

Australian PM accused of interfering in Papua New Guinea election

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Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has rejected claims that he interfered with domestic politics in Papua New Guinea (PNG) by visiting Port Moresby and praising Prime Minister Peter O'Neill on the eve of national elections. Nominations for the PNG elections open within two weeks, and polling starts on June 24.

Turnbull's first official visit to Australia's neighbour and former colony took place on April 7–9. Former PNG Prime Minister Mekere Morauta criticised the “insensitive” and “dangerous” timing of the trip and accused Turnbull of seeking to endorse O'Neill. “That is a very dangerous position for the Australian Prime Minister to put himself in, especially with the prospect of a new government just around the corner,” Morauta said.

Turnbull dismissed the complaint, saying the timing was “entirely unrelated” to PNG's domestic political events. He claimed the visit would focus on “trade, security, economic growth and education.”

During a joint media conference, however, Turnbull praised O'Neill for his co-operation in the “vitally important fight against people smuggling” and commitment to “strengthening relations” between the two countries. Turnbull also deflected questions about PNG's dire economic situation. Asked if it was a concern that the PNG government was “broke,” Turnbull said management of the finances of PNG was “a matter for the PNG government.”

Deepening social polarisation and resentment over grinding poverty and austerity measures are fuelling a political crisis in the Pacific nation. Earlier this month, a rift erupted between the two main partners in the ruling coalition, O'Neill's People's National Congress (PNC) Party and the National Alliance (NA), over the state of the economy.

Treasurer Patrick Pruaitch, leader of NA, attacked the

PNC for “mismanaging” the country, noting that last year's per capita income fell for the first time in 13 years and is expected to drop again this year and for at least another four years. Since the financial boost from ExxonMobil's Liquefied Natural Gas project first came on stream in 2014 the economy had “fallen off the cliff,” Pruaitch declared.

Gross domestic product (GDP) growth plunged to 2 percent last year, significantly lower than the population growth rate of over 3 percent. The government has borrowed K13 billion (\$US4.1 billion) to take the total debt this year to K21.6 billion, above the debt-to-GDP ratio of 30 percent set by the Fiscal Responsibility Act.

As in every country, the working class and rural poor are profoundly alienated from all the established political parties. Over the past 12 months, the O'Neill government has repeatedly mobilised the police and armed forces to suppress mounting unrest, firstly among students, then against villagers living near the \$US19 billion ExxonMobil site.

Visits to PNG by Australian leaders are infrequent. Turnbull's trip was undoubtedly motivated by concern over Australia's commercial and strategic interests. Addressing an Australia-PNG Business Council breakfast on Sunday, Turnbull told local business leaders Australia had a “vested interest” in the PNG economy. “Almost 5,000 companies are doing business in PNG,” he pointed out, with total investments worth \$A5.8 billion.

Turnbull emphasised that PNG also receives \$A500 million (\$US375 million) annually in aid. Signalling Canberra's determination to dictate the terms of the relationship, the Turnbull government in March rebuffed a request by PNG to shift the aid away from traditional programs and into the PNG government's

accounts, in order to fund core services such as health and education. Australia's Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, bluntly declared that the aid program was "not a charity."

Canberra also made clear that its interests will prevail in the planned closure of Australia's refugee detention centre on PNG's Manus Island. Last year the PNG High Court ruled that the centre violates the refugees' constitutional right to personal liberty. Turnbull dodged questions about where his government would send the detainees if the Trump administration does not accept all 900 under a deal previously struck under Obama.

Australian Immigration Minister Peter Dutton told Sky News that any refugees not taken by the US would be settled in PNG, while non-refugees would be sent back to their home country. He said that under an agreement with the previous Australian Labor government, PNG had the "responsibility" to settle refugees not accepted by the US. "They are not coming to Australia," Dutton asserted. "We have been very clear those people are not going to settle in our country because that would restart the people trade."

Behind the scenes there is growing alarm over China's influence in the region. The state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported in February that Beijing is investing billions in infrastructure and business developments in PNG. The \$A260 million Edevu Hydro Project is funded by the China Development Bank, while Chinese companies are building roads in the highlands and redeveloping Lae's port. The Chinese government has loaned PNG hundreds of millions of dollars to build roads, create a National Broadband Network and a National Identity Card system.

In a bid to counter Beijing, the Australian government recently announced it will pay at least a third of the costs of PNG's hosting of next year's APEC summit. The commitments, including a two-year extension to the deployment of 73 Australian Federal Police officers, will exceed \$A100 million. Security, diplomatic support, advisory roles, immigration and intelligence processes will all be provided by Canberra. According to the ABC, security and foreign policy advisers warned that leaving the PNG government to fund the summit "would risk China filling the breach."

Canberra and Washington are particularly concerned about PNG's growing defence ties with Beijing. Following a state visit there last year, O'Neill expressed his government's "respect" for China's "legitimate and lawful rights and interest" in the South China Sea. O'Neill also endorsed China's "One Belt One Road" trade route system across the Asia-Pacific, designed to counter the aggressive efforts by the US to isolate China.

O'Neill's predecessor, Michael Somare, was ousted in 2011 with the backing of the Australian government because he was seen as too close to Beijing. O'Neill, who assumed office through an illegal parliamentary manoeuvre, has relied on Canberra's backing. He welcomed an expanded Australian police and "advisor" presence, while supporting Australia's neo-colonial interests in the wider region.

Under conditions of intensifying geo-strategic tensions, Australia is determined to see this continue, whoever wins the forthcoming election. Turnbull used the occasion to remind the PNG ruling elite of the historical ties between the two countries, dating back to previous imperialist wars. He visited Isurava, a 1942 battle site where Australian forces fought Japanese troops in World War II and the Bomana War Cemetery, where 3,800 Australian soldiers are buried.

Turnbull noted that Bomana has the largest number of Australian war dead of any cemetery. "Australia's freedom," he declared, "depends on courage, endurance, mateship and sacrifice of those Australians and Papua New Guineans who stood together and held back the Japanese advancement."



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