

Papua New Guinea government faces strikes, no-confidence motion

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Just weeks after suppressing widespread student demonstrations, the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government is confronting strikes and protests and a renewed push by the parliamentary opposition for a vote of no-confidence. Students had been demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill over corruption allegations.

The Supreme Court this week ordered the reconvening of parliament to consider the no-confidence motion. The opposition parties also obtained a court order forcing the parliamentary speaker to allow time for the motion to be properly considered. Parliament, which met yesterday, has been adjourned for a week until July 22.

O'Neill had previously used his overwhelming majority to adjourn parliament until August 2, thus avoiding a no-confidence motion due to a statutory period of grace prior to elections due next year. The Supreme Court ruled that government attempts to block such a vote were unconstitutional.

"Whatever the reasons are, the fact remains that these rejections are unprecedented and pose a real threat to parliamentary democracy in this country," the court declared. The judges warned of criminal sanctions if government MPs continued to frustrate attempts to debate the motion.

Cracks in O'Neill's coalition have begun to appear. Shortly before parliament reconvened, Petroleum and Energy Minister Ben Micah defected to the opposition with five other members of his People's Progress Party (PPP). The opposition is well short of the 56 voters required to topple the government. However, the ruling coalition is a fragile amalgam of small parties and individuals, and the one-week delay buys time for the opposition to build support.

The no-confidence motion is the opposition's fourth

in the past eight months, in response to a longstanding warrant for O'Neill's arrest over the alleged corrupt appropriation of about \$US22 million of public funds.

Large crowds gathered outside parliament on Friday. Police imposed a lock-down and mobilised a large contingent of armed officers. The *National* reported that police were also monitoring "threats purportedly issued by some workers' unions for a nationwide stop work."

The unrest follows two months of sustained student protests that culminated in the police shooting into a group of protesters at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) campus on June 8. Several were wounded. Efforts to end a boycott of classes failed, forcing the university administration to terminate the academic year on July 5.

While the opposition parties have focussed on O'Neill's alleged corruption, the political turmoil is symptomatic of a worsening economic and social crisis. The government is under pressure from global financial agencies to devalue the currency and accelerate austerity measures that have already produced widespread popular opposition. The International Monetary Fund has warned the government has sufficient reserves to cover just three months of imports.

Slumping oil and gas prices have led to a collapse of state revenue and the Asian Development Bank forecasts economic growth will slow to 2.4 percent by 2017. The government's austerity program is more aggressive than that of Greece, slashing expenditure by 13.5 percent, including cuts of more than 40 percent to health and education.

The parliamentary opposition, however, has no fundamental disagreement with the government's socially regressive agenda. Opposition leader Don

Polye was O'Neill's treasurer until 2014 and played a critical role in cutting social spending and attacking living standards.

An opposition grouping, the Concerned Citizens Coalition (CCC), which includes pilots, aviation workers, lawyers and union officials, is mounting limited protests and strikes. Spokesman and lawyer Moses Murray told Radio New Zealand that its members were spurred into action by the police shootings at UPNG. "The professional working class and the ordinary citizens want to express the brunt of this country's failing economy being felt by all as a result of the consequences of Peter O'Neil's tyrant style leadership," he said.

Murray stressed that the CCC was not calling strikes but for people to not go to work. "It's not militant in nature, never," he said. "As I speak to you it's happening in the three city centres. People are just not going to work, they're staying home." A number of pilots have not reported for work since Wednesday, causing flight delays and cancellations at Port Moresby airport. Several government departments have reported minimal disruptions. The trade unions have refused to declare a general strike.

The Doctor's Association has warned that in response to health budget cuts, doctors and nurses will strike from next week unless O'Neill steps down. The association last month ordered a return to work after more than 20 doctors at Mt Hagen General Hospital, the biggest referral hospital in the Highlands, voted unanimously to resign en masse. Over 200 nurses also walked off the job.

O'Neill has responded to the spreading unrest by ramping up repressive measures. The National Security Advisory Council (NSAC) met this week to determine how to counter strikes and protests. Chief Secretary Isaac Lupari threatened to invoke the Internal Security Act and Essential Services Act. "Politicians, landowners, public, students, landowners and any members of the community who issue threats will be investigated, arrested and prosecuted," he declared.

The NSAC established a National Security Joint Task Force, including police and military personnel, to "quell increasing internal security threats." The National Intelligence Organisation will also be involved. Lupari warned that the task force will monitor both social and mainstream media.

The response of Australia, PNG's former colonial ruler, has been muted to date. An offer of "help" by Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull after the UPNG shootings was firmly rejected by O'Neill. However, the Australian government will be following developments closely. In 2011, Canberra helped oust former Prime Minister Michael Somare, who was regarded as too close to Beijing, and install O'Neill, who took office in 2012.

Following a state visit to Beijing earlier this month, O'Neill expressed his "respect" for China's position on disputed claims in the South China Sea—a statement that will have raised concerns in Washington and Canberra as they exploit the latest court ruling in The Hague to intensify diplomatic pressure on China.



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