

Papua New Guinea government ejects Australian “advisors”

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The Papua New Guinean government of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill has removed 15 Australian officials who were working as so-called advisors in senior posts within the finance, treasury, transport, and justice ministries. Foreign officials who are not directly employed by the national government are now banned from the country, except for those working with the PNG police and military.

This decision marks a setback for Australian imperialist interests in its resource-rich former colony.

In the past decade, successive Australian governments have invested considerable resources in planting diplomatic and public service officials in key state positions. Under the guise of “improving governance,” Canberra has sought to wield behind-the-scenes influence in PNG and other Pacific states, directing economic and diplomatic policy. As well as direct military interventions in East Timor and Solomon Islands, Australian advisors have also provided the mechanism for several of the provocations and dirty tricks operations carried out in the South Pacific, most notably in 2006–2007, against then PNG Prime Minister Michael Somare and Solomon Islands' Manasseh Sogavare (see “Canberra weighs up ‘regime change’ in Papua New Guinea”).

The 15 expelled Australian officials who had their contracts officially terminated on December 31 were employed by AusAID—Australia's official overseas aid agency—under the “Strongim Gavman [strengthening government] Program.”

The PNG prime minister publicly foreshadowed the move last July, apparently without any prior discussion with Canberra. A government backbencher complained in parliament that “we cannot have a conversation without everybody listening in on us,” and asked how he could be sure that “foreign consultants are not

spies.” O'Neill responded by declaring that he had “taken note of the concerns” and that advisors would in future be employed only by the government directly, so that “they work in the interest of our country, not for anyone else.”

O'Neill's stance marks a definite shift. Assuming office in 2011 through an illegal parliamentary manoeuvre, O'Neill depended heavily on Australian government backing. He subsequently functioned as a lackey of Australian imperialism, welcoming an expanded Australian police and “advisor” presence within the PNG state apparatus and backing Canberra's various diplomatic initiatives in the region.

O'Neill's time in office has coincided with Washington's “pivot to Asia,” which has seen the US work with Australia and other regional allies to diplomatically isolate and militarily encircle China. O'Neill's predecessor, Michael Somare, was unlawfully ousted with the backing of the Australian government because he was seen as too close to Beijing.

PNG has lucrative energy and mineral reserves, currently dominated by Australian and American transnational corporations. Four years ago, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton notably raised the importance of the \$17 billion ExxonMobil natural gas project in the country, at the same time accusing China of being “in there every day, in every way, trying to figure out how its going to come in behind us, come in under us.”

The former Australian colony also occupies an important strategic position in the Pacific, directly south of the US territory of Guam, which has been converted into a massive military staging post for a potential attack on China. PNG has the largest population and landmass of all the Pacific states.

There is an ongoing discussion within the Canberra foreign policy and military establishment about the threat posed by Beijing to Australian imperialist interests in the region. A paper published in March last year by the Australian Defence College, *China's Growing Influence in the South-West Pacific*, concluded: "China is certainly seeking influence in the South Pacific and, by default, may be considered to be competing with Australia ... China's growing influence has eroded Australia's standing and leadership role, and Australia can and should be doing more to rebalance China's influence."

The *Australian* published an article last October raising the spectre of Bougainville, a resource-rich island in PNG's east, becoming a Chinese client-state through an independence referendum due to be held there in the next five years. Rowan Callick, the newspaper's Asia-Pacific editor, declared that the "US might well wish to pay particular attention to the highly strategic island ... with deepwater ports and lengthy runways that could be swiftly rehabilitated, [that] lies 2,500 km straight across the horizon from Guam."

It remains unclear whether O'Neill's shift on the issue of Australian officials operating with impunity within the PNG state apparatus is part of an attempt by the Port Moresby government to orchestrate a wider diplomatic and strategic reorientation away from Canberra and Washington.

The PNG prime minister may instead be seeking leverage for a heightened Australian security presence in the country. The police force and military were notably exempted from the new bans on foreign advisors working in the country. In May last year, O'Neill addressed the Lowy Institute in Sydney and declared that he wanted Australian Federal Police agents to be not just training PNG cops but acting in front line positions. The PNG prime minister has made "law and order" the hallmark of his administration, repeatedly using police and troops to violently suppress social disorder, political dissent, and protests against the destructive activities of transnational mining and energy companies.

O'Neill is undoubtedly preparing for heightened unrest amid an escalating economic crisis. Declining global commodity prices have resulted in severe fiscal problems. A supplementary budget delivered last November registered a 12 percent collapse in

government revenue. Massive spending cuts targeting the urban and rural poor were imposed in response.

The government sought to conceal the extent of its austerity measures through highly opaque budget papers, and legislation that was rushed through parliament on the same day the budget was announced. One analyst, however, reported "real cuts of around 45 per cent for education, health and transport and even more in the economic sector" over the next several years.

These cuts will escalate social inequality and poverty in the economically backward country, further fuelling the social and political turmoil.



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