

Papua New Guinea embroiled in ongoing political turmoil

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The government of Papua New Guinea (PNG), led by Prime Minister James Marape, has plunged into turmoil after the defection of over a dozen MPs to the opposition. The crisis comes barely 18 months after Marape ousted previous Prime Minister Peter O'Neill in a similar manner over corruption allegations, leading to his arrest in May.

The defectors included 12 cabinet ministers, among them Deputy Prime Minister Sam Basil and leader of the National Alliance Party, Foreign Affairs Minister Patrick Pruaitch. Basil, leader of the United Labour Party, had been appointed deputy prime minister just last month in a Cabinet reshuffle, justified by Marape as necessary for the “stability” of his coalition.

Basil said “the cries of the people” had spurred the defectors to act, adding that the country had gone backwards under Marape’s leadership. The timing appears to be linked to plans to bring forward a vote of no confidence, which can only occur 18 months after a prime minister takes office, i.e., not before November 30.

Marape declared on Facebook that he would not be easily removed. “It’s not over until it’s over, leadership has its moments,” he said. The government staved off the no confidence vote last week by passing the budget before abruptly adjourning parliament until April.

While the opposition coalition currently holds a parliamentary majority, it was caught out by the government’s manoeuvre. The opposition had earlier called for an adjournment vote, which they won. An estimated 43 opposition MPs, including the defectors, then travelled to remote Vanimo to prepare for the confidence vote.

On November 16, however, parliament’s speaker Job Pomat announced that opposition leader Belden Namah

had no right to call an adjournment and that parliament was still in session. The house sitting was brought forward to 10 a.m. the next day. With the opposition absent, the government mustered the required quorum of one third of all 111 MPs. With less than half MPs present, they approved the budget without any debate, before adjourning parliament.

The legality of the sitting was promptly challenged in court by O’Neill. Both camps are now waiting for the Supreme Court to rule on the matter, and on a separate case previously brought by Namah challenging the legality of last year’s installation of Marape as prime minister.

A vote of no confidence remains possible next April, but it would be unlikely unless the governor general dissolves parliament and calls an early poll. According to the parliamentary rules, a confidence vote cannot be put any later than next July.

The cynical manoeuvring between rival groups of parliamentarians highlights the vast gulf that separates the poverty-stricken PNG masses and the country’s corrupt and venal political elite.

Marape last week summoned public service heads, including the police commissioner and defence force commander, for a briefing. His message, later broadcast to the general population, was that nobody should “get caught up” in the crisis. “Leave politics to the politicians,” he said, “remain focused and get on with your life.” Police have mobilised extra personnel to beef up “security” around the capital Port Moresby.

Behind the turmoil is the spiralling social and economic crisis intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout. After a period of several months during which the country remained isolated from the pandemic, a surge in cases erupted in July and August. PNG has now recorded 609 cases of

COVID-19 with seven deaths. Only 30,000 people have been tested from the population of 8 million.

The pandemic has caused major disruption. The massive Ok Tedi mine was at the centre of a COVID-19 outbreak over August and September with staff and contractors accounting for the majority of the almost 200 confirmed cases in Western province. A shortfall in production due to a six-week shutdown is likely to continue for some time.

Despite the ongoing surge in COVID-19 cases, the government last month lifted some restrictions it had previously imposed. Police Commissioner David Manning, who is also the pandemic response controller, opened international flights from Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan and Solomon Islands, in addition to Australia which already had access. The daily curfew in Port Moresby was also lifted.

Before the pandemic hit, the economy was already reeling from a collapse in earnings from the major resources industries. There is a severe budget shortfall, with government debt near 40 percent of GDP. In May, Marape was reportedly seeking a \$US2 billion bailout from international institutions, including the IMF and Asian Development Bank (ADB), to prevent PNG becoming a “failed state.”

Radio NZ reported on November 19 that before his defection, Basil had authorised a “large payout” from the supplementary budget to address the “towering challenges” of the economy. The government secured an IMF loan of \$US340 million and another \$28 million from the ADB to “restructure” Air Niugini. The IMF and ADB are certain to demand brutal attacks on the social position of the working class in return.

On taking office, Marape had resorted to nationalist demagogic, proclaiming he would “take back PNG,” and pledged “regime shifts” in the resources industry to “bring more wealth to the people.” He stirred fears in Canberra with a proposal that the Chinese government refinance the national debt of 26 billion kina (\$A11.3 billion). While this did not eventuate, Marape signalled a move away from an “aid-donor” dependency on Australia.

The government then announced it would not extend the lease on the Porgera goldmine that contributes some 10 percent of the country’s total exports. The mine’s Canadian operator Barrick Gold and Chinese partner Zijin Mining condemned the move as “tantamount to

nationalisation without due process,” and initiated legal action. With 3,500 jobs on the line, and millions of dollars in lost revenue accumulating each week a deal was struck. It will see PNG take a major share of equity, while Barrick retains operatorship. The mine, however, is still not reopened.

The extraction projects have done nothing to improve the lives of the people. Members of the ruling class, on the other hand, have reaped enormous personal wealth through their collaboration with Australian imperialism and services rendered to the giant transnational corporations.

PNG remains among the poorest countries in the world, despite having lucrative natural resources. Most of the country’s people confront limited or non-existent health care, education, and other social services and infrastructure, with preventable disease and other indices of social distress comparable to sub-Saharan Africa.

PNG’s former colonial overlord, Australia, will be watching developments closely. Prime Minister Scott Morrison deferred a planned trip to Port Moresby this month after Namah challenged the timing as “highly suspicious,” suggesting it was “bad diplomacy” that would unduly influence local politics.

Canberra will not, however, hesitate to act to defend the billions worth of investments by Australia’s multi-national companies. PNG is, moreover, on the frontline of great power competition with China in the Pacific, as far as both Canberra and Washington are concerned (see: “Australian media stokes fears over Papua New Guinea-China links”). It is a contest in which Australian imperialism is determined to maintain its hegemony.



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