

Papua New Guinea: Rival ex-prime ministers unite in bid to form new government

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Following national elections held earlier this month, former Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Michael Somare has declared his support for his erstwhile rival Peter O'Neill, whose People's National Congress party won the most seats in the new parliament. Somare and O'Neil had spent the previous 12 months locked in a bitter power struggle that split the impoverished country's military, police force and state apparatus.

In August 2011, while Somare was receiving medical treatment in Singapore, O'Neill unconstitutionally took over as prime minister. He refused to surrender the post when Somare returned to Papua New Guinea (PNG). A Supreme Court ruling in December last year, confirmed again last May, ordered O'Neill to relinquish power. The order was ignored, with the illegal government remaining in office with the backing of dominant sections of the military and security forces. Tensions between the two rival leaders were evident leading up to the election, with Somare threatening to imprison O'Neill if he won office.

Somare's turnaround is consistent with his long record of abject political opportunism and also underscores Somare and O'Neill's shared commitment to promoting the interests of PNG's wealthy elite and the major international investors in the country. His decision to join O'Neill effectively legitimises the government's unlawful actions over the past year, setting a precedent for similar moves in the future.

Somare declared that while he "rigorously campaigned with my team to ensure that the type of violations and breaches to the constitution that began with my unconstitutional removal are corrected and never happen again in the future," he accepted that "the

people have spoken and many of the members of parliament and candidates of the National Alliance did not win their seats." The 76-year-old "grand chief" resigned his leadership of the National Alliance party and declared he would not contest the next parliamentary election, due in five years.

The deadline for the publication of the election results has been extended to August 1. So far, 89 of the 111 seats in parliament have been decided. O'Neill's People's National Congress has 26 seats, the greatest number of any party, and is therefore legally entitled to have first opportunity to form a coalition government. He has received the backing of Somare and fellow ex-prime ministers Julius Chan and Paias Wingti. O'Neill has set up a "camp" for his parliamentary supporters away from the capital, Port Moresby, in the isolated town of Alotau, on PNG's eastern tip. O'Neill's numbers will be tested when parliament convenes some time after the election results are finalised.

O'Neill's main rival is Belden Namah, his former deputy prime minister. Despite going into the election campaign having pledged to again form government with Namah, O'Neill has since repudiated him, declaring that the population was "sick and tired of erratic behaviour" and were demanding "leaders who are stable."

No doubt all manner of frenetic, behind-the-scenes horse-trading is underway among the rival parliamentary camps. The parliamentary system bequeathed by PNG's former colonial ruler, Australia, is notoriously corrupt. There is no genuine party system. Tribal and communal politics are interlaced with business arrangements that benefit a tiny layer at

the top. The formation of a coalition government is typically determined by payoffs and promises of lucrative positions.

The Australian government is undoubtedly an active participant in all this, doing its utmost to ensure that O'Neill prevails.

O'Neill is Canberra's man. His apparent election victory explains why Australian officials have said nothing about the widespread evidence of election corruption, including vote rigging and bribery. The Australian government backed O'Neill's illegal power grab last year and provided unstinting support, even as his government violently cracked down on opposition protests, claimed new authoritarian powers and unlawfully arrested Supreme Court judges.

Somare fell out of favour with the Australian Labor government after orienting toward Beijing and encouraging a heightened Chinese diplomatic, military and economic presence in PNG. This was untenable for both Canberra and Washington, especially as the Obama administration was orchestrating a region-wide strategic offensive aimed at countering China's threat to US hegemony.

O'Neill has longstanding and close ties with the Australian political establishment, and since taking office has encouraged a greater Australian military and federal police presence. An unprecedented 250 Australian and New Zealand troops, including elite SAS forces, were deployed to the country during the election campaign, ostensibly to assist with security and logistics.

Many of the machinations now unfolding in Port Moresby are undoubtedly due to Canberra's interference. Namah has been sidelined after making a limited anti-Australian nationalist appeal during the election campaign.

Somare's commitment to O'Neill has in turn been hailed as a grand act of statesmanship. Last week the *Australian* devoted an editorial to insisting that Somare "deserves great credit" for working to "boost Mr O'Neill's chances of forming a stable government to

end the debilitating rivalries of recent times and create the political stability the country's institutions and economic development so desperately need".

The Australian ruling elite's desire for "political stability" reflects its geostrategic and commercial interests in the impoverished country. PNG borders Indonesia and that country's key naval passageways connecting China with the Middle East and Africa. PNG is also the South Pacific's largest and most resource-rich country. The US and Australia have significant investments, the largest being a \$16 billion liquefied natural gas (LNG) project under construction by an Exxon-Mobil led consortium. The bulk of the Australian military contingent sent to PNG for the elections was stationed in the Highlands region, where the LNG operation is located.

O'Neill has violently suppressed any interference with the LNG project by local residents, who have protested against environmental damage and inadequate compensation.

Yesterday it was reported that Exxon had just begun drilling for gas, keeping it on schedule to have vast quantities of LNG ready for export to China, Japan and Taiwan in 2014. The *Australian* last week revealed that the "strong progress" at the project site was "buoying the prospects of minority partner Oil Search." Oil Search, an Australian oil and gas firm, has a 29 percent stake in the LNG project and is now valued at nearly \$9 billion.



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