

# Michael Somare (1936-2021) and the failure of bourgeois nationalism in Papua New Guinea

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Papua New Guinea's first post-independence leader, Michael Somare, died of pancreatic cancer on February 26, aged 84. Somare was the most important political figure in PNG's history, having served as prime minister from 1975 to 1980, 1982 to 1985 and 2002 to 2011.

His political career and legacy serve as another demonstration of the abject failure of bourgeois nationalism. Contrary to the various promises made by Somare and his colleagues in 1975 and afterward, the "independent" capitalist state in PNG has failed to advance the economic interests and social and democratic rights of the working class and rural masses. Still dominated by Australian imperialism, the country's people remain among the most impoverished in the world, while PNG's extensive natural wealth, including minerals and energy, continues to be plundered for profit by transnational corporations.

Somare was born in 1936, to a father who worked as a police officer with the Australian colonial force. The PNG half-island had been under full Australian control since 1914, when Canberra seized on the eruption of World War I to take over the German-controlled northern part of the territory.

Somare inherited his father's chiefly status within his East Sepik-based tribe in northern PNG. He trained as a teacher and spent seven years working in primary and secondary schools before becoming a radio and newspaper journalist.

He became active in politics after 1963 when authorities decided to bring "down salary levels to what it was estimated the economy of the Territory could afford" (in the words of one Australian official). This involved racist distinctions between pay rates for indigenous blacks and expatriate whites within the public service. The measure saw new local public service workers paid about half what white Australians were paid for doing the same work. Existing public service workers like Somare had their wages permanently frozen, with no possibility of raises through promotion.

"With the new salary scheme it became practically impossible for any Papua New Guinean to move into one of the more comfortable houses," Somare explained in his 1975 autobiography. "There was probably no other single issue that made Papua New Guineans more aware of the injustices of colonialism." [*Sana: An Autobiography of Michael Somare*, p. 43]

It is telling that the origins of the nationalist movement in Papua New Guinea lie not in a concern for the plight of the country's masses under imperialist rule, but rather in the effort of a small and relatively privileged layer, including members of the chiefly elite, to advance its social and economic interests.

There was never a mass anti-colonial movement in PNG. Somare and his colleagues played an important role in blocking the entry of the masses into politics, fearing a challenge to their class interests and a disruption to their relationship with the Australian authorities. Somare occasionally drew the ire of the most reactionary and racist settler layers, but Canberra saw him as a trusted guarantor of Australian imperialist interests. This is

why Somare was never imprisoned or harassed by colonial authorities in the pre-independence period.

His political career leading up to independence consisted of manoeuvring within the pseudo-parliamentary structure created by the Australian authorities as they prepared to hand over formal control. By the mid-1960s, previous Australian imperialist proposals to annexe PNG as a new state or territory had been abandoned. World imperialism was forging a new form of exploitative relationships with the previously colonised territories and the Australian government feared international censure if it was not seen to be making preparations for PNG independence.

A flag and national anthem were invented in 1961. Australia commissioned a World Bank survey of the territory's economy in 1965 ("the greatest hopes in the mineral sector rest on general geological indications that the Territory, and western Papua in particular, may contain major petroleum fields," the report noted). It established the University of Papua New Guinea and Institute of Technology in 1967, with the express aim of training an indigenous ruling elite. A related initiative in 1964 saw the creation of a House of Assembly based on a restricted franchise, limited powers and reserved seats for white expatriates.

Somare won a seat on this body in 1968, after rising to prominence through his work in the public service trade unions. He was elected together with a group of fellow aspiring public servants who in 1967 had formed Pangu Pati (Papua and New Guinea Unity Party). Pangu was not a political party in the usually understood sense—it had no mass membership, no clear program beyond aspiring to "home rule" for the territory, and its House of Assembly caucus lacked stability, as members variously joined or left the group. Somare nevertheless came to head a group that, as he described it, constituted a "loyal opposition" to the administration.

## The establishment of formal independence

After the 1972 elections, Somare was able to muster a majority in the House of Assembly and was appointed chief minister.

This coincided with the election in Australia of Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, who accelerated the preparations for independence. Whitlam was seeking to fashion a fresh face for Australian capitalism on the world stage amid growing denunciations of its White Australia immigration regime and racist treatment of the Aboriginal population. Whitlam saw PNG independence as a means of maintaining Australian hegemony in the South Pacific. Labor, he explained, had commitments, "first, to our own national security, secondly to a secure, united and friendly Papua New Guinea."

Somare and his colleagues repeatedly expressed concerns that Whitlam was moving too quickly and suggested an extended "home rule" period before independence.

Somare's record as chief minister from 1972 to 1975 underscores his conservative politics and commitment to the status quo. On the question of PNG's post-independence constitution, for example, he emulated

Australia's anti-democratic constitution, even retaining Queen Elizabeth II as head of state. He dismissed student demonstrations that broke out in Port Moresby when the constitution was announced, arguing that retaining the British monarchy was aimed at ensuring "stability."

Ideologically, Somare's Pangu Pati had been formed only on the basis of some vague sympathies for Tanzania's first post-colonial leader Julius Nyerere, together with an idealised promotion of the Papua New Guinean village.

After becoming chief minister, Somare issued "Eight Aims" in December 1972. These included "a rapid increase in the proportion of the economy under the control of Papua New Guineans ... a more equal distribution of economic benefits including equalisation of income among people ... decentralisation of economic activity and an emphasis on agricultural development [and] a more self-reliant economy less dependent upon imported goods and services."

These aims, one historian explained, "quickly became the cornerstone not only of economic planning but also a sort of instant government-sponsored ideology ... they acquired, or at least the government tried very hard to have them acquire, an almost religious sanctity." [Don Woolford, *Papua New Guinea: Initiation and Independence*, p. 220]

After independence, the "Eight Aims" were effectively dropped, along with associated talk within ruling circles of pursuing a non-capitalist, egalitarian village-based economic development. This had been nothing but a populist cover for Somare's pursuit of a capitalist economic program, subordinated to the diktats of Australia and the US.

The first post-independence budget was unveiled by Somare's finance minister, businessman Julius Chan, who declared that "self-reliance" now meant "fiscal self-reliance," adding that "easy days are over," with lower than expected Australian aid requiring austerity measures.

This set the stage for the subsequent domination of the PNG economy by transnational corporations that continues to the present day.

#### **Somare in office**

After taking office in nominally independent PNG, Somare headed a government that remained tied by a thousand strings to Australian imperialism. Canberra's so-called aid funding comprised 56 percent of total PNG government spending in 1975, and by 1985, a decade after the end of colonial rule, this had only slightly declined to 33 percent.

During Somare's first two terms in office (1975-1980, 1982-1985), very little, if anything, changed for the vast majority of PNG's population. There was no significant redistribution of wealth, change in land ownership, or shift in economic policy.

The first years of Papua New Guinea's independence coincided with the collapse of the nationalist program of economic regulation and import substitution based on tariff protection that had been widely promoted and adopted in former colonial countries. From the late 1970s and 1980s, governments in the so-called Third World instead sought to integrate their economies into the capitalist world market by welcoming foreign investment on exploitative terms. This approach saw PNG transformed into a lucrative source of minerals and energy for many of the world's largest transnational corporations.

Australian investments were protected after PNG independence, most importantly including Rio Tinto's Panguna copper and gold mine that was opened in 1972 in the island province of Bougainville. The mine, one of the world's largest copper sources, caused widespread environmental damage and triggered a separatist civil conflict in Bougainville that has not finally been resolved despite an end to fighting.

Just four years after independence, dissatisfaction with the government triggered student protests and workers' strikes in Port Moresby. Tribal conflicts spiralled in some regions, including the Highlands. Extreme social inequality and lack of decent housing in the capital city also saw an increase in violent crime. Somare responded by declaring a state of emergency over much of the country in 1979, and threatening to deploy

the military to crack down on strikes and demonstrations. This was only the first of many states of emergency, with the military repeatedly deployed in the Highlands and other parts of the country in the 1980s.

Somare's foreign policy was squarely in line with US-Australia Cold War imperatives. His loyalty to the Western powers found one expression in his enthusiasm for the British monarchy. After independence he accepted a seat on the Queen's Privy Council and a knighthood (afterwards insisting he be referred to as "Sir Michael"). Somare also sought to appease the neighbouring Indonesian military junta that had come to power in 1965-66 through an anti-communist bloodbath. Somare endorsed Indonesia's brutal invasion and occupation of East Timor from 1975 and welcomed the Indonesian dictator Suharto to Port Moresby in 1979.

PNG politics increasingly became dominated by unstable cliques of capitalist politicians and "independents" based on narrow parochial appeals in a country fragmented by hundreds of language or "wontok" groups and motivated by the crumbs of office and personal aggrandisement. To provide some small measure of stability, governments formed on the basis of unwieldy and shaky alliances have been protected by a 30-month period of grace when no-confidence votes are not permitted.

Somare was installed for a third term as prime minister in 2002 on the basis of a coalition of 13 parties and 20 independent MPs. His final term in office (2002-2010) saw greater friction with Canberra. Somare regarded the emergence of China as a significant power in the region as an opportunity to gain financial assistance as well as some leverage with Australian imperialism.

Somare initially agreed to the Australian government's Orwellian-named Enhanced Cooperation Package, \$A1 billion neo-colonial program aimed at inserting Australian police, legal officials, economists and other state officials into key positions of power in Port Moresby. The program was modelled on the 2003 Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), an Australian military-police takeover of that Pacific country.

By 2006-2007, however, Somare withdrew support for the operation, in part because of Australian government provocations on PNG soil during its illegal vendetta against Solomon Islands' attorney general Julian Moti. Somare won a national election in 2007 amid threats of an Australian military intervention and "regime change" operation. In 2011, however, his continued orientation to Beijing under the banner of a "Look North" foreign and economic policy saw the Australian government endorse his illegal ousting by political rival Peter O'Neill.

#### **Somare's legacy**

Somare's domestic record is marked by the failure of successive governments, his own included, to alleviate the enormous poverty and social inequality that wracks PNG.

The country exports cash crops—including coffee, cocoa, coconut and palm oil—as well as minerals such as nickel, copper and gold, and also oil and gas. The aggregated value of these exported resources since independence would amount to hundreds of billions of dollars. This has not flowed, however, to ordinary Papua New Guineans but to many of the world's largest mineral and energy firms, mostly Australian and American—including ExxonMobil, Chevron, Barrick Gold, BHP Billiton, Newcrest Mining, and Rio Tinto.

A tiny elite layer within PNG has accumulated significant personal fortunes, Somare and his family among them. In 2011, it emerged that he and his children owned a number of Australian beachfront houses and luxury apartments. The former prime minister was repeatedly accused of corruption, including accepting multi-million dollar corporate bribes—though this was always denied and not proved in court.

For most people, so-called capitalist development after independence has been a disaster. Many mining and energy extracting operations have

produced environmental crises—most notoriously at BHP’s Ok Tedi copper and gold mine, where waste chemicals were dumped for more than a decade in the 1980s and 1990s, with more than 50,000 people affected by the poisoning of the Fly River eco-system.

The country remains among the world’s most impoverished. Average life expectancy is just 65 years. Diseases including polio, malaria, and HIV-AIDS ravage the country, contributing to an annual death toll of more than 15,000 children, or one in every 13 children. Around three-quarters of the 8.5 million people still depend largely on subsistence agriculture. Just over half have access to electricity, and only a small minority access reliable power.

Within PNG villages and towns, there are numerous serious social problems, including alcoholism and family violence. Around one-third of the population is out of school and unemployed, and only 62 percent of adults are literate. Within the cities and towns, young people are afflicted by mass unemployment, lack of basic facilities, and a shortage of educational opportunities.

It is a damning indictment of Somare and the entire venal capitalist class he represented that they have proven unable to meet the democratic aspirations and basic social needs of the vast majority of the population.

A new generation of Papua New Guinean workers and youth will in the next period turn toward a new political perspective, based on socialist internationalism and Leon Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution. Workers in the country confront the same exploitation, often by the same transnational corporations, as their fellow workers throughout the Asia-Pacific and internationally. A unified struggle with workers internationally—above all in the Pacific states, Australia and Indonesia—needs to be based on the fight for a government of the working class and rural masses that will establish genuine democracy and end neo-colonial oppression through socialist policies directed to the social needs of the population.



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