

More tortured manoeuvres in Papua New Guinea parliament

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A political shakeup in Papua New Guinea over the past fortnight has again highlighted the country's instability. In a bid to maintain his grip on power, Prime Minister Michael Somare sacked seven cabinet ministers on May 18 and threw the Peoples National Congress (PNC)—the second largest party in the shaky ruling coalition—out of the government.

Those dismissed included deputy prime minister Moses Maladina, who leads the Peoples Action Party (PAP), the leader of government business, Peter O'Neill from the PNC, as well as the ministers for defence, tourism, prisons, employment and fisheries.

The rupture followed the incorporation of the PNG Party, led by former prime minister Mekere Morauta, into the government a week earlier. Morauta, a businessman and former central bank chief, is known for his close relations with Australia, the IMF and World Bank. He lost the 2002 national election as a result of a backlash against his government's economic restructuring measures.

Morauta announced on May 11 that the PNG Party would join the government to provide "increased political stability" for the country. But the effect was the opposite. On hearing that the PNG Party with its nine MPs wanted three cabinet posts, two of Somare's allies—the PNC and PAP—issued their own demands for more ministries, along with the removal of Treasury and Finance Minister Bart Philemon.

Philemon's unpopularity flows from his insistence on stringent restrictions on government spending. Although Somare capitalised on the hostility to Morauta's austerity program to win the 2002 poll, his government has adhered to the demands of the IMF and Canberra for economic reforms. The last budget made further cuts to social spending while granting significant tax breaks for mining companies.

Somare bitterly told parliament on May 14 that internal intrigues were paralysing the government. "During the

first 21 months in office, the real opposition has come not from the official opposition [parties] but from within the coalition government," he said. Having failed to secure their support, Somare moved against the PNC and PAP four days later.

A key element in all the wrangling has been an attempt by Somare to amend the country's constitution to increase the length of time that the government is immune from a vote of no-confidence. Under the proposed amendment to section 145, which requires a two-thirds majority in parliament, the period of grace would increase from 18 months to 36 months.

Somare's attempts to pass the amendment have failed on two occasions, the most recent in January, despite the fact that his coalition of 12 parties had, on paper at least, a large parliamentary majority. Opposition to the proposed constitutional change has already resulted in a series of splits among smaller parties. The Peoples Progress Party, the United Resources Party, and the Peoples Labour Party now have MPs in both the government and the parliamentary opposition.

Somare's period of grace expired in February and there have been rumours ever since that he would be ousted by a vote of no-confidence. He adjourned parliament from January 21 to June 29 as a means of avoiding any vote but was forced to reconvene it after the Supreme Court ordered a new governor-general be elected. While former prime minister Pias Wingti sought to move against Somare, he failed to gather the numbers.

Somare's cabinet reshuffle was made after the PNC and PAP indicated they would not support the constitutional amendment. The PNC is no longer in the government, and Somare effectively split the PAP by appointing three of its members to cabinet. Three MPs from Morauta's party were also installed as ministers.

But for all the bloodletting, the prime minister was no closer to gaining the numbers required to pass the

amendment. Morauta emphasised that his party members would have a conscience vote on the constitutional change. Somare has since shelved the proposal by referring it to a re-formed constitutional development commission.

The other major issue connected to this manoeuvring has been Canberra's insistence that continued aid to PNG be tied to the dispatch of Australian police and officials to take over top posts in the country's police force, courts, financial and planning agencies. After considerable Australian arm twisting, Somare finally agreed to the "enhanced cooperation package" last year but the plan remained bogged down because PNG refused to grant Australian police legal immunity from prosecution in PNG courts.

The so-called cooperation package is part of broader plans by Australia to tighten its grip over its former colony and the near-Pacific region as a whole. Australian Strategic Policy Institute director Hugh White has called on the Howard government to take even more aggressive steps in PNG. Branding the current package as insufficient, he declared recently: "Australia must find ways to support deep-seated basic reform of governance, not at the margins, which we're doing some of at the moment... and not incrementally". White played a key role in urging Canberra to intervene last year in the neighbouring Solomon Islands, with the dispatch of 2,200 troops, police and officials.

In this context, Somare's alliance with Morauta, who is known to be close to Canberra, is significant. At the least, it is an attempt to reassure the Howard government that Australian interests will be safeguarded and to fend off further demands from Canberra.

The Howard government has exploited instability and corruption in PNG to justify its demands for a more direct say in the country. But as the former colonial power, Australia is responsible for the economic backwardness and lack of social services in PNG, which fuels the political volatility that has plagued the country since formal independence in 1975.

To a large extent Australia only developed PNG's infrastructure where it served the mining industry and other areas of trade and commerce. The majority of the population continues to live off subsistence agriculture, in villages or the slums that have sprung up around major urban centres. While Australian firms have extracted billions of dollars in profit, Port Moresby has been forced to slash public spending and carry out structural reforms that have exacerbated unemployment and poverty.

Parliamentary politics in PNG are based around local loyalties. The election of a member of a village or clan to parliament is welcomed as the means to gain some desperately needed local development. Inevitably, parliament is dominated by short-lived alliances aimed at taking power or gaining infrastructure grants to satisfy parochial demands. Party allegiances are notoriously unstable, with no significant ideological differences separating any of the formations.

Since 1975, PNG has had 11 governments, all of which have been coalitions of various parties, and none of which has survived a full parliamentary term. In fact, the governments have lasted on average just over two years in office. On six occasions, prime ministers have been removed through votes of no-confidence or, in one instance, by a Supreme Court ruling. Somare himself has been the victim of no-confidence votes on two occasions, in 1980 and 1985. His rather crude and anti-democratic constitutional amendment to block no-confidence votes in no way addresses the underlying sources of the country's political fragility.

Far from the Australian intervention being aimed at assisting the PNG population, Canberra is seeking to ensure that the economic prescriptions of the IMF and World Bank are adhered to even more closely. The planned dispatch of some 230 Australian police, who are to be actively involved in PNG police operations, indicates Canberra's concerns over growing social discontent. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer flew to PNG on Friday for further talks with the Somare government on the enhancement package.

In the latest twist in Port Moresby's tortured politics, Somare on May 28 ousted former prime minister Bill Skate from the post of parliamentary speaker in a secret ballot by 56 votes to five. Earlier in the week, Skate, who leads the PNC, had vowed to tackle the government "head on" in the parliament. Somare's move preempted any vote of no-confidence in the government and allowed Somare to adjourn parliament and stave off any further challenge until at least June 29.



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