

Threat of Australian intervention hangs over Papua New Guinea election

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National elections currently underway in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) are taking place under the cloud of Australia's aggressive interventions throughout the southwestern Pacific. Polling began last Saturday but will not be completed for more than a week—a sign of the lack of physical, administrative and social infrastructure bequeathed by Canberra to its former colony.

Insofar as the election has been covered at all, the Australian and international media have focussed on signs of violence, corruption, political unrest and social breakdown—recalling the campaigns preceding Australian military interventions in the Solomons and East Timor. In both cases, Australian Prime Minister John Howard exploited political and social unrest to justify sending in troops, police and officials to shore up Australian economic and strategic interests against those of its rivals.

While an Australian military force is not currently on PNG's doorstep, plans have been discussed. Speaking in East Timor in mid-June, Australian Army chief, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, declared that he could not rule out an intervention in PNG or Fiji, as the recent Fiji coup and imminent PNG elections had the potential to incite social tensions. "I think we would need to have prudent plans and just see whether we need to do that," he said. PNG and Fiji both firmly rejected the possibility.

Canberra may not have police and troops on the ground in PNG, but it has a large stake in the election outcome and the means to influence the results. Following the Australian military intervention in the neighbouring Solomons in 2003, Howard laid out plans for an Enhanced Cooperation Package (ECP) for PNG to send more than 200 Australian police as well as senior bureaucrats to "advise" key PNG ministries, including finance, treasury, immigration, customs and the judiciary—all in the name of promoting "good governance" and market reforms.

Prime Minister Michael Somare bitterly opposed the ECP, insisting that PNG was a sovereign country, and threatened to look for aid elsewhere if Canberra carried out its threat to cut-off assistance. Somare grudgingly accepted the package, but tensions with the Howard government have led to a series of diplomatic clashes over the past three years. There is no doubt that Canberra wants to see Somare replaced at the current election by his chief opponents—former Prime Minister Mekere Morauta and former Treasurer Bart Philemon who have formed an anti-Somare alliance.

Morauta, a former central bank governor, forged a close relationship with the Howard government during his time as prime

minister from 1999-2002. He lost the 2002 election largely as a result of the widespread hostility to the IMF/World Bank austerity measures imposed by his government at Canberra's demand. He established the PNG Party in 2002, which joined the ruling coalition in 2004. Morauta made clear at a business dinner in May that he would continue the "pro-reform" agenda. His government would have "determination and guts—guts to make difficult decisions when necessary, and determination to pick up the reform program where it was left in 2002".

Philemon was treasurer until he unsuccessfully challenged Somare for the leadership of the ruling National Alliance, then quit to form his own New Generation Party. He is also regarded highly in Canberra for his efforts to push ahead with the economic reform agenda. Philemon told Australian Associated Press last week that if the opposition parties won the election, "a priority would be to normalise relations with Australia and ask it to assist PNG to fight corruption".

Philemon was instrumental in salvaging the ECP arrangement with Canberra after the PNG Supreme Court ruled in May 2005 that the legal immunity granted to Australian police sent to PNG was unconstitutional. With Canberra threatening to terminate the ECP and associated aid, Philemon held talks with Australian Treasurer Peter Costello and brokered a deal to keep high-level Australian advisers in place. "In the end common sense prevailed, and they left the guys in the non-policing areas and only the police were withdrawn," he said recently.

Both Philemon and Morauta have been waging a cynical campaign against Somare's alleged "corruption," which they claim is responsible for the appalling social conditions facing the majority of the population. Along with Somare, both men bear a share of the responsibility for undermining the limited public welfare, education and health services and creating the present social disaster. A World Bank report released last year noted that 70 percent of PNG's six million people live in poverty—a higher proportion than ten years ago. World Vision this year described PNG as a country going backwards. Compared with 22 other countries, PNG had the highest rate HIV/AIDS infection, around 2 percent, and the lowest proportion with access to clean water, 39 percent.

The opposition anti-corruption campaign received a welcome boost when Morauta announced on Monday, after polling had started, that he had obtained a leaked confidential report of a PNG Defence Force inquiry into last year's controversy involving

former Solomon Islands Attorney-General Julian Moti. The entire Moti affair is a graphic demonstration of Canberra's gross political interference in both the Solomons and PNG.

The Howard government targetted Moti over child sex allegations in order to destabilise the Solomons' government. It demanded his extradition and then orchestrated his arrest while in transit at Port Moresby airport. The Somare government refused to extradite Moti and released him from custody. He was eventually flown back to the Solomons on a PNG military flight. Canberra created a major diplomatic row over the incident, imposing a travel ban on PNG ministers, to which Somare threatened to respond in kind.

At an election rally in April, Somare accused Canberra of orchestrating the incident to discredit his government and lay the basis for his defeat at the polls. He questioned why Australian officials had not had Moti arrested in Singapore or waited until he arrived back in the Solomons. He has denied Canberra's accusations that he personally authorised the military flight but refused its demands to release the Defence Force report, saying it contained lies.

Now conveniently Morauta has obtained a copy, which he claims proves Somare's involvement and "corruption". Both Morauta and Philemon have demanded that Somare "come clean" and release the report. It is impossible at this stage to know who exactly leaked the report, but it is worth noting that Canberra has high-level military advisers in PNG. According to the latest Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade briefing on PNG, there are "23 ADF [Australian Defence Force] personnel who fulfill a variety of advisory and in-line roles in the PNG Defence Force".

As in the Solomon Islands, Australian advisers are only nominally answerable to PNG ministers and officials. Last month, an Australian adviser in the PNG Finance Department was told to stay away from its Port Moresby office amid allegations of spying. "He was acting like a spy here. He takes our files and takes them down to Canberra once a month. He just barges into our office, opens our draws and pulls out files," one government official told the media.

The Australian government also has a direct hand in the PNG election via an aid package to the Electoral Commission, which pays for 16 long-term advisers and a small army of accountants—one in each of PNG's 20 provinces—to oversee electoral commission budgets. The Australian assistance is supposedly to monitor electoral reform and ensure free and fair elections, but the first reports of voting indicate that at least one of the reforms—the revision of the electoral roll—has gone far from smoothly.

A *Sydney Morning Herald* article on Monday reported that thousands of names have been struck off the electoral roll in Southern Highlands province as part of efforts to eliminate so-called ghost voters. The entire village of Kusa with its 437 eligible voters has been removed from the roll. In another, Det, more than half had been eliminated. District returning officer Robin Pip told the newspaper that he only found out last Wednesday that nearly 12,000 names had been struck off his list.

Many Southern Highlanders are undoubtedly wondering whether they have been stripped of their vote deliberately. The failure of

successive central governments to address the most basic needs of the urban and rural poor has led to disillusion, the weakening of political loyalties and a fragmentation of PNG politics. In the current election, 22 parties and 2,759 candidates are vying for 109 parliamentary seats. Winning a seat often depends on the complexities of clan, tribal and language group rivalries to create a narrow lead over the many rivals.

Eliminating whole villages from the electoral roll could tip the balance in key seats, raising the question as to whether the actions of the Electoral Commission and its Australian overseers were simply incompetent or deliberate. It could also lead to accusations of ballot rigging, legal challenges and violence as happened in the Southern Highlands in 2002 when the votes in nine electorates were declared invalid.

A great deal is at stake for Australian capitalism. Papua New Guinea is by far the largest of the South Pacific countries, with rich mineral reserves, including oil and gas, as well as other natural resources. The Australian government is seeking to ensure its continued economic and strategic dominance of the region amid growing international and regional rivalry for resources. In what is no doubt regarded in Canberra as a significant challenge to Australian interests, the China Metallurgical Construction Company signed a deal last year for an \$800 million cobalt-nickel mine near Madang—China's first major investment in PNG.

Somare, who became PNG's first prime minister following independence in 1975, has collaborated with various Australian governments for decades. His willingness to resist Australia's aggressive interventionist moves, however timidly, has nothing to do with defending the interests of the majority of the population. It is based on the possibility of turning to other sources of investment and aid from China and other powers. In the midst of the stand-off over the Moti affair last year, Somare thumbed his nose at Canberra's threat to stop aid, saying: "If they threaten to withdraw aid, then by all means go ahead."

It is precisely the growing influence of rival powers in PNG and the Pacific that the Howard government is determined to block. That is why behind the scenes, Australian officials are no doubt pulling out all stops to swing the election in favour of Somare's opponents and, if that fails, planning other options.



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