

Papua New Guinea government deploys troops to quell opposition

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In an ominous attack on democratic rights, the newly-installed Papua New Guinea (PNG) government of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill announced last week that it will deploy additional military and police personnel to two provinces in the country's remote Highlands region.

The move is part of a broader crackdown on widespread social and political opposition, which has intensified in the wake of last month's national election. The polling was dominated by accusations that O'Neill's People's National Congress had engaged in dubious electoral practices, including outright fraud, in order to cling to office.

Troops and heavily armed police will be dispatched to Hela Province, and will conduct operations in the neighbouring Enga and Southern Highlands provinces. They will join hundreds of military personnel who were sent to Hela Province several months ago, on the pretext of combatting tribal violence.

Announcing the military call-out last Thursday, O'Neill cited reports that election-related violence, involving rival clans, had resulted in up to 20 deaths in Enga province. Fatalities and serious injuries have also occurred during clashes in the Southern Highlands.

O'Neill gave no indication of how many police and military personnel would be involved. His comments, however, indicated that the authorities are preparing a violent assault on opponents of the government.

"The behaviour we are witnessing by small groups is totally unacceptable," O'Neill stated. He menacingly added: "I am issuing a very clear warning to people seeking to cause disruption, that you will be faced with the full effort of our disciplined services, arrested and tried for criminal acts."

The trigger for the violence in Enga province was accusations that the dubious activities of electoral

authorities were responsible for prominent opposition leader, Don Polye, losing the seat of Kandep. His supporters have claimed that as many as eight boxes containing ballots from villages supportive of Polye went missing, resulting in the victory of People's National Congress candidate, Luke Manase.

Those claims are among a litany of accusations of electoral malpractice. These have included indications of bribery, ballot-box tampering and the wholesale omission of names from electoral rolls.

Following the closure of polls on July 8, after a two-week voting period, the entire Electoral Advisory Committee, an official watchdog body, resigned. They accused the Electoral Commission of denying them access to basic information relating to the ballot.

A detailed review of the election results by Sean Dorney, on the Australian-based Lowy Institute's *Interpreter* site, raised the possibility of voter-fraud on a vast scale. Dorney noted, for instance, that 55 percent of all votes were cast in the Highlands, which, according to the 2011 census, accounted for just 39 percent of PNG's total population.

The election has resulted in an O'Neill government that is widely viewed as illegitimate. Parliament was hastily reconvened on August 2 by Governor-General Bob Dadae, even though five of the parliament's 111 seats had not yet been declared. Dadae had already invited O'Neill to form government on July 28, when as many as a quarter of electoral returns were still outstanding.

In parliament's first sitting, O'Neill received 60 votes to form a new government, with 46 opposed. The result means that the government's majority is substantially reduced, setting the stage for ongoing political crises.

Underlying the election turmoil, and widespread

hostility to O'Neill's government, is the deepening social crisis facing workers, young people and the poor throughout PNG.

Almost 40 percent of the country's population subsists on less than \$US1.25 a day. The previous O'Neill government imposed a deeply unpopular austerity agenda, which included cuts to health and education budgets of up to 40 percent in the 2016-17 financial year. Many public servants had their wages slashed, or were hardly paid at all, over that period.

In imposing this agenda, O'Neill's government was responding to the dictates of the global corporate and financial elite for a stepped-up offensive against the social rights of workers and the poor.

The trigger was the precipitous fall in global commodity prices, which led to a decline in PNG's economic growth from highs of over 14 percent in 2014, to just above 2 percent this year. The country's debt has ballooned to K21.6 billion (\$US6.8 billion), after the government borrowed K13 billion (\$US4.1 billion) in the 12 months to June.

The new government has already indicated that it will intensify the social onslaught. On August 17, O'Neill spoke at a meeting attended by senior figures from PNG's business establishment, and representatives of major multinational companies.

O'Neill foreshadowed a 2017 "mini-budget," that would "make necessary adjustments to achieve the fiscal deficit target of this year's budget." In other words, the government will press ahead with attacks on education, health and other areas of social spending, negating O'Neill's election promises.

O'Neill stated that his government would work closely with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, two of the key institutions of global finance, on a review of the "medium term fiscal strategy to ensure that our budgets are framed prudently."

O'Neill also gave assurances that his government would not impose any, even nominal tax hikes on business. One newspaper, *Loop PNG*, summed up the tenor of the prime minister's remarks by declaring that "investor confidence" had been "reaffirmed."

While seeking to capitalise on the social opposition created by O'Neill's pro-business policies, the opposition leaders, including Don Polye, have repeatedly signalled their support for the austerity

agenda.

An opposition leader Mekere Morauta summed up the position of all of the opposition parties. Morauta, who oversaw the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and other pro-business policies when he was prime minister from 1999-2002, declared earlier this month that "budget repair" was the first task of the new government. He warned that it should not seek to downplay the country's fiscal crisis.

The entire political establishment is aware the government's pro-business program will provoke ever-greater anger.

The deployment of troops to the Highlands is a warning of how the government will respond to social protest and opposition from the working class and young people. O'Neill's previous government oversaw substantial attacks on democratic rights, demonstrated most graphically last year by the police shooting at peaceful student protesters calling for his resignation.

Australia, which for decades controlled PNG as a colony, has already signalled its support for the new government. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop absurdly described the election as "successful" in a statement earlier this month, and declared that her government "looks forward" to working with O'Neill.

Australian authorities were directly implicated in the anti-democratic conduct of the elections. Two hundred Australian soldiers were dispatched to PNG in June to "assist" with the ballot.



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