

Papua New Guinea authorities clamp down on student protests

John Braddock**13 June 2016**

Following the shooting of student protesters by heavily-armed police at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) last Wednesday, the government and university authorities have quickly moved to suppress widening anti-government unrest.

Nearly 40 were injured when police fired into a group of 1,000 students as they were preparing to march on parliament in support of a planned vote of no-confidence against the government. Prime Minister Peter O'Neill, who is accused of allegedly authorising payments for fraudulent legal bills amounting to \$A30 million (\$US22 million), has been the focus of sustained student protests and mass boycotts of classes for six weeks.

Behind the longstanding “corruption” scandal lies a worsening social crisis produced by the precipitous collapse of global commodity prices. In the last 12 months the PNG economy, which is almost entirely dependent on commodity exports, has gone into sharp reverse. Severe government spending cutbacks has resulted in public servants not being paid and spending reductions of up to 40 percent in health and 23 percent in education.

The police shootings, and ongoing measures of suppression, are a warning to young people and workers, not only in PNG but throughout the region and internationally, as to what the ruling elites have in store as swingeing austerity policies are enacted in response to the unfolding capitalist crisis.

Despite government claims to the contrary, the police attack on the peaceful protest was unprovoked. Radio New Zealand described the scene at UPNG as a “veritable war zone.” Two of the victims were reportedly chased and shot by police several kilometres from the campus. Six people remain in hospital.

Police are encamped at UPNG’s Waigani campus,

where classes are due to resume on Tuesday. The university has been closed since armed police occupied the campus on May 17. In the wake of the shootings, further protests have been banned. A court order was obtained late on Wednesday by the university administration stopping the students from acting in any way “contrary to their enrolment.” Acting chancellor, Nicholas Mann, claimed the court order was deemed necessary “to prevent any intimidation on campus.”

Government spokesmen defended the police actions and vilified students. Higher Education Minister Malakai Tabar declared: “The thuggery of these opportunists must end and the violence has to stop.” O’Neill blamed the shooting on students, falsely claiming they threw rocks at police and “provoked a response that came in the form of tear gas and warning shots.”

According to Students Representative Council (SRC) president Kenneth Rapa, students remain fearful. “If the police can go right into the campus and shoot them, it’s unsafe for them to stay in the campus anymore so most of the students have left the campus already,” he said. Rapa added the SRC would abide by the court rules, but that it was considering legal options.

Separate inquiries by the government, police and the university are being prepared in order to carry through a witch-hunt. O’Neill declared the government’s inquiry is intended to uncover “external influences” driving the student protests. A similar inquiry by the police will also look into sources of “outside support” for protesting students, as well as the conduct of SRC president Rapa.

O’Neill’s actions mirror measures he took in April against striking power workers. After falsely blaming them for repeated power blackouts in the main cities, he enacted a provision making deliberately cutting off the

electricity supply a criminal offence.

Discontent over the shootings has continued to spread in the Highlands region. Air Niugini and PNG Air were forced to cancel flights into Mt Hagen after unrest forced the closure of the airport. Two secondary school students were arrested following a reported riot in the town. The Kainantu section of the Highlands Highway has been blocked and local businesses shut due to looting. Protests, led by high school students and their parents, have occurred in the Enga Province.

In Port Moresby, despite media reports that the capital is now “calm,” Transparency International postponed a public demonstration that had been planned for yesterday after police told the organisers they were unable to guarantee their safety. As many as 4,000 people in three separate provinces were expected to join the annual “Walk Against Corruption.”

In a sign of growing alarm within sections of the establishment, the *National* newspaper declared in an editorial critical of the government on Thursday that the police “failed to uphold their constitutional duty” when they fired into the crowd of students. “If this is how the police are going to handle public protests ...then something is terribly wrong with this State body,” it concluded.

The PNG’s “founding father,” former prime minister and governor of East Sepik province Michael Somare condemned the actions of police as “inexcusable.” O’Neill ousted Somare in 2011 in a series of unconstitutional manoeuvres, tacitly backed by the Australian government, which regarded Somare as too close to China.

Opposition MPs have sought to exploit the student movement while issuing repeated warnings against the protests getting out of hand. Far from condemning the government, opposition leader Don Polye welcomed its impending inquiry, saying that police should be using “normal riot equipment and crowd control methods as used by police all over the world” instead of lethal force.

As the PNG ruling elite becomes increasingly desperate in the face of the teetering economy and broad social crisis, opposition politicians are using the corruption scandal and students protests to bring down O’Neill and make their own bid for power. Such a government would be no different from the current one in carrying out drastic austerity measures.

Until recently PNG was deemed the best-performing country in the region, mainly due to the construction of a \$US19 billion gas plant operated by ExxonMobil. However, the fall in commodity prices has slashed state revenues. The Asian Development Bank is forecasting annual growth to slow to 2.4 percent by 2017, a severe reversal of the 13.3 percent rate in 2014. There is a shortage of foreign exchange, with the value of the kina collapsing and foreign reserves dwindling. In 2012 the kina was worth 47 US cents, but is only 30 cents today. Over the same period foreign currency reserves have fallen from \$US4.7 billion to \$US1.7 billion. PNG’s international credit rating has been cut three times in the past 12 months.

The opposition has positioned itself accordingly. Last August Poyle warned that the looming financial turmoil required “urgent belt-tightening measures.” In February, the shadow cabinet expressed concern over escalating crime due to the deepening social crisis and called for a review of the 2016 budget. It demanded “urgent adjustments” be made to “concentrate on basic life and death items and, goods and services.”



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