

Papua New Guinea government attempts to postpone election

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Between 5,000 and 10,000 people yesterday demonstrated in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea (PNG), against the government's bid to postpone elections scheduled for June.

The government has issued contradictory statements in recent weeks about whether the vote will be held on time, or delayed for six months, in violation of the constitution. Last month, Prime Minister Peter O'Neill declared that he had "no powers" to defer the election, but then on April 5 he and other government ministers rushed a bill through parliament authorising a six-month suspension. Deputy Prime Minister Belden Namah insisted that the delay was necessary to make the required logistical arrangements, including up-to-date electoral rolls in the isolated Highlands region.

O'Neill yesterday addressed the anti-government demonstration and declared that the election would proceed as initially planned. The prime minister was booed and met with chants of "rausim, rausim" ("chase him out"). Under heavy police guard, he told the protesters gathered at a Port Moresby athletics stadium that the parliament did not have the authority to interfere with the electoral commissioner. The commissioner, Andrew Trawen, had earlier stated that elections would proceed, with writs issued three weeks later than usual to update voting rolls.

The demonstration was carefully followed by police, who have violently dispersed other protests recently held in Port Moresby. Several government officers, schools and businesses were closed on security grounds.

University of Papua New Guinea and the University

of Technology students initiated the demonstration. The students have been organising against the O'Neill government under the banner of the Occupy movement. Increased access to the Internet has seen students coordinate political meetings and protests through social networking web sites. The issues of social inequality and corporate domination of social and political life raised by Occupy Wall Street clearly resonate among young people in PNG. A wealthy elite has accumulated fortunes through the theft of the country's natural resources, while the vast majority of the population of seven million remain in impoverished rural areas.

Yesterday's demonstration was backed by the trade union bureaucracy in PNG and various so-called civil society non-governmental organisations, many entirely dependent on Australian government funding. Their involvement points to the active role played by Canberra in PNG's protracted political crisis.

The Australian government backed O'Neill when he took over as prime minister in August last year, as Michael Somare, the incumbent, was receiving medical treatment in Singapore. The Supreme Court ruled last December that O'Neill had acted unconstitutionally and that Somare ought to be reinstated. With Canberra's backing, O'Neill ignored the ruling and consolidated his control over the state apparatus, including police and military, to suppress Somare's challenge.

O'Neill has close ties with Australia, and after he became prime minister welcomed a heightened Australian military and federal police presence in PNG. The government in Canberra has tacitly backed

O'Neill's recent antidemocratic moves to remove the Supreme Court judges who favoured Somare.

As prime minister, Somare had attempted to manoeuvre between Canberra, PNG's former colonial ruler, and rival powers, including Beijing. He promoted Chinese economic investment and encouraged the PNG military to develop ties with its Chinese counterparts. These initiatives fell foul of the Obama administration's efforts to shut China out of the Pacific by cultivating close diplomatic and strategic ties with various states in the region.

The Australian government is now pressing O'Neill to hold elections as scheduled. Foreign Minister Bob Carr threatened to isolate PNG internationally and impose sanctions if the vote were postponed. This statement triggered diplomatic protests in Port Moresby and Carr subsequently said he had made a "mistake," but the threat was clearly intended to put O'Neill on notice. Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard issued a statement after the PNG government voted to authorise a six-month election delay, stating: "While we respect Papua New Guinea's sovereignty, as a strong supporter and long-time friend of Papua New Guinea, Australia believes the elections should be held on time, in accordance with the constitution."

The Australian government clearly hopes that an election will act as a circuit breaker to the unresolved political impasse in Port Moresby between the O'Neill and Somare camps. There is also concern over the infighting within the O'Neill government, reportedly driven by Deputy Prime Minister Namah. The most outspoken proponent of delayed elections, Namah denounced Carr for "threatening the independence" of PNG via his threat of sanctions.

An election in June may provide Canberra with a pretext for deploying more Australian soldiers, police and officials. Last Monday, Carr said the government was prepared to "provide substantial practical support, including up to 30 Australian Civilian Corps personnel and an air support mission, to enable elections to proceed as scheduled." The Civilian Corps, created in 2009, is a sub-agency of the official AusAid agency and has deployed personnel to Afghanistan, Sudan, and

Haiti.

The "air support" will be a military operation. During the last elections, held in 2007, more than 20 Australian officers served as "advisors" within the PNG defence force, but this year the Australian army is already playing a more prominent role.

The Australian Defence Force's joint chief of operations, Lieutenant General Ash Power, last month led a "fact-finding team" to PNG's Western Highlands Province. The *National* newspaper reported that Power was accompanied by Australian High Commission defence adviser Colonel Mark Shephard, and said "his men would be providing any assistance needed by the PNG Defence Force."

Logistical difficulties in holding elections in PNG's Highlands also provide a convenient rationale for stepping up Australian military activity where a \$16 billion liquid natural gas project is being developed by an American-Australian consortium led by the oil giant ExxonMobil. Due to come on line in the next two to three years, the project's construction remains beset with problems. Local landowners are demanding greater compensation and dividends than were originally promised, and the project's workforce has staged industrial action and other protests.

The O'Neill government has deployed large numbers of police and PNG soldiers to suppress opposition to the project. In the latest violent incident, the *National* yesterday reported that police last week shot into a crowd of workers at a Southern Highlands construction camp, killing one and wounding others. The workers reportedly came to the defence of local people who had been assaulted by police after complaining that their water supply was contaminated by construction work. Esso Highlands, a subsidiary of ExxonMobil, confirmed that work on the gas pipeline in the area had been suspended after the police clashes.



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