

New Somare government formed in PNG despite Australian interference

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Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Michael Somare was re-elected on Monday for a second successive term with the support of 86 of the 109 MPs in the PNG parliament. Somare's party, the National Alliance, won 27 seats and formed alliances with various independents and 13 minor parties to establish the largest governing coalition since the country became independent in 1975.

The opposition parties could only muster 21 votes for their alternative candidate—Julius Chan—who was backed by his People's Progress Party as well as Bart Philemon's New Generation Party and Mekere Morauta's Papua New Guinea Party. Philemon and Morauta had campaigned vigorously against Somare, claiming corruption and economic mismanagement and calling for closer ties with Australia—PNG's former colonial ruler.

The outcome was a serious setback for the opposition parties, and also the Australian government, which openly intervened in the course of the election to undermine Somare. Canberra repeatedly called for the release of a PNG Defence Forces report into Somare's alleged involvement in assisting the Solomon Islands Attorney-General Julian Moti to leave Port Moresby last September after he had been arrested at the instigation of Australian officials.

The entire Moti affair is a cynical provocation orchestrated by Canberra to undermine Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare in the Solomon Islands and Somare in PNG, both of whom have objected to Australian dictates. The Howard government dredged up old child sex charges that had already been thrown out of court in Vanuatu as a means of smearing Moti and demanding his extradition. Moti's arrest and subsequent escape while on bail in Port Moresby has been exploited to aggressively pursue Somare.

Like Philemon and Morauta, Somare has no compunction in pursuing the economic restructuring agenda demanded by the IMF and World Bank that has led to a widening gulf between rich and poor. He earned the Howard government's ire, however, by seeking alternative sources of aid and investment, including from China, and objecting to the imposition of an Enhanced Cooperation Package (ECP), which installed Australian "advisers" to supervise key aspects of the PNG state apparatus, including police, finance, treasury and the judiciary.

Canberra's interference in the PNG election appears to have backfired by enabling Somare to posture as a defender of the country's sovereignty. Despite public hostility over the impact of the government's economic policies, his National Alliance gained more seats than at the previous election. Commenting after his victory, Somare defiantly declared: "We will guard the sovereignty of our country, we will help our neighbours whenever we can."

Former Australian diplomat and Howard government critic Tony Kevin told Reuters: "The lesson for Australia is to be less heavy handed." Far from backing down, however, the Howard government immediately made clear it would continue its campaign against Somare. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer reiterated his demand for the release of the PNG Defence Force report.

In an editorial on August 14, the *Australian* defended the Howard government's aggressive intervention in PNG politics and its demands for the report to be released. The newspaper had earlier obtained and published a leaked copy of the report, highlighting its recommendation for Somare to be charged over the Moti affair. It should be noted that Canberra has a number of "advisers" throughout the PNG Defence

Force.

Downer has continually insisted that relations between the two countries will only be normalised if Canberra deems that PNG has acted appropriately on the findings of the Defence Report. This would mean Somare facing charges, with the likelihood of imprisonment and removal from the leadership of the country. The Howard government has placed travel bans on PNG politicians over the Moti affair.

Despite their electoral defeat, the opposition parties are also seeking to challenge Somare's installation as prime minister on the basis of several legal technicalities.

Firstly, Philemon and Morauta have pointed to the National Alliance constitution, claiming it prevents anyone from serving two consecutive terms as parliamentary leader, thus disqualifying Somare. At a press conference on 8 August, they also said National Alliance members had disregarded the constitution by not meeting to elect a leader after the votes in the election were tallied.

The opposition is further seeking to have the current process whereby the largest party is given the first opportunity to form government declared invalid by the Supreme Court. Their argument is that, in its amendments to the Organic Law Act in 2003, the Somare government deleted certain parts from Section 63, Subsection 5, thus rendering the whole section dealing with the election of the prime minister invalid.

If Morauta's camp is successful, the stipulations of the Organic Law will be disregarded and individual parliamentarians will no longer be bound by party loyalties. This could mean Somare's appointment would be nullified and another parliamentary vote would take place. Philemon and Morauta would be free to horse-trade with individual parliamentarians, including with members of the National Alliance.

The cynicism of this move is highlighted by the fact that Morauta, while in office from 1999 to 2002, was pivotal in implementing the Organic Law to try to restore stability to the volatile PNG parliament. Canberra welcomed the new law at the time. Despite the small number of seats won by his party, Morauta, who is backed by Australia, is seeking to gain office in a free-for-all that will only lead to further instability.

The Morauta-Philemon opposition has no differences of real substance with the economic agenda of the

Somare government. Philemon served for several years as the treasurer in Somare's government, earning Canberra's praise for his market reforms and tight social spending. His falling out with Somare was not due to differences over social or economic policy, but over his failed leadership challenge.

The Somare government has presided over a relatively buoyant economy due to high commodity prices and increased investment in mining and forestry. It loosened taxes for exploration in mining and allowed the increased plunder of PNG forests by companies such as the notorious logging giant Rimbunan Hijau. Little of the increased government revenue has gone to improving social services or ending widespread poverty.

The country's social indices are among the worst in the region. In a report released last year, the World Bank noted that a greater proportion of the population lives in poverty now than 10 years ago. AIDS is on the increase and a disaster of African proportions looms.

The social crisis is reflected in growing political alienation and the emergence of bitter rivalry between the country's many different tribal and language groups. In the recent election, 22 parties and 2,759 candidates were vying for the 109 parliamentary seats—each seeking a large slice of dwindling government resources for their area. While there were fewer outbreaks of violence than during the 2002 election, a heavy police presence points to continuing instability.

The Australian government and its local allies are certain to exploit the political uncertainty to undermine the newly elected Somare government, in the first instance using the Moti affair. For all of its talk about the need for good governance and democracy in the Pacific, Canberra has no scruples in exploiting all available means to impose its dictates, with complete disregard for the wishes of local people.



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