PNG crisis eases as Australia hints at military intervention

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One of Papua New Guinea's contending prime ministers, Peter O'Neill, yesterday strengthened his control of the key state institutions—the army and the police—after the Australian government let it be known that it had plans to intervene militarily, if necessary, to resolve a week-long constitutional stand-off.

At a press conference late yesterday, O'Neill effectively claimed victory, saying: "There is only one government in this country… There is only one government mandated by the people through its parliament." Nevertheless, the political situation remains uncertain, with his rival, long-time prime minister Michael Somare, refusing to concede defeat. There are continuing concerns in ruling circles that O'Neill's actions have undermined the legal and constitutional fabric of PNG.

PNG, an Australian colony until 1975, was thrown into turmoil on Monday when the Supreme Court ruled that Somare, who had been hospitalised in Singapore, had been unconstitutionally removed by O'Neill in August. The unfolding events have indicated that O'Neill enjoys backing in Canberra, following his effective repudiation of Somare's previous "look north" strategy of seeking aid and investment from China and other Asian countries.

In what appears to have been a definite signal, the *Australian Financial Review* reported on Thursday that a "senior defence source" had indicated that a "contingency plan" existed and would be executed if there were a "breakdown of law and order" or if "requested" by someone in PNG.

Significantly, the article noted that although Washington might provide support, the US "may well consider that Australia should take the lead." In other words, any Australian intervention would have the backing of the Obama administration. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton earlier this year publicly accused China of seeking to undermine US interests in PNG, the largest of the South Pacific island states with considerable mineral and energy resources.

Earlier, Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith also referred to a military intervention, but ostensibly ruled it out, stating that the Australian government was closely monitoring the situation and urging a resolution in accordance with PNG's constitution. Canberra's preoccupation with the events in PNG is driven by deep concerns about growing Chinese involvement in the South Pacific which Australian capitalism, under US tutelage, has regarded as "its backyard."

Also on Thursday, Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd stated, via his twitter account, that he had discussed the PNG crisis with Clinton while visiting Washington. No further details were provided of the talks, but in his remarks at a brief joint media conference, Rudd emphasised his commitment to the Obama administration's aggressive diplomatic push into the Asia-Pacific region to undermine Chinese influence.

Rudd said President Barack Obama's recent trip to Australia had been "a first-class visit and a reaffirmation of the United States presence in Asia and the Pacific." He added: "And if I could say this about the Secretary of State, her commitment to our region has been absolutely clear-cut."

Tensions in the capital, Port Moresby, reached their highest point on Thursday when O'Neill ordered 150 police to occupy government house and other areas where police loyal to Somare were stationed. A shift took place yesterday when Somare's police officers handed in their weapons and granted control to O'Neill of government house, the government press and key public service offices.

Somare reportedly made a desperate call to the military

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barracks at 3 a.m. on Friday, ordering the armed forces to stand ready to intervene on his behalf, but the military commanders refused to recognise his authority.

On Thursday, Somare had attempted to cut the utilities to parliament house, where O'Neill currently holds a clear majority, but could not get the relevant authorities to do so. Somare's only visible support now comes from his 19 appointed ministers, whom the governor general swore in after the Supreme Court ruling.

In a show of popular support, O'Neill held a rally outside parliament on Thursday in which 1,000 people took part, holding banners and shouting slogans against Somare.

These scenes would have caused some anxiety in ruling circles, including in Canberra and Washington. Both O'Neill and Somare generally avoided making any popular appeals for fear of igniting widespread discontent over worsening poverty and social inequality in the country. Just last month over 1,000 young people took part in violent riots in the northern coastal town of Lae.

Pressure for a swift resolution to the crisis was intensified by concerns being expressed in corporate and mining quarters over the impact on business and investment. Port Moresby Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive David Conn told the media: "We are facing all the advances and growth in our economy trashed in the eyes of the world." He reported that "our members are getting frustrated, some of them angry."

Over the past two days, O'Neill has been given prominent and mostly favourable coverage in the Australian media. An opinion piece today by Hamish McDonald, the Asia-Pacific editor for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, concluded that "it would be best if this week's crisis ends with his [Somare's] retirement." Accusing Somare of being part of an elite that siphoned off the benefits of the country's mining boom, McDonald specifically complained of the huge Chinese-owned Ramu nickel-copper project, which Somare had approved, "pushing aside labour, land-owner and environmental inspectors."

Since seizing office in August, O'Neill has indicated an orientation toward Australia, and hence the US. Two months ago, he brought a delegation of nine cabinet ministers for talks with Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard and agreed to the resumption of a top-level Australian police and military presence in PNG.

In 2005, Somare effectively forced Prime Minister John Howard's Australian government to remove 150 Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers from PNG after the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to grant them immunity from prosecution. Somare's stance ended a program that placed senior Australian officials in control of key military, police and public posts. O'Neill's agreement to allow AFP and Australian military personnel back into the country therefore had a particular significance.

The Australian political and business establishment has long regarded the South Pacific as its "patch," to be patrolled with the sponsorship of the United States. Over the past decade, Australian governments have intervened militarily in nearby East Timor and Solomon Islands to install governments more amenable to Australia's imperialist interests.

In 1997, Australia was behind the removal of PNG Prime Minister Julius Chan after his government sought to sideline Australia by employing private mercenaries in Bougainville, cutting across Canberra's efforts to strike a deal with the island's secessionists. Chan was forced to step down after PNG Defence Forces chief Brigadier General Jerry Singirok called for his removal.

Neither O'Neill nor Somare represents the interests of the workers, young people and villagers of PNG. Rather the two men are based on competing factions of the country's tiny ruling elite that has enriched itself from the mining boom and is now caught up in the intensifying rivalry between the US and China for influence throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

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