

Military mutiny in Papua New Guinea

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27 January 2012

The Australian-backed Papua New Guinean government of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill appears to have suppressed a military mutiny that erupted yesterday. The incident underscores the unstable political situation in the South Pacific country, with the ruling elite divided and a constitutional crisis unresolved.

A group of soldiers—as few as 20, although reports remain sketchy—stormed the Taurama and Murray barracks in Papua New Guinea's capital, Port Moresby, early yesterday morning. PNG's armed forces commander Brigadier-General Francis Agwi was placed under house arrest. Retired colonel Yaura Sasa, a former defence attaché in Indonesia, held a press conference to declare that he was in charge of the military.

"I assure the international community, our investors, this is not a military coup," Sasa stated. "It is a normal process of replacement of commander by the government of Sir Michael Somare, through the National Executive Council."

The colonel insisted that Somare was the rightful prime minister, because of the Supreme Court decision last December that ruled O'Neill's installation invalid. The colonel declared himself neutral in the power struggle between Somare and O'Neill, but threatened unspecified "necessary actions" if the governor-general did not reappoint Somare prime minister. Sasa demanded the recall of parliament within seven days, to "sort out the current political situation."

O'Neill became prime minister last August. The parliament had declared the office vacant after Somare spent four months receiving medical treatment in Singapore. When he returned to PNG, Somare launched a legal challenge against his removal, resulting in last month's Supreme Court ruling. The decision against O'Neill triggered the spectacle of Somare and O'Neill appointing rival cabinets, governors general and police

chiefs. O'Neill, however, prevailed after maintaining the support of the state and security apparatus, as well as the key backing of the Australian government.

Yesterday's events indicate that Somare turned to a faction of the military in a desperate rearguard effort to return to power. According to PNG's *National* newspaper, Somare issued a statement, declaring, "We cannot allow this situation to continue where a rogue government commandeers the disciplinary forces. It is incumbent on the police and army to comply with the orders of the Supreme Court and support the legitimate government which is the minority Somare-Agiru government. It is for this reason that my government had appointed Col. Yaura Sasa to take control of the PNGDF [PNG Defence Force] while we await other outcomes of the court."

The military action seems to have quickly collapsed. The O'Neill government moved quickly to shut down air travel within the country, reportedly to prevent soldiers based in other provinces joining the mutiny. Brigadier-General Agwi was then freed, only a few hours after he was detained. According to O'Neill, several mutinous soldiers have been arrested, while Colonel Sasa is "being dealt with." The latest reports, however, suggest that Sasa and other rebel soldiers have locked themselves in Taurama barracks and are refusing to leave until granted immunity.

The O'Neill government's dubious legal status means that the political crisis in PNG will continue, despite O'Neill's apparent dominance over the Somare faction. Somare's daughter Betha told the *Australian* today that nothing had been resolved. "There will still be a stand-off," she stated. "He's [Somare's] still got a lot of people who support him." She accused O'Neill of "illegally holding onto power" and insisted that his government had "abrogated the constitution and dismissed what the Supreme Court decided."

Papua New Guinea has long had a fractious elite and volatile political system. The current situation, however, reflects the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China that is fuelling instability throughout the Asia-Pacific.

O'Neill is closely aligned with Australian imperialism. He led a major ministerial delegation to Australia—PNG's colonial ruler until 1975—shortly after he became prime minister, announcing closer military ties and inviting a significant contingent of Australian Federal Police (AFP) agents into the country.

In 2005, a Somare-backed court ruling had found that that the legal immunity enjoyed by 150 AFP officers stationed in PNG was unconstitutional. This forced the officers' withdrawal and effectively marked the collapse of the Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP) that had been modelled on Canberra's neo-colonial intervention into the Solomon Islands. Australian and American dissatisfaction with Somare grew after this episode, as diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks make clear.

Through a "look north" policy, Somare promoted Chinese investment in the resource-rich country. In 2006, a Chinese state-owned mining company was awarded the \$1.5 billion contract to develop the Ramu nickel mine. Under Somare's leadership, diplomatic and aid cooperation between Port Moresby and Beijing was developed, while the PNG military forged closer ties with the People's Liberation Army.

Somare never advanced an anti-Australian or anti-American perspective. His relations with Beijing were merely intended to provide him with greater room for manoeuvre when dealing with Canberra, consistent with his opportunist diplomatic operations during his 17 years as prime minister.

Somare has now fallen foul, however, of the Obama administration's aggressive drive to counter China's growing influence in East Asia and the Pacific. Washington has worked to install governments throughout the region that collaborate with its efforts to contain Beijing's military and geo-strategic standing.

The State Department has devoted considerable resources to cultivating relations with the South Pacific states, and PNG is by far the most strategically significant

of these, with the largest land mass and population, and a shared border with Indonesia. The impoverished country also has vast raw materials, including natural gas reserves. American oil giant Exxon-Mobil is currently developing a \$16.5 billion gas project, due to begin production in 2014. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last year pointedly raised the "realpolitik" of US interests in PNG, accusing China of trying to "come in behind us, come in under us."

The Obama administration is yet to comment on the latest crisis in PNG. Washington's junior ally in the region has, however, made its position clear. The Australian Labor government condemned the military action and again insisted that O'Neill is the legitimate prime minister. The Australian media has similarly lined up behind O'Neill against Somare. Prime Minister Julia Gillard issued a statement yesterday saying it was "critical therefore that this situation be resolved peacefully as soon as possible, with the PNG Defence Force chain of command restored." She added that the government was "monitoring developments closely."

The *Australian* reported that military personnel and aircraft in northern Queensland were placed on alert yesterday. This further indicates that the Labor government has advanced contingency planning for a predatory intervention, to be launched if Australian and American strategic and economic interests come under threat.



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