

# PNG constitutional crisis: O'Neill consolidates as PM

Zac Hambides  
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Peter O'Neill consolidated his position this week as Papua New Guinea's prime minister over his rival Michael Somare. In the latest move on Monday, Governor General Michael Ogio declared that his swearing in of Somare last Wednesday had been "wrong and invalid", effectively recognising O'Neill as prime minister. The O'Neill government lifted its suspension of Ogio as governor general on the same day.

The constitutional crisis erupted on December 12 when both Somare and O'Neill claimed to be the legitimate prime minister. The build-up began while Somare was receiving heart treatment in Singapore earlier this year. After Somare had been out of the country for three months the parliamentary speaker, Jeffery Nape, declared the position of prime minister vacant and on August 2 a vote was held in which O'Neill was elected prime minister by a margin of 70-24.

Somare returned to PNG and challenged parliament's vote via the Supreme Court, the highest court in the country. In anticipation of its ruling O'Neill passed retroactive legislation on December 9, revoking Somare's leave of absence to travel to Singapore and thereby removing him from parliament. The Supreme Court ruled on December 12 by a margin of 3-2 that O'Neill's installation was unconstitutional. O'Neill has since sought to undermine the ruling with further legislation, the latest being to force prime ministers to retire at the age of 72. Somare is 75.

The constitutional crisis reached a high point last Thursday when both Somare and O'Neill appointed their own cabinet, governor general and police chief.

The turning point occurred on early Friday morning when the military refused Somare's call for it to intervene on his behalf. On the same day, a section of the police force that had been backing Somare recognised O'Neill's police chief and handed in their weapons.

Both Somare and O'Neill had been under pressure from sections of big business to end the standoff, which threatened to impact on foreign investment. There were also serious concerns that the split in the ruling elite could become the spark for far wider popular hostility over deteriorating living standards and the lack of basic services.

Reflecting this discontent, the PNG Trade Union Council last Thursday threatened to take nationwide strike action, citing the concerns of their members over jobs. Somare reacted by calling on the unions "to recognise the calm that exists" and "not to stir up sentiments by interfering at this present time." The trade union posturing was never more than a threat, and was quickly withdrawn on Monday.

As of yesterday, O'Neill has the support of the state apparatus, particularly the military and police, and the governor general in addition to his parliamentary majority. However, the constitutional and legal issues remain unresolved.

O'Neill claims that the PNG constitution allows parliament to pass retroactive legislation that legalises previous actions, such as speaker Nape's decision in August to declare the prime minister's position vacant. Governor General Ogio has now swung over to this view, saying he had overlooked legislation passed on

December 9 revoking Somare's parliamentary membership.

O'Neill has declared victory, telling the Australian Broadcasting Corporation yesterday: "He [Somare] does not have the public support, he does not have parliament's support and certainly he does not have the business community and international community's support. He needs to retire gracefully."

Somare, however, is yet to concede. He stated yesterday: "My minority government does not want to see this country being led by members of parliament that use sheer numbers to hijack processes in parliament and trample all over our Constitution." At this stage, it is unlikely that Somare will be reinstalled.

A major factor in Somare's sidelining has been the stance of Australian imperialism, which has been tacitly backing O'Neill. At the height of the crisis last Thursday, a Defence Department official told the Australian press that the military was ready to intervene should a "breakdown in law and order" occur or if "requested" by someone in PNG. The country was an Australian colony until 1975.

An editorial in yesterday's *Sydney Morning Herald* entitled "Time for PNG to move on" summed up the attitude in Canberra. After expressing some concern about the "constitutional damage" done by O'Neill, the editorial directed its main fire against Somare, accusing him of "unscrupulous desperation" for appealing to the PNG military to intervene.

Relations between successive Australian governments and Somare have been tense. Canberra has been concerned that under Somare, PNG has been turning towards China. He gave the go ahead for a \$1.5 billion Chinese-owned Ramu nickel/copper mine in the PNG highlands as part of his "look north" policy of attracting more investment from Asia.

After gaining office in August, O'Neill made clear his orientation to Australia. He led a delegation to Canberra where he reached an agreement to allow Australian Federal Police (AFP) and military personnel into PNG for the first time since Somare forced the

removal of 150 AFP officers in 2005.

The current crisis in PNG takes place as the Australian government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard has thrown its support behind the Obama administration's aggressive drive to undermine Chinese influence throughout the Asia Pacific region. The Australian government has undoubtedly been active behind the scenes in ensuring that the PNG army and police in particular sided with O'Neill.

In 1997, the Australian government was actively involved in ousting PNG Prime Minister Julius Chan for secretly employing mercenaries to seize control of the huge Bougainville copper mine from separatist fighters. Instrumental in the ouster was army chief Brigadier General Jerry Singirok who called for Chan's resignation.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute noted on December 1 of this year: "Washington feels Canberra has taken its eyes off the ball"—a reference to Canberra's longstanding role as a proxy for the US in the South Pacific in maintaining its domination. Canberra has no doubt been working assiduously in Port Moresby to ensure a government that is firmly in line with US-Australian interests.



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