Somare set to win PNG election despite Canberra's smear campaign

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This month's Papua New Guinea national election results are yet to be finalised but it appears that Prime Minister Michael Somare will retain government. By yesterday, his National Alliance had won 25 seats in the 109-member parliament, with 14 seats still undecided. Having the largest single number of seats of any group, Somare will have the first opportunity to establish a ruling alliance with smaller parties and independents. The PNG press indicated that the party was confident it already had sufficient support to form a new government.

Somare's two main political opponents—Bart Philemon's New Generation Party and former Prime Minister Mekere Morauta's Papua New Guinea Party—are trailing well behind with just four seats each. With PNG's highly fractured political establishment, the poll has been dominated by small parties and independents. Some 1,478 independent candidates stood in the election and so far 18 have been elected.

Somare's return to office will only heighten tensions with the Australian government, which intervened into the election campaign in what can only be construed as a deliberate attempt to undermine the prime minister. In a front-page article yesterday, Murdoch's *Australian* signalled that Canberra's anti-Somare campaign is about to be intensified. It leaked further details of a PNG Defence Force report into the so-called Moti affair, a report that apparently calls for charges against Somare.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* last Friday described Somare's likely win as "another setback in the South Pacific for the Howard government". The article pointed out that Canberra might now be placed in the difficult position of deciding whether to allow Somare to attend the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Sydney in September.

The Howard government banned PNG ministers from entering Australia after a PNG military plane transported lawyer Julian Moti from Port Moresby back to the Solomon Islands last September. Canberra has been pursuing Moti on dubious charges of child abuse as a means of pressuring the Solomons government and demanded that Moti be extradited to Australia after he was detained in PNG. Prime Minister John Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer accused the PNG government of organising Moti's flight; accusations which Somare denied.

Canberra's manipulation of the Moti affair is a graphic example of Australia's neo-colonial intervention within the region. Even Moti's detention at Port Moresby airport appears to have been orchestrated by Australian police who were sent to PNG as part of Canberra's so-called Enhanced Cooperation Package (ECP). Somare crossed swords with the Australian government over the package and threatened to look for aid from other countries, but eventually agreed to allow senior Australian "advisers" to oversee key areas such as finance, treasury, immigration and the judiciary.

During the election campaign, Downer publicly called for the release of the PNG military report into the Moti affair. On July 5 as voting was beginning, the Australian foreign minister declared that "there should be a public debate about it and for the Papua New Guinea public to make up its minds about it ... obviously it would influence anything we might do in the future as well".

Somare said that it was for the PNG people to decide, and he is challenging the findings in court. The document was leaked to Somare's opponents who declared that it implicated the PNG prime minister in Moti's flight. In the midst of the voting, the Australian

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press prominently featured an article on July 16 claiming the report called for Somare to be charged over the affair. Downer made further comments to the *Australian* newspaper on July 17 again calling for the report's release.

Canberra's blatant interference in the election campaign appears to have backfired and produced deepening local resentment. Australian-born PNG politician and Health Minister, Sir Peter Baxter, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* on July 11 he was not happy that Somare was leaning toward Asia rather than "our traditional friendship with Australia". But, he added: "I think the Australian government is equally at fault ... I think Downer has a lot to learn about the Pacific, and I think John Howard has as well. They haven't played it very well."

Baxter revealed that Downer had attempted to pressure him last year not to recruit Cuban doctors for PNG's desperately understaffed health system, claiming it would "destabilise security in the Pacific". The PNG health minister explained: "I replied that we appreciated Australian assistance but it really was our concern whether we bring in Cuban doctors ... I felt his letter was totally out of place." PNG officials left for Cuba this month to recruit 20 doctors.

Downer's letter to Baxter underscores the fact that the Howard government's interventions in the Pacific have nothing to do with improving the lot of ordinary working people. Australia, with the backing of the US, is seeking to tighten its grip over what Howard has described as "our backyard", amid growing competition for influence from China, Taiwan and the European powers. PNG, an Australian colony until 1975, is by far the largest of the small South Pacific nations and is endowed with considerable mineral wealth.

During the election campaign, Morauta and Philemon made clear their loyalty to the Howard government's agenda, declaring that PNG had no choice but to maintain close relations with Australia. In the name of fighting corruption, both men have championed the acceleration of market reforms being demanded by the IMF, World Bank and Canberra. Somare backed Philemon's slashing of public spending before sacking his finance minister last year over a leadership challenge. The economic agenda of both Somare and his opponents will inevitably lead to a further decline in living standards in a country where unemployment, poverty and the lack of adequate health care and education are already major social problems.

While they lag far behind in the count, Morauta and Philemon are engaged in behind-the-scenes "horsetrading" with independents and other political parties. They are also keen to exploit divisions within the National Alliance. Deputy Prime Minister Don Polye has said the National Alliance's grouping from the Highlands may exploit one of the provisions in the party's constitution to challenge for the post of prime minister if it returns the highest number of seats.

The opposition's prospects of unseating Somare appear slim, however. The National Alliance has won more than the 19 seats it had in the previous parliament. Somare, who became the country's first prime minister in 1975, is a master at the wheeling and dealing required to put together a coalition government. Unlike many of his recent predecessors, he served a full parliamentary term without being ousted in a no-confidence vote.

If Somare does succeed in forming the next government, the Howard government's political intervention into PNG will only deepen. Downer has already put Somare on notice over the Moti affair. "They're just going through an election at the moment and there's an election underway in Papua New Guinea this week so I think we can probably do nothing more than revisit this issue once the election is out of the way," he declared earlier this month.

Having failed in its attempt to undermine Somare at the poll, the Australian government seems intent on pushing for legal action against the newly elected prime minister.

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