

Papua New Guinean government arrests chief justice

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In extraordinary scenes yesterday, Papua New Guinea's deputy prime minister Belden Namah led a contingent of soldiers and police to the Supreme Court and arrested Chief Justice Salamo Injia. The prosecution of the chief justice on sedition charges has no legal basis and is in retaliation for the Supreme Court's recent confirmation that the Australian-backed de facto government headed by Peter O'Neill remains in power illegally.

On Monday, Chief Justice Injia affirmed the Supreme Court's earlier ruling, issued last December, that O'Neill's installation as prime minister in August 2011 was "unconstitutional, invalid and of no effect", and that he must relinquish power to his predecessor, Michael Somare. O'Neill, after securing a parliamentary majority through defections from the Somare government, openly defied last year's ruling. He secured control of the state apparatus, including the military and the police, and, crucially, was backed by the Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

The de facto government has since ruled in an increasingly authoritarian manner, cracking down on public demonstrations, militarising the Highlands region around a massive liquid natural gas project led by ExxonMobil, threatening to arrest anti-government bloggers and attacking the judiciary.

O'Neill has repeatedly attempted to remove Chief Justice Injia. He was arrested last March, but the courts blocked the charges and issued contempt charges against the senior police who ordered the arrest. The de facto government responded by passing anti-democratic legislation authorising it to sack judges at will. This

move triggered large demonstrations in the capital, Port Moresby, which forced O'Neill to back down temporarily.

After the Supreme Court ruling on Monday, O'Neill's deputy, Belden Namah, issued a public statement warning that Injia, together with justices Les Gavera-Nanu and Nicholas Kirriwom who concurred with the judgement, must resign within 24 hours or face arrest. There was no legal basis behind this threat. Even O'Neill's appointed attorney general, Allan Marat, admitted to Radio New Zealand that there was no "provision in the constitution or any other law that makes that conduct by judges to be criminal behaviour that they can just be arrested for." Injia refused to back down, and issued a warrant of arrest against Namah on contempt charges.

At the same time, Somare twice attempted to enter the governor-general's residence to be formally sworn as prime minister, only to be blocked by security forces loyal to O'Neill. Somare, who has governed Papua New Guinea for much of the time since formal independence from Australia in 1975, accused O'Neill of bringing the country "to the brink of political tyranny and dictatorship".

The scenes at the Supreme Court yesterday resembled a military coup. Belden Namah led a contingent of security forces and stormed into the courtroom while it was in session. Namah shouted to Injia: "I want you gone. Enough is enough." The chief justice then escaped through a door behind him, and locked himself in his chambers. The standoff lasted several hours, as security forces surrounded the court building. Soldiers reportedly forced photo-journalists present to delete

pictures taken in the courtroom. From his chambers, Injia spoke to the media and explained that he feared for his safety. “It is unprecedented,” he told Associated Press. “This country is being run by men who are happy to use force rather than the rule of law.”

Injia emerged after it was agreed he would be formally charged within the court building, not at a police station. Earlier today he briefly appeared in the Waigani District Court, where the case was adjourned until July.

Also today, underscoring the continued tensions, about 30-40 police reportedly loyal to Somare erected a blockade around the parliament building and prevented vehicles entering and leaving.

The explosive political crisis in Papua New Guinea is bound up with sharpening geostrategic tensions throughout the Asia-Pacific. The Obama administration, backed by Australian Prime Minister Gillard, has moved to bolster its diplomatic and military standing in the region to counter China’s growing influence. This aggressive strategic “pivot” has in several East Asian countries seen political figures pressured out of office for obstructing the drive against Beijing. Somare had long manoeuvred with Australia’s rivals, including China, and had stymied Canberra’s efforts to permanently station Australian Federal Police and other officials in the country. His removal from office was warmly welcomed, as O’Neill is closely aligned with Australian imperialism.

The Gillard government continues to recognise the legitimacy of O’Neill’s government, despite the Supreme Court twice ruling it illegal. The affair provides a stark demonstration of the way that the Australian government uses rhetoric about “governance” and “democracy” against governments that it has targeted for removal, in the South Pacific and elsewhere, but is silent when regimes aligned with its strategic interests suppress their opponents.

Gillard reportedly spoke with O’Neill last night and urged “restraint”. Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr recommended the charges against the chief justice be dropped, but, like Gillard, emphasised that the key

issue is for planned elections to proceed on June 23. “As long as nothing affects the election timetable, I’m placated by what I hear out of the country,” Carr stated.

Canberra hopes that the vote will put an end to the instability in Papua New Guinea. Earlier this year O’Neill and his colleagues had attempted to postpone the elections, in violation of the constitution, but backed down in the face of widespread opposition among ordinary people and after Australian Foreign Minister Carr threatened to impose sanctions.

The elections provide Canberra with a welcome pretext to bolster its military presence in its former colony. Last Friday the Australian government leased three helicopters to the PNG Defence Force, as part of a “Combined Joint Task Force” providing air surveillance during the election period. According to an article in the *National*, the task force comprises “more than a hundred aircrew and technical experts from PNG, Australia and New Zealand.” The three helicopters “will be based in Mt Hagen and deployed to trouble spots in the Highlands.”

These “trouble spots” centre on the massive LNG investment in the area, developed by a US-Australian consortium led by ExxonMobil. Still under construction, the project has sparked numerous clashes with local landowners and tribes, who have complained of environmental damage and inadequate compensation. Securing the \$16 billion investment is a central priority of the Australian and American governments.

O’Neill has violently suppressed all opposition to the LNG project, deploying the military to the site earlier this year. Last week he declared that more troops would be sent during the election campaign. “I want to assure everyone, including the investors, that the protection and security of the PNG LNG project is a top priority in this security exercise,” he explained.



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