

Anger erupts in chaotic, drawn-out Papua New Guinea elections

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Polling in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) elections began on July 4 after a six-week campaign. The elections run until 22 July, with areas voting on different days and results due by 29 July. A total of 3,499 candidates, many motivated by potential access to money or favours, and 25 political parties are contesting 118 seats and the governorships of 22 provinces.

As the polls opened, the *Post Courier* declared that the 2022 election will be “a game changer for a country that has seen and experienced more upheavals in the past five years than any other time in its 47 years of independence.”

Within days, however, chaotic scenes were reported in the Highlands region where angry voters in East Sepik and Hela destroyed ballot boxes and set fire to hundreds of ballot papers after discovering their names were not on the Common Roll.

Despite assurance by Electoral Commissioner Simon Sinai that more than five million voters could cast ballots, thousands have been turned away because their names were missing. By one estimate as many as 1 million people are not on the roll. In some locations there are not enough ballot papers and voting in the capital, Port Moresby, has been delayed several times.

Prime Minister James Marape has repeatedly appealed for “peace and calm.” The last election in 2017 was widely discredited, mired in bribery and corruption, ballot rigging and the wholesale omission of names from the roll. Protests erupted over accusations that vote counting was hijacked. More than 200 people were killed in violent clashes.

Some 8,000 security personnel, plus 140 Australian Defence Force (ADF) troops, have been despatched across the country. Police Commissioner David Manning said the security forces and police will be “heavily engaged” in election operations. In a revealing comment, he also warned them not to allow themselves to be

“coerced, bribed, forced or threatened to act in the manner that brings the whole security operation into disrepute.”

Institute of National Affairs director Paul Barker told the *National* that electoral rolls had not been updated in the five years since 2017, when they were also not rigorously updated. Barker also alleged that police had intercepted containers with tampered papers, highlighting the immense “temptation and readiness” to defraud the election.

The past week has seen an escalation of the violence and mayhem. The *Post Courier* reported on July 11; “People are being killed, properties are being destroyed and the guns are coming out in huge numbers to intimidate voters. There have been killings, fighting, deferral of polling, resignations and detainment of high-profile persons for been [sic] in possession of huge amount[s] of cash.” It concluded that the election was already the “worst ever experienced.”

In the latest eruption of violence last Thursday, the Yumbilyam High School in Enga province was set on fire when frustrations boiled over after all the local ballot boxes were hijacked.

The explosive 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 ruling elite has disintegrated following decades of social deprivation and growing inequality, buttressed by authoritarian military-police measures.

The crisis has been exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Tens of thousands of workers, as high as 25 percent of the workforce, have lost their jobs. Meagre government relief measures such as tax deferrals and loan repayment holidays were woefully insufficient. According to UN figures, 39 percent of the people live below the poverty line of \$US1.90 a day.

To date, PNG has officially recorded 44,752 COVID cases and 662 deaths, but with testing all but abandoned

the figures are meaningless. Less than 4 percent of the population has been vaccinated. The fragile health system is facing collapse, its inadequate conditions and low pay leading to repeated protests and strikes by nurses.

One young mother from Port Moresby told the Australian Broadcasting Commission about the election: “We want services, the main one is water in our homes, we live in a settlement and there is no water,” she said. “The other issue is our youths, there are a lot of young people in the settlement, they don’t have jobs or good schools.”

Despite having significant natural resources, PNG is among the poorest countries in the world. All the parties blame each other for the economic crisis. The debt to GDP ratio increased from 19 percent of GDP in 2012 to 40 percent in 2019 under Marape’s predecessor Peter O’Neill, then to 52 percent of GDP in 2021 under Marape. Marape has sought concessional loans, including from Australia, Japan and China, to help the government repay its debts and finance infrastructure.

In November 2020, the Marape-led coalition almost collapsed when dozens of MPs, including cabinet ministers, defected to the opposition. Marape passed his 2021 budget in an emergency parliamentary session with the opposition absent—a move the Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional. He then adjourned parliament for four months to avoid a vote of no confidence, ensuring that he could not, under the rules, be removed before the current election.

O’Neill, who was himself deposed in 2019 amid corruption allegations, is Marape’s main challenger. Marape’s Pangu Party is contesting more than 80 seats, while O’Neill’s People’s National Congress (PNC) more than 90. Either party will only form government by cobbling together a coalition with several minor parties and independents, which produces intense factionalising, horse-trading and near permanent instability.

The burning issues facing the working class and rural poor were totally ignored during the campaign. Marape ran on his record, saying that O’Neill left the economy “bleeding and struggling.” On taking office, he had resorted to nationalist demagoguery proclaiming he would “take back PNG” through “regime shifts” in the resource industry, which he falsely claimed would “bring more wealth to the people” and reduce dependence on Australian aid.

O’Neill in turn defended his own economic record, while making a suite of empty promises policies, running the gamut from political stability to public services

reform, job creation to law and order, and investing in infrastructure.

As prime minister O’Neill was responsible for brutal authoritarian measures aimed at suppressing social discontent. In 2016, police opened fire on student protesters demanding he step down and face fraud charges. Opposition intensified following the 2017 election, which O’Neill only narrowly won. Police and military units were dispatched to the Highlands to crack down on subsequent violence. In 2020, after leaving office, O’Neill was charged with misappropriation, abuse of office and official corruption.

The election is being closely watched by the US, Australia and China, after China’s foreign minister, Wang Yi, visited early in June and signed several deals covering investment in Green Development, COVID-19 aid and an anti-narcotics centre. O’Neill has promised to cancel the agreements should he win office.

Marape took part in the just completed Pacific Islands Forum which was addressed remotely by US Vice President Kamala Harris. She announced a major escalation of US involvement in the Pacific, aimed at ramping up the strategic, economic and military encirclement against China.

China is a significant trading partner and the biggest destination for PNG’s exports. Australia, however, the country’s colonial ruler until 1975, is PNG’s immediate geo-strategic “security” overseer, with members of the Australian Federal Police and the ADF based in the country full-time.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is expected to visit PNG immediately after the new government is formed. While Albanese was at the Madrid NATO summit, further committing to the US-led confrontations with Russia and China, his Foreign Minister Penny Wong toured the Asia-Pacific region enforcing Washington’s anti-China agenda.

Canberra is determined to maintain its dominant geo-strategic position in PNG and, whatever the election outcome, significant pressure will be applied to the incoming administration in the Pacific’s largest country.



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