

Papua New Guinea locked in constitutional crisis

Zac Hambides
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A constitutional crisis engulfing the former Australian colony of Papua New Guinea has reached a deadlock, with Michael Somare and Peter O'Neill both claiming the position of prime minister. The impasse in the resource-rich and strategically-located state underscores the political volatility being created throughout the Asia-Pacific region by the Washington's aggressive drive to counter Chinese influence.

As of writing there were two prime ministers, cabinets, governors general and police chiefs operating in PNG. There is a heavy police presence at Parliament, Supreme Court and Government House and throughout Port Moresby, the capital.

The standoff has continued since Monday when the Supreme Court, PNG's highest court, found that Somare, the country's long-time prime minister, had been unconstitutionally removed in August by O'Neill's supporters, who currently hold a parliamentary majority.

Parliament had voted by 70 to 24 to elect O'Neill on August 2, after Somare was hospitalised in Singapore for three months and his family had announced his retirement from politics. Many of Somare's supporters defected to O'Neill, reflecting the instability of PNG politics.

Once he recovered from heart surgery, Somare challenged O'Neill via the Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Salamo Injia, whom O'Neill unsuccessfully sought several times to disqualify.

The judges ruled by 3 votes to 2 on Monday that Somare had neither resigned nor been declared medically unfit to govern. Somare then reappointed his former police chief Fred Yakasa to replace O'Neill's appointee, Tom Kulunga.

Last Friday, however, the parliament passed legislation revoking Somare's previous leave of absence in March, reinforcing its vote in August to replace him. Further legislation on Monday, just before the court ruling, removed parliamentary membership from any MP away from the country for more than three months.

A tense confrontation took place that night when armed police supporting Somare blocked O'Neill and Australian officials from entering Government House to see Governor General Michael Ogio. Under PNG's Westminster-style 1975 constitution, the British Queen remains head of state, represented by the governor general, who has the power to appoint governments.

After initially refusing to declare which side he would back, yesterday afternoon Ogio swore in 19 of Somare's supporters as ministers, nominally giving Somare control of the government. In response, O'Neill's supporters passed legislation last night suspending Ogio as governor general, making way for an acting governor general, parliamentary speaker Jeffrey Nape, to swear in O'Neill as prime minister.

O'Neill still has control of parliament, held together by the fact that soon after taking office in August he appointed 11 vice-ministers in addition to the cabinet of 33—shoring up the support of nearly half the MPs. On the other hand, Somare, who has been prime minister, on and off, since independence in 1975, is backed by other figures who have benefited during his rule.

It is not out of the question that those who split from him in August will switch back on the basis of a better deal for their local constituencies. Such is the fragmented character of the PNG parliament, which largely consists of various small regional-based parties.

More broadly, Somare has caused concern in Washington and Canberra because he had adopted a "look north" policy to open PNG more to Chinese investment. In 2009, Somare gave the go-ahead for the construction of the Chinese-owned \$1.6 billion Ramu nickel-cobalt mine.

O'Neill had indicated a shift away from Somare's orientation by bringing a delegation of nine cabinet ministers with him to Canberra for a bilateral ministerial forum in mid-October. Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced that

Australia would resume substantial police and military activity in PNG, which had been effectively suspended by Somare in 2005.

PNG has major mining projects, including gold and copper mines, and the largest reserves of untapped minerals, gas and oil in the South Pacific. Access to these resources has become a source of tension between the major powers, particularly China and the US. The US-based ExxonMobil is currently developing a \$16 billion liquefied natural gas project, which is expected to double PNG's gross domestic product by 2014.

Last November, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited PNG as part of a regional tour, making it plain that the US intended to play a more dominant role. In her public remarks, according to the State Department transcript, she issued Somare a thinly-veiled warning to toe the line. Clinton told him of a "resource curse" that required "a commitment to good governance and accountability and transparency." She said the US departments of interior and treasury were already "working with the respective cabinet ministries here to work to see how the United States can be of help."

Addressing the US congressional foreign relations committee in March, Clinton was more blunt. "Let's put aside the moral, humanitarian, do-good side of what we believe in and let's just talk straight, real politic," she stated. "We are in a competition with China. Take Papua New Guinea—huge energy find." Clinton accused China of trying to "come in under us" and declared that it would be a "mistaken notion" to think that the US would retreat from "the maintenance of our leadership in a world where we are competing with China."

This message has not been lost in Canberra, which had previously been entrusted by Washington to maintain a sphere of influence over the South Pacific. In a report released on December 1, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute noted that Clinton had identified PNG's resources as a source of rivalry between Beijing and Washington, and that "Washington feels Canberra has taken its eyes off the ball."

Media commentary in Australia has already canvassed the possibility of direct intervention into the PNG crisis, an indication of intense discussion underway in ruling circles about trying to stabilise the situation and install a regime that will ensure that the interests of the US and Australia prevail.

Today's editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* asserted: "Australia's moral responsibility in this crisis is that independence came too quickly in 1975." It stated: "The real test of Australia's post-colonial management of relations with the country will be whether we have to actually intervene to fix this mess." The newspaper urged Somare to "take a lead from

events in the Middle East" and stand aside to make way for a new generation.

At the same time, the editorial expressed dismay at the readiness of O'Neill's "apparently more popular" forces to "manipulate the constitutional and legal institutions", indicating real nervousness that the political crisis could ignite wider unrest in PNG. Social inequality in PNG is vast with tiny elites enriching themselves from mining revenues at the expense of the vast majority of the country's seven million people. Many live in poverty, often in squatter settlements or in remote mountain regions, commonly without basic services such as electricity.

Accompanying the *Australian Financial Review* editorial was an op-ed article by Jenny Hayward-Jones of the Lowy Institute, a prominent foreign policy think tank, supporting calls for a national unity government to stabilise the country until elections that are due next June. She conceded, however, that it would be hard to convince the competing prime ministers and "it may be outside the remit of the constitution."

On Tuesday, an Australian Broadcasting Corporation interviewer challenged Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd to justify his stated policy of "using quiet diplomacy with all parties." Rudd pointedly refused to rule out the interviewer's call for "stronger intervention," instead stating that it was "unhelpful to speculate on those sorts of possibilities."

In other words, the Gillard government and its officials are already actively involved in the political crisis and are prepared to intervene more directly if their "quiet diplomacy" fails. While the immediate outcome of the present standoff is uncertain, and the situation remains highly volatile, there is no doubt that the Obama administration and its ally, the Gillard Labor government, are intent on imposing their will in PNG, ensuring further political instability, as well as heightened tensions with Beijing.



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