

Papua New Guinea's Governor-General tries to avert failure of election

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Papua New Guinea's Governor-General, Sir Bob Dadae, last week intervened to prevent the failure of the country's national election. Widely disrupted polling and violence have marred the vote in the drawn-out election. Dadae allowed an extra two weeks until August 12 to allow vote counting to be completed.

There had been warnings that a constitutional crisis could result if the election writs were not all handed in by the due date, July 29. Dadae declared he would allow the extra time on the recommendation of Electoral Commissioner Simon Sinai.

Only 20 writs from 118 electorates had been declared by the official deadline. On Friday the *Post Courier* cited former Chief Justice Arnold Armet, who said there were "no Constitutional provisions for any extension of writs." The newspaper noted there was no formal Gazette notice legalising the extension of the writs, which it warned would portend "a troubling future."

Highlighting the extremely unstable situation, incumbent Prime Minister James Marape called a press briefing late Friday to announce the writs would now be due on August 5, with parliament returning on August 9. A Gazette notice was posted accordingly. Peter O'Neill, the main opposition leader declared: "I think the whole [electoral] system has collapsed," setting the stage for ongoing legal wrangling over the results.

The poll has been mired in bribery and corruption, ballot rigging and omission of names from the Common Roll. In one high-profile case, the Electoral Commission rejected the declaration of Don Polye as winner of the Kandep Open seat and charged the returning officer with breaching directives concerning the "integrity" of ballot boxes. Polye is leader of the opposition Triumph Heritage Empowerment Party.

In a desperate bid to stem popular distrust, Marape was forced last week to issue a statement that his Pangu Pati was "not rigging" the process. None of the 25 parties and

3,499 candidates, however, has any intention of addressing the social gulf that separates the political elite from the masses, a fact that is not lost on ordinary people.

The governor-general's intervention came after escalating violence erupted in the capital, Port Moresby, on July 24. Rival supporters wielding bush knives turned the streets into what the *National* described as "a battlefield" when one group chased and slashed people indiscriminately as votes were being tallied for the Moresby East electorate.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported that the rampage started with a dispute over the counting of two ballot boxes, quickly escalating into a full-blown confrontation. Supporters had been camping outside counting centres with weapons, including knives and stones, hidden in their camp sites. Some electoral officials had been escorted in by police amid scrutineer complaints about incorrect tallying of votes. Four officials were last week charged with inflating the tally.

According to the ABC, the attack and violent incidents on subsequent days "fed fear and tension in the city," and forced the capital into a near lockdown. Troops with armoured vehicles were deployed to patrol the streets and the count was suspended.

While the violence in Port Moresby provoked particular alarm, it was only the latest outrage to hit the chaotic election. A major source of popular frustration is the incomplete election rolls, which have not been updated since the last election in 2017. Within days of the polls opening, angry voters in East Sepik and Hela districts in the Highlands destroyed ballot boxes and set fire to ballot papers after discovering their names were missing.

A Commonwealth Observer Group monitoring the election reported that in some areas as many as half of those eligible to vote were not on the register. By one estimate, 1 million out of a potential voting population of 6 million have been affected.

Competing candidates are accused of inciting their supporters to try to influence outcomes. Dozens of attacks have taken place with election-related deaths officially reaching 49 since May 20.

The first occurred in early May in Western Highlands, when an election officer was shot. The incident followed a delay in the publication of a list of appointed election officers. False lists were then being circulated, prompting violence between rival candidates over rumoured appointments.

Throughout June and July, most violence occurred in the Highlands. In one incident four men were killed and three critically injured when they were ambushed and shot execution-style in Nebilyer, Western Highlands. The men were allegedly moving illegal ballot boxes when they encountered a roadblock and were gunned down by vigilantes with high-powered firearms.

In another tragedy, 25 people were killed in a massacre in Enga Province on 20 July, near the site of the currently idled Porgera gold mine. A police commander told the *Post Courier* the slaughter appeared to be the work of a “deranged mob” who had carried out an hour of “wanton destruction.”

Soldiers who had been stationed in the area reportedly left Porgera after polling finished, when the killings then erupted. A state of emergency has since been declared, with 150 police and army personnel in the township.

Authorities denied that the killings were directly linked to the elections but were part of a tribal battle that has been raging over a land dispute, causing 70 deaths. While tribal fighting is a regular occurrence in the remote Highlands, heightened social tensions surrounding elections inevitably intensify popular anger and frustration. The 2017 poll saw more than 200 people killed in clashes.

The lack of security has prevailed despite 8,000 police and army personnel, including 140 Australian Defence Force troops, being dispatched across the country, prompting calls from some quarters for harsher crackdowns. PNG Think Tank Group spokesman Samson Komati said that a force of anything less than 20,000 is “insufficient to contain any form of strategic violence.”

In fact, following decades of social deprivation and growing inequality, buttressed by authoritarian military-police measures, trust in the entire parliamentary system has disintegrated. The unbridgeable gulf that separates the poverty-stricken PNG masses from the country’s corrupt and venal political establishment has seen a series of strikes and protests by nurses, doctors and students in

recent years.

The tiny ruling elite reaps enormous personal wealth through services rendered to giant transnational corporations. Successive governments have conducted decades-long attacks on living standards and basic rights. Tax cuts for the wealthy and private companies have accompanied harsh labour market deregulation and cuts to the minimum wage.

PNG remains among the poorest countries in the world. Some 85 percent of people live in rural areas, many on the margins of the modern economy, eking out an existence on semi-subsistence agriculture. Most have only limited or non-existent health care, education, and other social services and infrastructure amid widespread social distress. COVID-19 has caused further devastation, with escalating unemployment, inadequate social support and a disintegrating health system.

Behind the explosive situation is the legacy of economic backwardness produced by decades of colonial rule and the continued subordination of PNG’s economy to the interests of the banks and transnational corporations. Culpability lies with the former colonial power Australia which, since ceding nominal independence in 1975, has used its position to protect its business and geo-strategic interests while doing nothing to address the plight of the PNG masses.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who is due to visit PNG in September, has so far remained silent on the chaos surrounding the election. Whatever the outcome, Canberra’s central concern is to maintain its hegemony over the country, and to push back against China’s growing economic and diplomatic influence.



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