

Papua New Guinea election plagued by corruption, violence and a lack of funds

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Polling ended last Saturday in Papua New Guinea's national elections after being delayed for a week amid ongoing violence and corruption. While some seats have already been decided, the Electoral Commission warned last week that protracted delays in counting might provoke a constitutional crisis if the results are not finalised by the deadline on July 15.

The election has been marred from the start by a lack of funding for transport and personnel, resulting in electoral officials being unable to access remote areas where about a quarter of the country's voters live. Some have been denied the right to vote. According to a report in the Australian-based *Age* newspaper, no polling teams could be sent to remote villages in East New Britain or to the Mamusi area of Mul-Baiyer.

The breakdown in transport and organisation deferred the polls in many regions, as electoral officials refused to continue unless they were paid. The major transport company contracted to the Electoral Commission, Pacific Helicopters, grounded its fleet in late June for several days after failing to receive \$US280,000 in outstanding payments.

The delays heightened tensions that were already at boiling point. There has been widespread violence particularly in the Highlands. The worst affected area, Chimbu Province, where five people were killed, was declared a "fighting zone," giving the police wide-ranging powers to raid homes without a search warrant and to disarm anyone suspected of carrying firearms.

At least 13 people have been killed in election related violence and many more injured. One of the worst episodes involved a fight between two council candidates in Gumine, Chimbu province, on June 21 that led to the shooting death of a 14-year-old schoolgirl. The aggrieved tribe carried out a revenge attack, burning down 10 houses belonging to the enemy

clan and raping seven women.

A number of polling officials have been threatened and assaulted. The returning officer for Daulo Open, for instance, was attacked after he refused to release a ballot box to supporters of a particular candidate. As well the candidate for the Kompam/Ambum seat shot dead two men after an argument broke out over ballot papers.

The police have been implicated in several cases of electoral corruption. The most publicised occurred in the Port Moresby Northeast electorate also on June 21, when several policemen removed a ballot box and took it to the recently elected candidate, a member of prime minister Mekere Morauta's Peoples Democratic Movement (PDM). Assistant Police Commissioner Matthew Minok said he was forced to negotiate for four hours to secure the release of the ballot box, which he claimed, had been tampered with.

The climate of violence and corruption surrounding the poll points to the country's political crisis. Over the past two decades, a series of shaky coalition governments have imposed the demands of the IMF and World Bank for economic restructuring with devastating consequences. Having lost faith in the major parties, villagers in impoverished rural areas often look to a local candidate to win a seat and provide benefits—usually on the basis of clan and tribal loyalties.

As social conditions have deteriorated, the contest for seats has become more and more ferocious. In the current election, a record 2,875 candidates—including independents and members of 43 parties—are contesting seats. None of the major parties will win a majority, forcing each of them to try to put together a coalition. In the intense post-poll bargaining, independents will trade their votes for handouts to their local supporters.

At this stage, only a few seats have been finalised. Former prime minister Bill Skate has been returned in his National Capital District Regional seat, polling 18,757 votes. His nearest rival received 3,198 fewer votes. In the most closely watched result, Morauta, a former Central Bank Governor, won his seat in what was a relatively close contest.

In April, Morauta attempted to delay the elections by claiming in the National Court that the electoral roll was inadequate. The legal challenge failed but he has continued to criticise the Electoral Commission's handling of the poll. Morauta's government, however, has been directly responsible for the election problems, having cut the commission's budget by more than \$US1 million in early June, a move that Electoral Commissioner Reuben Kaiulo denounced as illegal.

Having contributed to the election chaos, Morauta may try to exploit the situation to declare the results illegitimate, if his party's results are poor. Under the country's constitution, there is provision for parliament to declare a state of emergency and annul the results. Having won his seat, Morauta's attacks on the Electoral Commission have subsided for the moment.

While it may be more than a month before the shape of the next government is determined, the fact that Morauta won his seat was greeted with relief in Canberra, which has consistently backed him. An Associated Press report noted: "Sir Mekere's re-election will buoy the hopes of major aid donors such as Australia and the World Bank who are keen to see the economic reforms continue in the crime-ridden South Pacific nation."

The Australian government's Export Finance Insurance Corporation commented in a report: "It is widely acknowledged that Morauta, despite his apparent willingness to ditch fiscal responsibility temporarily for electoral advantage, is the only politician committed to decisively improving economic management over the long term."

According to a recent ABC *Four Corners* program in Australia, Canberra was so concerned to see Morauta returned that Australian officials ensured that PNG received a crucial \$200 million World Bank loan before the end of 2001. The money was untied budget support, giving the Morauta government a free hand to spend the finance however it wanted. Without the funding, Morauta would have faced a budget crisis that would

have undermined his election prospects.

The *Four Corners* program revealed emails from a senior World Bank economist who said bank officials had felt that the "Australians are breathing down our necks". "[The] PNG government has put pressure on the Bank to lower the bar. This pressure has come from various quarters including the Australians," he said.

The manoeuvring to form the next government has already begun. Skate, who has been widely criticised in Australia, has ruled out a bid for the prime ministerial post but he is seeking a role. Having "declared war" on Morauta, he said his Peoples National Congress would join "any other party that has the numbers". Other former prime ministers, including Michael Somare, the country's post-independence leader, have indicated they are seeking the top job.

Whoever wins government will have to depend on the support of independents, many of whom will have been elected with as little as 10 to 20 percent of the vote in their electorates. According to one prediction, over 60 percent of the sitting members will be defeated and independents will hold at least a third of the seats in the next parliament. The results may also be plagued by legal challenges.

Whatever the final outcome, the next Papua New Guinea government will be just as unstable, and as undemocratic, as the last.



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