies are ready to pronounce an economic and social catastrophe if the next government fails to display the same resolve” as shown by Morauta in imposing the IMF/World Bank agenda.

Whoever comes to power will be under pressure to accelerate economic restructuring and slash public spending even further. Mining and petroleum, the economy’s mainstay, is in sharp decline, exacerbating the country’s economic crisis. ANZ bank’s senior economist Bernie Shuttleworth declared in April: “A supplementary budget will be necessary after the election no matter who wins and it will need to be harsh if a liquidity crunch is to be avoided”.

In this context, the call for emergency rule takes on a wider significance. It is an indication that the ruling elites in Port Moresby and internationally are well aware that to impose deeply unpopular economic measures will ultimately require anti-democratic methods of rule.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact