

Incumbent PM declares victory in turbulent Papua New Guinea election

John Braddock
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On Tuesday, the James Marape-led Pangu Pati was invited by the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Governor-General Sir Bob Dadae to form the country's next government. Marape was unanimously re-elected unopposed as Prime Minister by MPs present in the first sitting of the new parliament.

The announcement came in the wake of an election plagued by violence, fraud allegations and large numbers of voters missing from the electoral roll. As parliament met there were still 14 seats to be declared in the 118-seat house. Voting began on July 4 and ended on July 22, but counting was extended until August 5 by Dadae because of writs still outstanding. The deadline was extended again for a third time until August 12.

Former Prime Minister and Peoples National Congress (PNC) leader Peter O'Neill unsuccessfully applied to the Supreme Court to delay parliament's return until all electorates had finished counting.

Marape claimed victory last week, saying the Pangu Pati had the numbers to form a coalition giving it an "overwhelming mandate." The Pangu Pati, along with a string of coalition parties and independents, controls a total of about 80 seats.

The Pangu Pati has the most seats with 36, the main opposition PNC 14, United Resources Party (URP) 10, People First Party (PFP) 2, People's Progress Party (PPP) 1, United Labour Party (ULP) 3, Peoples Party 4, National Alliance Party 5. There are also several single-member parties and eight independents.

Marape told the *National* that the Pangu Pati had entered the election with "clear coalition partners" such as the URP and PPP and had not contested certain seats against them. "Hence, it is very easy for us now to stitch a coalition," he declared. Belden Namah, leader of the opposition Papua New Guinea Party and a

former deputy prime minister, was one prominent recruit.

Solicitor General Tauvasa Tanuvasa initially stated that the Electoral Commissioner had no power to extend the receipt of writs beyond August 5 and any not handed in by then would be declared as "failed." However, his comments have been ignored in the haste to install the new government. A series of court battles is expected.

The election will be widely viewed by the population as illegitimate. In a desperate bid to stem popular distrust, Marape was forced at one point to issue a statement that the Pangu Pati was "not rigging" the process. He said if Pangu was doing that it would have made a "clean sweep" of all 118 seats, including those lost by prominent party leaders such as John Simon in East Sepik.

His chief rival, O'Neill, told the media that "the rights of at least 3.8 million citizens and hundreds of candidates have been denied by the wilful actions of a few power-hungry men." Electoral roll problems meant "millions of our people have not voted," he said.

The three-week polling period saw widespread illegal ballots, accusations of bribery, weapons brandished to intimidate voters and even killings. The media have reported at least 50 election-related deaths, down from 204 documented in the 2017 election, but including several days of violence in the capital Port Moresby during which troops were deployed onto the streets.

In one area alone, Madang, 211 men were charged for fighting and disrupting the count. Police Commissioner David Manning described "ongoing investigations into some candidates who are believed to have been inciting their supporters to fight with opponents, and arrests will be made." He added there was potential for more confrontation as parliament sits and the court hears

disputes over the vote.

International election observers reported problems ranging from interference in counting by scrutineers and double voting, to incomplete electoral rolls, which had not been renewed since 2017. In some cases, up to half of the names of eligible voters were not on electoral rolls, a Commonwealth Observer Group said.

The Melanesian Spearhead Group, in another observer report, said the election's "many challenges" included unexplained delays of up to three days before counting started in some electorates, scrutineer interference and failure to check voter identity documents.

The new government is likely to be highly unstable. In 2019 Marape, who was then finance minister, took over the prime ministership after O'Neill resigned amid corruption charges. Marape has presided over an economic and social disaster, including the ongoing closure of the Porgera goldmine and alleged misuse of international funds for PNG's COVID response. Budget shortfalls resulted in government debt rising to 52 percent of GDP.

Marape's coalition almost collapsed in late 2020 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, Marape's main opponent, declined in the end to challenge for the prime ministership. "I encourage leaders who have been elected properly and who are genuinely interested in rescuing PNG from the economic and social chaos Marape has plunged the country into over the past three years, to consider putting their hand up for the top job," O'Neill declared.

The *Guardian* asked in one commentary whether "PNG's institutions have been so eroded that people feel they have no option but to take matters into their own hands." In fact, trust in the entire 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, lost their jobs. PNG remains one of the least vaccinated countries in the world, with just 3.4 percent of the eligible population partially vaccinated. Authorities have ceased vaccination operations in the capital Port Moresby due to lack of funding. The fragile health system is facing collapse, its inadequate conditions and low pay leading to repeated protests and strikes by nurses.

The political and business elite in Australia, PNG's colonial ruler until 1975, is increasingly concerned about the unstable situation in its northern neighbour. The Lowy Institute's *Interpreter* commented on August 4 that while Canberra had helped with planning, transport and ballots for the PNG election, its electoral support "was clearly inadequate to the task."

Canberra's primary concern is not the plight of the impoverished PNG peoples, but its own geo-strategic and business interests.

Pointing to the Solomon Islands' recent security pact with Beijing, the *Interpreter* declared that "PNG should be the centrepiece of Australia's renewed Pacific foreign policy." It highlighted "strategic infrastructure investments" such as the government-backed purchase of telecommunications company Digicel by Telstra, a ports upgrade program and the Coral Sea Cable as projects that will "enhance connectivity with PNG and contribute to regional security."

Amid the United States-led drive to war, Australia's chief aim is to maintain its hegemony over the country, and to push back against China's growing economic and diplomatic influence in the Pacific. This will undoubtedly be at the centre of Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's visit in September.



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