

Papua New Guinea prime minister re-installed

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Peter O'Neill, Papua New Guinea's prime minister, was placed back in office when the country's parliament reconvened on Wednesday following national elections. O'Neill received 60 votes from newly elected parliamentarians, with 46 voting against. He will now begin a second five-year term, but with a significantly decreased majority.

Parliament was recalled even though results from only 106 of 111 seats had been declared. With the remaining seats still to be confirmed, the final shape of parliament is yet to be determined. A high number of electoral petitions is expected also in the court of disputed returns.

The hasty reconvening of parliament by Governor-General Bob Dadae was undoubtedly designed to legitimise the deeply undemocratic and disputed election, and intended to quash widespread popular anger over its outcome. Dadae had already invited O'Neill to form a new government last Friday, when more than a quarter of official returns were still outstanding.

The parliamentary vote was held despite objections of some legal figures, who said Electoral Commissioner Patilias Gamato did not follow the law during the return of the election writs. Speaker Job Pomat declared that since O'Neill's Peoples National Congress Party (PNC)—of which Pomat himself is a member—gained the highest number of seats, his nomination met legal requirements.

O'Neill earlier declared that the PNC had negotiated an agreement with the Peoples Progress Party, the United Resources Party and the Social Democratic Party to form a coalition government.

The two-week voting period that ended on July 8 was dominated by vote-rigging, the wholesale omission of names from the electoral roll, ballot box-tampering and

bribery. The Electoral Advisory Committee members charged with overseeing the election all resigned, accusing the Electoral Commission of not allowing them access to basic information.

Australian academic and former PNG treasury advisor, Paul Flanagan, told Radio Australia on July 18 that by comparing the electoral rolls with 2011 census figures, he found rolls had been inflated by nearly 300,000 false names. The "ghost" voters were mainly concentrated in electorates controlled by the PNC.

In the weeks following the close of polling, hostility to the conduct of the elections erupted in protests and violent incidents over accusations that vote counting was hijacked. Towns in several Highlands provinces remain in lockdown following shootings between rival factions in which several people were killed.

Protestors in Mt Hagen last week crowded the town's streets, calling on the Electoral Commission to account for what they said was an illegal early declaration, with dozens of ballot boxes still left to count. The protests sparked fighting and forced the closure of businesses and disruptions to the airport. Demonstrations also have taken place recently in the capital Port Moresby over counting delays in the city's three electorates.

The turmoil is an expression of the explosive social tensions produced by the austerity policies imposed by the O'Neill government over the past two years. O'Neill seized office in 2011 by ousting his predecessor Michael Somare in an illegal parliamentary coup supported by Canberra, which regarded Somare as too close to Beijing.

O'Neill has clung to power in the face of struggles by students and workers over inequality, corruption and the country's deepening social crisis. The government has increasingly turned to police-state measures to suppress opposition.

International observer teams criticised the running of the election. The Pacific Islands Forum's team noted large numbers of citizens were prevented from exercising their constitutional rights to vote despite "high levels of civic awareness and interest in participating in the election."

The official observers stopped short of supporting calls by opposition leaders to force the Electoral Commission to declare the election officially "failed" and conduct a new one.

Despite the widespread electoral fraud, O'Neill's government has seen its majority slashed. The PNC has so far won 25 seats—down from 55 in the previous parliament. Prominent government figures, particularly those responsible for massive expenditure cuts, have been ousted. These include Deputy Prime Minister Leo Dion, former parliamentary speaker Theo Zurenuoc, Fisheries Minister Mao Zeming, Health Minister Michael Malabag, Petroleum and Energy Minister Nixon Duban, and Youth and Community Development Minister Delilah Gore.

None of the opposition parties, however, offer any alternative for working people. A coalition headed by the National Alliance (NA) with the second largest number of seats in the parliament, and backed by the Pangu Party and the PNG Party, has attacked O'Neill from the right, accusing him of bankrupting the country and not going far enough in slashing budget spending.

The NA was a coalition partner in the previous O'Neill government and bears responsibility for its savage austerity measures. NA leader Patrick Pruaitch was sacked as treasurer shortly before the election. He had belatedly tried to distance himself from the government by attacking the PNC for "mismanaging" the economy. The NA campaigned as part of the opposition, demanding an end to government borrowing.

The new government will immediately confront a deepening fiscal crisis. The Midyear Economic and Fiscal Outlook from the Treasury is expected to reveal a deficit one billion Kina (\$US309 million) larger than that forecast in the budget seven months ago. After five years of the biggest deficits in PNG's history, public debt has blown out from K21 billion to K25 billion—or from 29 percent of gross domestic product to 34.5 percent.

Like its predecessors, the incoming government will

carry out the requirements of the international banks and transnational companies that dominate the country's economy and dictate terms to the country's dependent capitalist class. It will intensify the attack on the living standards of working class and rural masses, and the police-military repression of opposition and unrest.

Washington and the regional powers, Australia and New Zealand, will be watching closely. All have vital commercial and strategic interests in the country and are seeking to maintain their hegemony in the southwest Pacific against Beijing's growing economic and diplomatic influence.



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