

Further political turmoil in Papua New Guinea

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The illegal Australian-backed government in Papua New Guinea has engaged in further desperate manoeuvres and authoritarian measures to remain in office. Last Monday, police loyal to de facto Prime Minister Peter O'Neill arrested Supreme Court Justice Nicholas Kirriwom, after earlier detaining the chief justice Salamo Injia. The government also unconstitutionally convened parliament to impose a state of emergency in the country, providing police with sweeping powers of arrest and detention.

The protracted political crisis in the South Pacific country began in August 2011, when Peter O'Neill and his parliamentary supporters ousted Prime Minister Michael Somare while he was receiving medical treatment in Singapore. Last December the Supreme Court ruled that this was unconstitutional and that Somare remained prime minister. O'Neill simply ignored the ruling and secured his control over the country's military, police, and state apparatus. A supporter of closer ties with Australian investors and with Australian police and military forces, O'Neill's hold on power was endorsed by Canberra.

The crisis flared again last month after the Supreme Court affirmed its December 2011 ruling and ordered O'Neill to step down. O'Neill's deputy Belden Namah responded by storming the Supreme Court building with a contingent of soldiers and police who arrested the chief justice on trumped up sedition charges.

O'Neill has since attempted to provide his government with a veneer of constitutional and parliamentary legitimacy, but his efforts triggered a farcical series of events.

O'Neill first reconvened the parliament in an attempt to use his majority to pass a vote purportedly nullifying the Supreme Court rulings. This was itself unlawful, because parliament had been prorogued when the writs were issued for the national election that is scheduled to begin on June 23.

The ABC's Radio Australia spoke with Dr John Nonggor, who it described as "Papua New Guinea's leading constitutional expert." He explained that "the sitting of the parliament this week was unconstitutional ... [and] everything the PNG parliament had done since Peter O'Neill replaced Sir Michael Somare in August last year was unconstitutional."

Papua New Guinea's governor-general refused to sign O'Neill's documents approving the recall of parliament, explaining that he would not line up with either O'Neill or Somare until after the election.

O'Neill proceeded anyway. On May 28, the deputy speaker of the parliament, Francis Marus, unexpectedly opened the session by expressing his agreement with the Supreme Court ruling that Somare was the legitimate prime minister. Marus quickly added, however, that Somare was now ineligible because he had been disqualified from parliament for missing three consecutive sittings. The deputy speaker concluded that the office of prime minister was vacant. The next day Marus declared that O'Neill was ineligible for nomination, but he relented after an uproar among pro-O'Neill parliamentarians. O'Neill was finally elected prime minister unopposed, by 56 votes to zero. Somare and his supporters had boycotted what they described as an illegal assembly.

This was not the end of the drama. Last Wednesday, O'Neill attempted to be formally sworn in as prime minister at Government House. With the governor-general away in Britain for the Queen's jubilee celebrations, Acting Governor-General Jeffery Nape arrived at the official ceremony where O'Neill was waiting alongside assembled media, only to declare that the swearing in was suspended until he "studied the documents." Nape then abruptly left through a rear door, leaving a stunned O'Neill to look around and ask whether he should wait in the building or come back another day. An Associated Press journalist reported that O'Neill's supporters spent the next three hours "locked in furious negotiations", with internal security minister John Boito heard shouting, "What the f--- is going on?", before Nape relented and swore O'Neill in.

Behind the bitter internecine struggle for power between rival sections of the Papua New Guinean ruling elite lies a sharpening geostrategic rivalry between US imperialism and China.

Papua New Guinea is the most populous and important country in the South Pacific, and its strategic significance has been enhanced with the Obama administration's "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific region aimed at countering China's growing influence. Somare's removal last year was welcomed by Washington and Canberra in part because he had worked to deepen ties with Beijing, encouraging closer relations between the Chinese and PNG armed forces and promoting Chinese economic investment in the country's lucrative minerals sector.

Like the Australian government, the Obama administration has said nothing about O'Neill's provocative and illegal actions, including his attack on his opponents in the judiciary. The US embassy released statements on April 11 and May 29 merely demanded that the June 23 vote be held on time. Again following Canberra's lead, Washington calculates that a national vote may end the political turmoil and allow their favoured parliamentarians to take office constitutionally.

A major preoccupation of US and Australian policy in PNG is securing a \$16 billion liquid natural gas

(LNG) investment that is being developed by a consortium led by ExxonMobil. O'Neill's de facto government has already militarised the Highlands region where the project is located, deploying troops against local residents and landowners. Police have also violently dispersed demonstrations held in Port Moresby over Exxon's inadequate payment of compensation and provision of social services to local people.

O'Neill's illegal state of emergency declaration is centrally aimed at protecting the LNG project. The emergency applies to Port Moresby and to two provinces, Southern Highlands and Hela, where the gas development is located.

An Australian military operation, launched under the guise of providing logistical assistance for the national election, is centred on the Highlands area. About 250 military personnel from Australia and New Zealand are being deployed, with planes and helicopters provided and an Australian navy ship used to deliver material to remote coastal areas. The operation has undoubtedly been prepared alongside contingency plans for a wider military intervention into the impoverished country, which would be triggered in the event that the election fuels further political turmoil that threatens Australian imperialism's economic and strategic interests.



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