

Papua New Guinea election campaign amid escalating crises

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Campaigning for elections in Papua New Guinea (PNG), with just over two weeks to go, is revealing an escalating social and political crisis. Polling in the Pacific's largest and most populous country is due to run from July 9 until July 22.

The last election in 2017 was widely discredited, having been 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. More than 200 people were killed in violent clashes.

A huge deployment of security forces is underway across the country, beginning with "hotspot areas" in the Highlands region at the centre of unrest in 2017. More than 5,000 personnel from the PNG Constabulary, Defence Force and Correctional Services, along with armoured vehicles, are being deployed across 22 provinces.

Prime Minister James Marape has appealed for "peace and order," declaring there will be "zero tolerance" for fresh violence. Police Commissioner David Manning also warned candidates and their supporters to refrain from violence. "Do not bribe your voters. Do not threaten them," he said.

The *National* reported on June 14 that election-related violence was "rising fast," with the death toll reaching 29. The latest clash between supporters of rival candidates saw two people shot, several critically injured and four vehicles torched. Sixteen more people died last Sunday when a truck overloaded with campaign supporters plunged down a cliff in the Western Highlands.

Simmering social tensions exploded in Wewak, East Sepik province on June 9, with seven people killed and several homes and properties razed during ethnic clashes. The fight started over a children's volleyball

game before raging for more than four hours. Local authorities blamed lack of sufficient government funds, as a result of the election campaign, for handicapping efforts to contain the situation.

Several incidents have been directed against election officials. In an apparent protest over the handling of the Mt Hagen returning officer's post, oil was deliberately spilled on the tarmac of the local airport. On June 5, a returning officer was shot and wounded in an ambush near his home in Enga province.

The sharp political tensions highlight the vast gulf that separates the poverty-stricken PNG masses from the country's corrupt and venal political elite. Trust in the government has disintegrated following decades of social deprivation and growing inequality, buttressed by authoritarian military-police measures.

Energy Minister Saki Soloma was recently set upon by a group of his disgruntled supporters at a rally in a marketplace in the Eastern Highlands. The incident was initially incorrectly reported, including by Soloma, as an attack by supporters of a rival candidate. The local police commander subsequently told Radio NZ the minister was "at the centre" of a melee that resulted in four vehicles burned by his own people and during which he had to be rescued by police.

The Pacific News Service reported this week that the Common Roll for the election is incomplete. The names of possibly more than a million voters are missing because of an update of the roll. Electoral Commissioner Simon Sinai maintains more than six million voters remain eligible, but it is still not known which roll will be used.

A total of 3,499 candidates is standing, motivated by potential access to money or favours. The election takes place amid a steep loss of income during the pandemic and associated lockdowns, protests against the vaccine-

for-jobs mandate and runaway inflation. At least 10,000 jobs were lost during the pandemic, with formal employment still not recovered.

PNG is one of the world's most impoverished countries. Marape's Pangu Party has presided over an escalating economic and social disaster, greatly intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. The government ditched national pandemic lockdowns in mid-2020 and all but abandoned testing for the virus. Just 3 percent of the population has been inoculated. The fragile health system is facing collapse, its inadequate working conditions and low pay leading to repeated protests and strikes by nurses.

Marape's main challenger, former prime minister Peter O'Neill, told one rally his People's National Congress Party (PNC) is ready to return and "remove thieves, liars and false prophets that have mismanaged and critically run the economy of the country."

The description perfectly fits O'Neill himself. Forced from office in 2019 while facing corruption charges, he remains deeply unpopular. O'Neill's government from 2011 oversaw a steep rise in government debt to 40 percent of GDP following the collapse of global mineral and gas prices. He is now campaigning on his record of using the loans for "infrastructure" development.

Escalating geo-strategic tensions between the US and its local allies, Australia and New Zealand, on the one hand, and China on the other, are significantly impacting the campaign. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi arrived in Port Moresby this month, towards the end of his eight-nation tour of the Pacific. Wang struck a series of bilateral deals on infrastructure, fisheries, trade and police equipment across the region.

Beijing is facing the mounting threat of war as the US Biden administration seeks to prevent any challenge to its global dominance. Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese accused China of seeking to increase its influence "in the region of the world where Australia has been the security partner of choice since the Second World War."

O'Neill attacked Wang's PNG visit, declaring "the election timetable should be preserved without international high-level visits." Marape warned the opposition not to "play politics" with the visit, noting China is a major trade partner and the biggest buyer of the nation's gas exports.

Wang signed three agreements promoting investment in Green Development, COVID-19 aid and an anti-narcotics centre. The two countries also agreed to expand cooperation in the areas of trade and investment. China has also reportedly offered "security support" to PNG during the poll.

In office, O'Neill had turned towards Beijing for financial support, followed by Marape seeking to reduce reliance on Australian aid. O'Neill, reflecting Australian and US interests, is now promising to nullify the new agreements, claiming they signify that "we have sold our own country to those who come visiting under suspicious circumstances."

Last week 130 Australian Defence Force troops arrived in the country. The new Australian Labor government announced the deployment shortly after winning the May election as it scrambled to re-assert Australia's regional position in the wake of Wang's tour. Dubbed Operation KIMBA, it will include air force, army and personnel to help with logistics and planning, including air lifts distributing and collecting votes.

Emphasis is being given to cyber security. Michael Shoebridge, from the pro-Washington Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), said this was hugely important to protect "the integrity of PNG's election," because of "the reach into our region by China" which, he claimed, has "a history of cyber interference, including hacking and collection through technical and digital means."

In fact, Australia, PNG's colonial master until 1975, has its own long and ignoble history of interference in the Pacific, particularly in PNG, up to and including regime change operations, defending the interests of its multinational mining companies and its own geo-strategic interests.



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