

University of Papua New Guinea closed down over student protests

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The University of Papua New Guinea's (UPNG) first semester for the year has been indefinitely suspended following month-long anti-government student protests. The university council declared on Tuesday that the 4,000 resident students at the Waigani and Taurama campuses in the country's capital, Port Moresby, have been given 48 hours to vacate the university. The announcement followed the occupation of the UPNG by heavily armed police beginning May 17.

Vice chancellor Professor Albert Mellam claimed the police were brought in "to secure the safety of staff and students" due to the activities "by some students that borders on criminality." The police were to maintain their presence until "normalcy" returned and the students stopped boycotting classes. It followed threats by the government's chief secretary, Isaac Lupari, who claimed outside "agitators" were attempting to "hijack" the student protests.

Despite the heavy police presence, students gathered at the UPNG forum square to continue their protests. These have spread through other tertiary institutions, including the University of Goroka and Lae Unitech where students are also boycotting classes. Students from at least six secondary schools had joined the sit-in at UPNG. Several unions, including the National Academic Staff Association, the National Doctors Association and PNG Nurses Association declared their support.

Student leaders declared that a total boycott of classes by the entire student body would be called unless Prime Minister Peter O'Neill, who is mired in corruption allegations, stepped down. The Student Representative Council (SRC) petitioned the government for both O'Neill and Police Commissioner Gari Baki to resign, and suspended investigators of the National Fraud and Anti-Corruption Directorate to be reinstated.

Since 2014 the fraud squad has been probing alleged illegal state payments of \$US30 million in legal bills to a

law firm, Paraka Lawyers. The investigation was launched by the country's main anti-corruption investigator Taskforce Sweep, a body that O'Neill immediately disbanded.

Police sought to arrest O'Neill over the case, but this was delayed by a series of legal challenges to the investigation. Last month, the Supreme Court lifted the stay orders, paving the way for a series of high profile arrests, including of the attorney-general, one of the prime minister's lawyers and a Supreme Court judge alleged to have taken a bribe while deliberating on matters around the case.

O'Neill, who has flatly refused to step aside, is facing heightened unrest amid an escalating economic crisis. Having assumed office in 2011 through an illegal parliamentary manoeuvre, he has repeatedly used police and troops to violently suppress political dissent and protests. Declining global commodity prices contributed to the government revenue shrinking by 20.7 percent in 2015.

No section of the PNG ruling elite has any solution to the former Australian colony's rapidly deepening economic crisis, except the imposition, under the direction of the international financial institutions, of drastic austerity measures. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported last August that PNG was facing a "fiscal crisis" and would need to either slash spending on crucial services, risking a humanitarian disaster, or seek a bail-out from international partners. PNG has recently been placed by Moody's Investors Service on review for a currency issuer ratings downgrade.

Massive spending cuts targeting the urban and rural poor have been imposed. Radio New Zealand reported in March that as the country's cash flow troubles have begun to bite, public servants are going without pay. The bankruptcy of state-owned electricity provider PNG Power means power blackouts have become a constant in

Port Moresby and Lae and, amid a prolonged and disastrous drought, budget reductions have been imposed in health and education. Protests have been breaking out across the public sector.

The benefits from development of PNG's natural resources—mineral, oil, forestry, fisheries and liquefied gas extraction—have been appropriated by a tiny privileged layer. Only limited job opportunities remain for the burgeoning youth population. Teacher training institutions were forced to close early last year after students boycotted classes and took to the streets following a decision to lengthen courses and increase study fees.

Under conditions described by National Alliance party spokesman Kerenga Kua as akin to “explosive,” the opposition parties are promoting economic nationalism and regulation. Papua New Guinea Party leader Beldon Namah, O'Neill's former deputy prime minister, told Radio NZ last June that O'Neill was acting like “an economic and constitutional terrorist,” awarding contracts to “Chinese companies” and his “corporate friends,” leaving “nothing to show for it on the ground.”

While there is a growing question mark, internally and internationally, over the coalition government, the opposition has no answers to the economic and social crisis. Repeated attempts to capitalise on the corruption case have come to nothing. Three no-confidence motions presented to the parliament since late last year all failed. Under the shifting allegiances within PNG official politics, the opposition itself is highly compromised and mired in corruption. O'Neill's People's National Congress has remained the largest party in parliament by luring dozens of MPs from smaller parties.

The opposition is seeking to exploit the student movement for its own purposes. Namah said that O'Neill was removing students' constitutional rights over the protests. However, voicing fears in ruling circles, he declared; “When you do that you allow people to take the law into their own hands, which is something that I want to discourage at all costs.”

The corruption scandal has become a lightning rod for social discontent. The student leadership, however, is seeking to corral the movement behind the official opposition and within the bounds of the parliamentary set-up. When SRC president Kenneth Rapa presented its petition to government representatives, he said that O'Neill needed to step down in order “to respect the Office of the Prime Minister” and declared; “We are moved by our patriotic, nationalistic spirit to see a better

nation tomorrow. That's all.”

Self-declared “leftist” and co-ordinator of the PNG Resource Governance Coalition, Martyn Namorong, claimed the student struggle was giving “meaning to the Constitution” and the country's founding “Goals and Directive Principles.” Namorong, who has been promoted by sections of the Australian media and foreign policy establishment, applauded “this young generation of PNG's emerging leaders” for showing how to “politely” give “the middle finger at the oligarchy.”

Behind the deepening crisis are divisions within the PNG ruling elite over fundamental geo-strategic issues. Under pressure from the Obama administration's “pivot to Asia,” every government in the Pacific is faced with the dilemma of balancing between the military build-up of the US, Australia and New Zealand for war against China, and maintaining trade and investment links with Beijing.

In January, O'Neill removed 15 Australian officials who were working as so-called advisors in senior posts within the finance, treasury, transport, and justice ministries—a marked setback for Australian interests in its former colony. O'Neill's predecessor, Michael Somare, was ousted with the backing of the Australian government because he was seen as too close to Beijing. O'Neill functioned as a lackey of Australian imperialism, but he now faces an uncertain future.

Both Canberra and Washington are clearly concerned to ensure that PNG remains in their camp. Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper, prepared in close consultation with Washington, noted that “the security, stability and cohesion of Papua New Guinea” was vital for a “secure, resilient Australia with secure northern approaches.”



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