

“Chaos” surrounds Papua New Guinea election outcome

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Papua New Guinea’s two-week election period from June 24 to July 8 has been beset by allegations of vote rigging, roll tampering, bribery, corruption and interference with ballot boxes. Voting in the capital, Port Moresby, was delayed for several days after election officials went on strike over pay.

To suppress unrest, the government mobilised 10,600 police and armed services personnel, purportedly to guarantee an “orderly” election process. Australia, the country’s former colonial ruler, provided training for police and more than 30,000 election workers, and Australian Defence Force planes and helicopters were involved in delivering election material to regional hubs.

The turmoil is an expression of the explosive social tensions produced by the austerity policies imposed by the government of Prime Minister Peter O’Neill over the past two years.

Budget cuts to health care and other social programs, following a collapse in state revenues due to the decline in global commodity prices, have worsened the already terrible levels of poverty and deprivation faced by most of the population.

Save the Children researchers revealed last month that almost half the country’s children suffer from under-nutrition, caused by insufficient food intake or disease, which is producing high rates of cognitive and physical impairment, including stunted growth.

O’Neill’s government appears to have tried to cling to power by blatant fraud.

The names of thousands of voters, including former prime ministers Rabbie Namili and Mekere Morauta, a leading opposition candidate, were missing from the electoral roll. Morauta told Radio New Zealand the election was “the most chaotic election in PNG’s history” and bluntly claimed the chaos was “organised”

by O’Neill’s party, the People’s National Congress (PNC).

“Because PNC is likely to be wiped out in a very clean election,” Morauta said, “it’s in O’Neill’s interest to create chaos and then use that chaos to return as many PNC candidates as possible.”

Writing for the *Asia Pacific NZ Report* web site, opposition MP and Oro provincial governor Gary Juffa asserted that O’Neill was using the election to prepare the “establishment of a dictatorship.” He claimed that O’Neill already had his own police unit escorting him in private jets, and a special army guard of 40, while he controlled the media, the public service and possibly the judiciary.

According to Juffa, up to half of eligible voters in the Popondetta Urban electorate were turned away because the roll did not have their names, even though many had tried to update their details.

Juffa warned that by the end of the election, many people would have concluded that “democracy was hardly a reality everywhere in Papua New Guinea.” Devoid of any progressive alternative, however, Juffa blamed ordinary people, declaring that “like lemmings and sheep, we are led to that reality with little resistance at all.”

In fact, there has been an upsurge in struggles by students and workers over inequality, corruption and the social crisis over the past 12 months. But these protests have been led to a dead-end by the trade unions and opposition parties.

Thousands of students boycotted classes for almost two months in 2016, demanding O’Neill step down to answer fraud allegations. At least 23 students were injured when armed police fired on them during a demonstration.

Last week, two students at the University of

Technology (Unitech) in Lae were arrested for burning ballot papers in protest over being unable to vote. Unitech was given only 1,100 ballot papers for a voting population of more than 5,000. At the University in Goroka over 4,000 people were unable to cast ballots.

At the University of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby, only 1,200 ballot papers out of 5,000 were delivered and there were numerous complaints about names missing on the rolls. A former Student Representative Council member, Gerald Tulu Manu-Peni, told Radio NZ the exclusion of so many students could be linked to the protest actions last year.

Corruption and favouritism are endemic. The Port Moresby district election manager and his assistant were arrested when reportedly caught in possession of \$US57,000 in cash and a document signed by an unnamed candidate. Further arrests occurred after officials were found smuggling ballot papers out of the election office.

In O'Neill's electorate, polling was temporarily deferred after a group of candidates served a protest notice with the election manager. They cited an inadequate common roll and politically-appointed presiding officers.

Several confrontations with authorities have erupted. In Hela province, where armed troops are guarding the giant ExxonMobil gas project from local protesters, a group of candidates and supporters attempted to destroy ballot boxes stored at the police station. According to police, the group with high-powered guns exchanged fire with security forces.

In another incident, Port Moresby candidates demanded the removal of police chief Ben Turi after officers fired shots near a crowd outside a polling booth. Turi defended the police action, declaring it was required to rid the area of "street vendors and unnecessary people who had been congregating near the counting arena." Radio Australia reported that police used "heavy handed" tactics, including assaults and intimidation, to force candidates and polling officials from the area.

In an effort to defuse tensions, Electoral Commissioner Patilias Gamato promised a taskforce to investigate the roll failures once the polling was over. Many who have been denied their right to vote denounced his announcement, however.

Critics used social media to condemn the polling

chaos, and called for the election to be officially declared a failure. Gamato said the threshold for this had not been reached. For that to occur, he declared, would require evidence of "gross" violence and that a majority of people were prevented from voting.

Former New Zealand governor-general Sir Anand Satyanand, who is leading a Commonwealth Observer Group, also issued a statement that it was "too early" to say the election failed.

Once the votes are tallied, horse-trading, alliance-gathering and influence-peddling will ensue among the competing elites. Whatever coalition is formed, it will likely include some of the current "opposition" formations.

None of the opposition parties that contested the election advanced any alternative to the government's austerity measures or its protection of the interests of the transnational companies that dominate the country's economy. Instead, they primarily attacked O'Neill over alleged "mismanagement," signaling their intention of imposing deeper budget cuts if they took office.

Like its predecessor, the incoming government will carry out the dictates of the international banks and corporations. It will intensify both the attack on the living standards of working class and rural masses, and the police repression of opposition and unrest.



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