

Social crisis looms over Papua New Guinea election

John Braddock
23 June 2017

Voting in the 2017 Papua New Guinea parliamentary elections begins on Saturday and will run until July 8. The poll takes place amid a spiralling fiscal and social crisis, fuelled by a collapse in government revenues.

A precipitous decline in global commodity prices has seen economic growth plunge from a high of 13.3 percent in 2014 to 2.5 percent. The government has borrowed K13 billion (\$US4.1 billion) in the past year to take the total debt to K21.6 billion. This is above the debt-to-GDP ratio of 30 percent set by the country's Fiscal Responsibility Act.

Nearly 40 percent of the population subsists on less than \$US1.25 a day. Over the past 12 months, health and education budgets have been slashed by up to 40 percent, many public servants have gone without pay and government offices have shut over unpaid power bills. Earlier this month, doctors threatened to strike indefinitely when a shortage of drugs forced eight hospitals to close due to government funding shortfalls.

Prime Minister Peter O'Neill and his People's National Congress party are widely despised. While O'Neill has been embroiled in corruption allegations, his government's austerity measures have impoverished the working class and rural poor.

O'Neill's government has survived because of the perfidy of the opposition parties and trade unions, which have no real disagreement with its agenda. They have repeatedly, and unsuccessfully, sought to divert deepening social opposition behind the issue of O'Neill's alleged corruption, even though many opposition MPs have themselves been mired in previous corruption allegations.

The entire political establishment is shifting sharply to the right. Far from advancing a program to address the unfolding social disaster, opposition parties have accused the government of "mismanagement" and

"reckless spending," foreshadowing expenditure cuts and attacks of their own.

Don Polye, the main opposition leader in the last parliament, opened his campaign for the Triumph Heritage Empowerment Party by promising to sell the government's share in the Oil Search company, which has a 29 percent stake in the gas projects. Last year Polye advocated an urgent supplementary budget to replenish depleted foreign reserves through further attacks on living standards.

Last week, a group of prominent leaders and former prime ministers established a formal opposition coalition. Ben Micah of the People's Progress Party, Kerenga Kua of the PNG National Party, Patrick Pruaitch of the National Alliance (NA) and former Prime Minister Mekere Morauta were among them. Although Michael Somare, PNG's first prime minister, has announced his retirement from politics, he also will be involved.

Micah declared that the major problem confronting the country "is the fact that the government is broke." He promised measures to "dig the economy out of its worst-ever debt crisis." In fact, all the figures leading the new political grouping have extensive records in government and carry responsibility for the present crisis.

The NA, the second biggest party in the parliament, was until recently part of O'Neill's governing coalition. Pruaitch, the NA leader, was removed as treasurer after distancing himself from O'Neill shortly before the election. Pruaitch declared that PNG's economy had "fallen off a cliff" due to "reckless" spending.

Morauta, prime minister from 1999 to 2002, was responsible for the privatisation of major state-owned enterprises, legislation to strengthen the powers of the

central bank, and electoral laws protecting governments from votes of no confidence. During student protests against the privatisations in 2001, police shot three students dead.

Kua was O'Neill's attorney-general before being sacked in 2014 for opposing measures to change the constitution in relation to votes of no confidence. Micah has a long history of corruption allegations levelled against him. In 1999 Morauta sacked him as chairman of the Independent Public Business Corporation for alleged misuse of funds.

Somare held the prime ministership for three separate terms over 17 years from 1975. He was ousted with the backing of the Australian government in 2011 because he was seen as too close to Beijing and replaced by O'Neill through an illegal parliamentary manoeuvre. Somare has not hesitated to carry out the pro-market demands of the foreign and local investors.

There is a vast gulf between these representatives of the ruling elite and the broad population. Along with O'Neill, they have operated in the interest of the US and Australian-based banks and corporations such as ExxonMobil, which operate lucrative mining and gas ventures, looting the country's extensive natural resources at the direct expense of working people.

O'Neill has flatly denied there is a crisis, declaring that the government has "delivered on its promises," while maintaining "vital services." Posturing as a defender of "ordinary men and women," O'Neill rejected a Taxation Review Committee recommendation to increase the Goods and Service Tax from 10 to 15 percent, saying it would adversely impact low-income earners. He has claimed the opposition parties will "cut free school fees, stop free healthcare and stop direct payments to the districts and provinces."

An upsurge in struggles by students and workers over inequality, corruption and the social crisis has occurred over the past 12 months. Last June, police fired on a peaceful march by university students in Port Moresby calling on O'Neill to resign. Strikes by port workers, doctors, pilots and health workers followed. The massive ExxonMobil natural gas operation in Hela province is under police and military guard after local villagers repeatedly protested over unpaid royalties from the project.

Some 2,821 candidates and 44 parties are contesting

111 seats in the election. Four people have died in clashes between rival groups of supporters and several candidates have been attacked while campaigning. Flights in and out of the Mount Hagen airport were disrupted by candidates protesting the appointment of the electorate's returning officer.

Last Monday, Micah claimed he had received evidence of ballot box tampering, and that voting papers were already in the hands of some candidates. He declared demagogically that if the polling were shown to be rigged, the country was facing "a revolution and not an election."

A total of 10,600 security personnel from the police, military and correctional services have been deployed. Police Commissioner Gari Baki maintained the security operation was necessary to ensure the election took place "without favour, threats and intimidation." The vast para-military mobilisation is in fact designed to intimidate people and suppress any expressions of pent-up opposition to the political elite.

The election will resolve none of the critical issues facing the mass of the population. Regardless of which political parties ultimately form government, they will carry out the dictates of the international banks and corporations, intensifying the austerity measures and state repression.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact