

Papua New Guinea parliament adjourned amid escalating COVID-19 crisis

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Papua New Guinea's (PNG) Prime Minister, James Marape, adjourned parliament for four months on April 21, avoiding a vote of no confidence that could have removed him from office.

Marape cannot now be formally removed before the next election. Under the rules, parliament cannot move a vote of no confidence in a sitting PM for 12 months before an election is scheduled, in this case in July 2022.

The government justified the adjournment until August 10 following the release of figures indicating a quarter of parliamentary staff and one MP, 42 out of 167 people, had tested positive for COVID-19. As many as seven MPs tested positive earlier this year.

Marape said he was unwilling to "sacrifice the health of our elected leaders" and their families by keeping parliament open. Asked whether a four-month adjournment was necessary given the incubation period for the virus was two weeks, Marape said the end of the incubation period would not stop the spread of the virus.

PNG is grappling with an escalating health disaster. The Pacific nation, with a population of nearly 9 million has, as of May 3, recorded 11,206 COVID-19 cases and 115 known deaths. Due to low testing rates, the true numbers are likely to be far higher.

Over 4,000 cases are in the capital Port Moresby, with over half the workforce at the country's main hospital having tested positive. The health system is near collapse nationwide with hospital beds fully occupied and oxygen, gloves, antibiotics and other supplies running out.

One health official in the Western Highlands told Radio New Zealand this week: "We really don't have any real grasp on [the virus]... Numbers are surging daily. The number of positive cases coming in has gone

far beyond our surveillance."

Marape's purported concern for his parliamentary colleagues does not extend to the broader population. On March 21, following a six-day surge that brought the total to over 4,000 cases, the government implemented a limited month-long isolation strategy. Restrictions were placed on travel, public gatherings and schools, but businesses, including markets and shops remained open, as did government departments. The measures inevitably failed to stem the outbreak, with cases exploding by over 6,000, including more than 40 deaths, during the four-week period.

The adjournment of parliament came after the opposition parties tabled a no-confidence motion and named former Prime Minister Peter O'Neill as their candidate. O'Neill declared the adjournment to be "wrong" and "in breach [of requirements regarding] minimum sitting days... so we will see them in court."

These maneuvers are part of a deepening political crisis. Last November, dozens of government MPs, including cabinet ministers, defected to the opposition, taking control of parliament and suspending the budget sitting. Marape passed the 2021 budget in an emergency session with the opposition absent—a move the Supreme Court subsequently ruled unconstitutional.

After weeks of political turmoil during which the opposition tried to initiate a motion of no confidence, the prime minister's majority was restored when a group of the defectors, including National Alliance party leader Patrick Pruitich, returned to the government's ranks. Following a court ruling that parliament resume sitting, and with Marape clinging to office, the government passed the budget before promptly adjourning parliament.

When parliament finally returned on April 20, opposition leader Belden Namah moved a fresh no-

confidence motion. Declaring the “future hangs in the balance,” he said the country was gripped by the pandemic and the economy was in negative growth. He also cited the government’s handling of the closure of the Porgera goldmine, alleged misuse of international funds meant to aid PNG’s COVID response, and the country’s high debt-to-GDP ratio. Also pointing to the economic crisis, O’Neill said the country could be called a “failed state.”

Before the pandemic hit, including under O’Neill from 2011-2019, the economy was already reeling from a collapse in earnings from the major resources industries. A series of severe budget shortfalls resulted in government debt rising to nearly 40 percent of GDP. Last year Marape reportedly sought a \$US2 billion bailout from international institutions, including the IMF and the Asian Development Bank.

O’Neill remains deeply unpopular. In 2016, police opened fire and killed four students at a protest demanding that he step down and face fraud charges. Opposition intensified following the 2017 election narrowly won by O’Neill. Police and military units were dispatched to the Highlands region to crack down on violence stemming from the election, which was widely regarded as illegitimate. O’Neill finally resigned in 2019 to be replaced by Marape. He currently faces charges of misappropriation, abuse of office and corruption from his term as prime minister.

The current cynical maneuvering by parliamentarians highlights the vast gulf that separates the poverty-stricken masses from the country’s venal political elite. Marape has resorted to nationalist demagoguery, proclaiming he would “take back PNG,” and falsely pledging “regime shifts” in the resources industry, dominated by foreign corporations, to “bring more wealth to the people.”

The PNG working class and rural poor, who are among the world’s most impoverished, remain acutely exposed to the deadly dangers of the COVID pandemic. Already, 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 one in every 13 children.

The response of the imperialist powers, including the former colonial power Australia, has been a mixture of indifference and self-interest. Geo-strategic considerations to push back against Chinese influence

have been at the forefront.

PNG’s vaccine rollout began very slowly three weeks ago, with a vastly inadequate batch of 8,000 AstraZeneca doses from Australia. Last week, 132,000 vaccines from India, sent through the COVAX facility, arrived in Port Moresby, with small emergency medical teams from Australia, Germany and the US. With the pandemic reaching catastrophic proportions in India and now gripping nearby Fiji, none of this matches what is required to bring the raging epidemic under control.

As the WSWS has noted, vaccines have not been distributed globally “based upon need nor in the pursuit of equity, but rather according to economic hierarchy.” COVAX, purportedly established to provide vaccine access to low-income countries, has supplied only 40 million doses to the poorest nations and is far short of its goal of delivering two billion doses.

The WHO’s director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, recently cited PNG’s struggle with the pandemic as an example of the importance of “vaccine equity.” He pointed out that one in four persons in high-income countries has received a vaccine, whereas in low-income countries, only 1 in 500 had so far received it.



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