Papua New Guinea elections loom amid growing domestic and global crisis

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National elections in Papua New Guinea (PNG), due in July, are already facing mounting difficulties. The issuing of writs was postponed for a week on May 12 following the death of Deputy Prime Minister Sam Basil in a car accident.

The delay was to allow for a state funeral and for Basil's United Labour Party to reorganise itself. Basil was a longstanding MP and member of the country's ruling elite. He had held major portfolios over his career and had ambitions to be prime minister following the election.

In November 2020, Basil was one of 12 cabinet ministers who defected from the James Marape-led coalition government, plunging it into turmoil. The manoeuvre, designed to force a no confidence vote, was stymied when Marape abruptly adjourned parliament for four months. Basil then returned to the fold.

Polling is due to start on July 9 and finish on July 22, with writs returned on July 29. Normally, several thousand potential candidates come forward to nominate in PNG elections seeking to access money and favours. This year, it is predicted the figure could be as high as 4,000 to contest the 118 seats.

Seven new seats have been created in the parliament. However, ballot papers were printed before the government formally established the new seats. The ballots had to be destroyed and reprinted, and there is ongoing uncertainty over the new districts which have not yet been budgeted for. There could well be a court challenge to their validity.

University of Papua New Guinea academic Okole Midelit told Radio NZ on May 16 that the election poses significant "security risks." Under-resourced police, widespread availability of illegal firearms, and the politicisation of the security force will present major issues, he warned. Low COVID-19 vaccination rates are also a particular concern, Midelit noted, with less than 3 percent of the population of nearly nine million fully vaccinated.

More than 200 people died in violent clashes during the widely discredited 2017 election. The poll was mired in bribery and corruption, ballot rigging and the wholesale omission of names from the electoral roll. Protests erupted over accusations that vote counting was hijacked.

The narrow victory of then Prime Minister Peter O'Neill was regarded as illegitimate. Explosive social tensions produced by the government's austerity policies in response to the deepening economic crisis, including the collapse in global energy prices, saw ongoing turmoil over the following year.

In 2019, O'Neill avoided a vote of no confidence by resigning his position and has since faced corruption charges. He was replaced as prime minister by former ally and finance minister Marape, leader of the Pangu Party, who has in turn fended off a series shifting allegiances from within the unstable and corrupt political establishment.

Marape has presided over an escalating economic and social disaster. His government has been criticised for its handling of the closure of the Porgera goldmine and alleged misuse of international funds for PNG's COVID response. Budget shortfalls have resulted in government debt rising to 40 percent of GDP.

O'Neill, who leads the People's National Congress Party (PNC), appears to be the main electoral threat to Marape. According to the *Post-Courier*, O'Neill told a pre-election crowd last week that the PNC is ready to return and "remove thieves, liars and false prophets that have mismanaged and critically run the economy of the country."

O'Neill, however, remains deeply unpopular. In 2016, police opened fire and injured dozens of people at a protest demanding that O'Neill step down and face fraud charges.

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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. Trust in the government has disintegrated following decades of social deprivation and growing wealth inequality, buttressed by authoritarian military-police measures.

The crisis has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. The government, which ditched national pandemic lockdowns in mid-2020, is responsible for an unfolding disaster. PNG has officially recorded 43,900 cases of COVID and 651 deaths but with testing all but abandoned the figures are meaningless. In March this year most remaining restrictions were removed, including the need for booster shots to be fully vaccinated.

Hospitals have been overwhelmed. Last October, health authorities organised a mass burial of 253 bodies, to relieve pressure on the Port Moresby General Hospital morgue, where bodies were stacked on top of each other as COVID-19 cases surged. Now, the country has begun grappling with a tuberculosis epidemic.

Tens of thousands of workers, estimated as high as 25 percent of the workforce, have meanwhile lost their jobs. Meagre government relief measures such as tax deferrals and loan repayment holidays have been woefully insufficient. According to UN figures, 39 percent of the people live below the poverty line of $US1.90 a day.

There is growing resistance in the working class. In March 2020, 600 nurses in Port Moresby held a sit-in over concerns about the lack of personal protective equipment. Four thousand nurses were then ready to strike over the lack of COVID preparedness, until the strike was called off by the union. More stoppages and sit-in protests took place late last year over nurses' pay and working conditions.

Marape has appealed for "peace and order" during the elections, declaring there will be "zero tolerance" for any violence. Highlighting the fears within the ruling establishment, Police Commissioner David Manning felt it necessary to warn all candidates and supporters to refrain from violence. "Do not bribe your voters. Do not threaten them," he said.

The election will be closely scrutinised by both Washington and Canberra. External interference by either or both powers to influence the outcome cannot be ruled out. Australia, the country's colonial master until 1975, has a long and dirty history in PNG defending the interests of its multinational mining companies and Canberra's geo-strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific.

The PNG ruling elite has maintained a precarious balancing act between economic and diplomatic relations with China on the one hand, and the demands of the imperialist powers on the other. PNG's involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative and Beijing's funding for infrastructure projects has increasingly alarmed Washington and Canberra.

The *Australian* on Saturday cited unnamed sources saying that China is offering "security support" to help PNG prevent political and ethnic violence during the election. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi is reportedly planning to visit PNG in June. The paper also noted that "Australia is providing about $30m in support towards the conduct of PNG's elections, while Australian Defence Force aircraft and about 140 personnel will assist with logistics and planning."

During his term of office, O'Neill turned towards Beijing for financial support, followed by Marape seeking to reduce reliance on Australian aid. Marape said regarding China that PNG is a "friend to all, enemy to none." His government has meanwhile maintained strong security ties with the US, including holding joint military exercises in each of the last two years.

PNG was pushed more sharply into focus in April when China and the Solomon Islands signed a security pact allowing for Chinese presence. US Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell was promptly dispatched to Honiara, to warn the Sogavare government Washington would "respond accordingly," if China were to establish any basing arrangements.

Underscoring Washington's wider intent to block any Chinese presence in the Pacific, the US delegation also visited Fiji and PNG and bluntly warned them against any similar treaties with China. The diplomatic intimidation included threats by then Australian Prime Minister Morrison, who said a Chinese base in the Solomons would be a "red line"—that is, a trigger for military intervention.

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