

Papua New Guinea government survives no-confidence motion

John Braddock
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Despite mounting popular unrest across Papua New Guinea (PNG), the government of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill survived a no-confidence vote in the parliament yesterday. The opposition parties secured only 21 votes, against 85 for the government.

The sitting, which was broadcast throughout PNG, took place under conditions of considerable tension. The motion, the fourth by the opposition, was brought over long-standing allegations of corruption concerning O'Neill and his refusal to co-operate with a police investigation.

The Supreme Court on July 11 ordered the parliament to sit so the motion could be put to be followed by yesterday's session. The ruling was a sign of sharpening divisions within the PNG elite. Parliament had not reconvened since police shot into a demonstration of students on June 8 as they prepared to march on parliament to demand O'Neill's resignation. Eight students were wounded.

The government had intended not to recall parliament until August, inside the one-year period protecting the government from formal challenges before an election. The court declared that repeated attempts to block no-confidence motions posed "a real threat to parliamentary democracy," and warned of legal sanctions if its decision was not implemented.

Yesterday police and military personnel were mobilised throughout the capital, Port Moresby. Police Superintendent Benjamin Turi warned civil society groups and others to refrain from "inciting violence," while the recently-formed National Security Joint Task Force denounced "threats to national security" purportedly made on social and mainstream media.

Deputy Opposition Leader Sam Basil, who moved the no-confidence motion, called for MPs to oust O'Neill. "He treats our citizens like criminals. He is incapable of

discussing issues. So pilots, doctors and students openly call for a change," he said. Basil criticised O'Neill's handling of the economy, citing the failure to pay public servants, constant power blackouts and cuts to essential services.

Speaking against the motion, Morobe Governor Kelly Naru hit out at the opposition campaign. "Even professional people are calling for the shutdown of essential services," he declared, denouncing them as "domestic terrorists." The debate was closed after little more than an hour as it descended into shouting.

The one-sided result, which does not reflect any strength on the part of the government, will only intensify the country's political crisis. The resumption of parliament on August 9 is likely see a raft of new austerity and repressive measures unveiled. The opposition group Concerned Citizens Coalition (CCC), made up of pilots, senior public servants and lawyers, has promised that protests and strikes will continue. CCC spokesman Moses Murray told Radio NZ yesterday: "The current prime minister must go. Whatever way he has to go, he has to go."

The government remains widely despised. Students at three universities mounted sustained protests and boycotts of classes for nearly two months, culminating in the cancellation of the academic year at the University of Papua New Guinea. After parliament adjourned last week, the opposition movement broadened, resulting in a series of strikes, "sick-outs" and go-slows by pilots, doctors and energy and port workers.

The political crisis is being driven by a worsening economic and social crisis. The government has reacted to the collapse of global commodity prices and revenues by imposing drastic austerity measures including funding cuts of 40 percent across the health

system. In order to intimidate any opposition, O'Neill has boosted the police and security apparatuses.

The gulf is deepening between the political establishment including the opposition parties, civic organisations and trade unions, and the vast majority of the population who live in poverty.

On the eve of the parliamentary vote, the government ordered a payment of \$US900,000 under the District Services Improvement Program (DSIP) to MPs who committed to supporting O'Neill. This year's delivery of funds had been delayed by the government's financial crisis. DSIP funds, which are allocated annually, would normally be paid to district treasurers. They are frequently used as slush funds for favoured local projects, clients and contractors.

With many of their own MPs previously mired in corruption allegations, the opposition parties have no fundamental disagreement with the government's austerity agenda. Opposition leader Don Polye told the *National* that if he succeeded in toppling O'Neill, he would bring down an urgent supplementary budget. It would replenish severely depleted foreign reserves, i.e., through further attacks on living standards, and focus on "compliance to the rule of law" by strengthening the prosecution and the judiciary.

Some trade unions openly backed O'Neill. PNG Trade Union Congress general secretary John Paska slammed the no-confidence vote as "baseless and unjustified." For the past week port workers worked a go-slow in defiance of orders by the Maritime and Transport Workers unions not to take part in the protests.

Other unions sided with the opposition but have sought to isolate and limit mounting strikes. The National Doctor's Association (NDA), National Airline Employees' Association and the energy workers' union all refused to officially mobilise or sanction any strikes, even after their members took action. NDA President James Naipao emphasised that doctors refusing to work were doing so as individual acts of "civil disobedience" and were therefore not on strike.

The country's economic situation is worsening. According to Australian economist Paul Flanagan, recent figures from the Bank of Papua New Guinea and the National Statistics Office reveal that PNG is two years into a severe recession.

The real growth rate over 2014 and 2015 was

negative 1.3 percent, down from earlier estimates of plus 3.6 percent. Economic indicators suggest that growth was considerably lower at negative 3 to 5 percent. Employment has dropped by 7 percent over two years, business sales declined by 16 percent from 2014 to 2015 and sharply reduced lending to the private sector is undermining investment.

Flanagan described the data as "of great concern." The start-up of natural gas production had made headline GDP numbers "look good," as high as 24 percent growth over two years, but "this has been a smokescreen for how poorly the key parts of PNG's economy have been doing," he wrote.

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