

Papua New Guinea foreign minister stands aside amid coronation travel furore

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Papua New Guinea's Foreign Minister Justin Tkatchenko declared on May 12 that he had "stood aside" from his position amid an escalating furore over the cost of the country's delegation to the coronation of King Charles III in London.

Tkatchenko sparked the controversy after his daughter Savannah, who had travelled with the delegation, posted a TikTok video boasting about her first-class plane journey and luxury shopping spree in Singapore. It prompted outrage with many respondents arguing that the public money should have been spent on basic services.

In an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Tkatchenko branded his daughter's critics as "primitive animals." He declared: "She's absolutely traumatised by these primitive animals... I call them primitive animals because they are." He continued: "Jealousy is a curse. And, you know, these people clearly show that they have got nothing to do in their lives other than to put down people that want to do something good for their country."

The comments provoked a public backlash, including protests by students who marched from the university campus to parliament in Port Moresby behind a large banner reading "We are not primitives!" "It is not just about the offensive comments," student Michael Pais told Radio NZ. "The primary reason is the manner in which money has been spent on this trip and the extravagance displayed whilst our people lack the most basic services."

Tkatchenko said he "stood aside" after consulting with Prime Minister James Marape, who would assume the portfolio. "I want to make sure the recent events do not interfere with the official visits and summits we are going to have with all the World Leaders in the coming weeks," he said.

Before a late cancellation on Wednesday, US President Biden, Indian Prime Minister Modi and leaders from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific were due in Port Moresby for a summit on May 22. It was to be the first visit by a sitting US president to a Pacific nation, taking place as Washington ramps up its diplomatic and strategic offensive against China. The US and PNG are close to signing a defence cooperation agreement potentially allowing American troops access to the nation's ports and airports.

According to the *PNG Post Courier*, a total of 6 million kina (\$US1,650,000) was used to attend the coronation in London as well as on local celebrations at a stadium in Port Moresby attended by a "handful of people" including Marape, British High Commissioner Keith Scott and embassy officials.

PNG's Government House official secretary Bill Toraso denied that the governor general's office had spent as much as 3 million kina on overseas travel but confirmed to Reuters 10 of its staff went to London plus 10 guests. Two foreign ministry officials also travelled with Tkatchenko. According to the *Post Courier*, PNG had been given only four tickets for the official coronation ceremony in Westminster Abbey.

Demands for Tkatchenko's resignation by the political establishment, including the parliamentary opposition parties and trade unions, were clearly aimed at quashing any social unrest provoked by the affair, particularly in the face of the looming international summit. Marape released a statement saying he too had been "offended" by the remarks, while asking the people to "accept" Tkatchenko's subsequent apology.

In fact, the contempt displayed by the minister for the broad population simply revealed too openly the attitude of the country's entire ruling stratum. At least one MP, Billy Joseph, came to Tkatchenko's defence,

calling for Papua New Guineans to “stop the deep hate and reverse discrimination” levelled against him.

Explosive political tensions have been generated over a long period by the vast gulf that separates the poverty-stricken PNG masses from the country’s corrupt and venal ruling class. Trust in the political establishment has disintegrated following decades of social deprivation and growing inequality, buttressed by authoritarian military-police measures.

The elections in 2017 and last year, in which Marape was installed, were both widely viewed as illegitimate. The electoral process was plagued by violence, fraud allegations and large numbers of voters missing from the electoral roll. Marape’s Pangu Pati, like previous administrations, now governs in a fragile three-party coalition, making for notorious instability, flagrant horse-trading and corruption.

Tkatchenko is a beneficiary of this political swamp. He has shifted his political allegiances whenever convenient and is currently a member of the Social Democratic Party in the coalition. Australian born, he is a naturalised citizen, a former television host and has significant business interests.

In the now infamous case of the “missing Maseratis,” as minister for the 2018 APEC summit in the Peter O’Neill-led government, Tkatchenko oversaw the purchase of 40 high-end Maseratis and four Bentley cars, costing \$US5.6 million.

Meant to impress visiting APEC dignitaries, the luxury cars were never used. Protests and strikes erupted over the extravagant waste of public money. Queried about whether the vehicles would be sold to recover the money, Tkatchenko famously promised they would “sell like hot cakes.” According to police, however, they remain locked away in an old shed on the capital’s main wharf.

Many took to social media to focus on the extreme social inequality and deprivation that prevails. On Twitter, Maninhare Grant highlighted the near collapse of the health system with a photo of the country’s second largest hospital with a queue of new mothers forced into the corridor after delivering their babies. Another person posted a photo of Tkatchenko’s upmarket apartment contrasted with the wooden shanties in which his constituents live in an area of Port Moresby rife with homelessness.

Despite its significant natural resources PNG, an

Australian colony until 1975, is among the poorest countries in the world. According to UN figures, 39 percent of the people live below the poverty line of \$US1.90 a day. During the COVID pandemic tens of thousands of workers, estimated as high as 25 percent of the workforce, lost their jobs. Meagre government relief measures such as tax deferrals and loan repayment holidays have been woefully insufficient. The fragile health system with inadequate working conditions and low pay has seen repeated protests and strikes by nurses.

Among deepening popular discontent, the Marape government is turning to more repressive measures. Last month, a curfew was imposed in the West New Britain province and extra police mobilised to quell unrest over the shooting dead of 16 prisoners trying to escape from Lakiemata prison. Seven out of the 24 escapees, aged between 22 and 40, were on remand.

In other authoritarian moves, forthcoming amendments to media laws threaten to mirror the harsh restrictions that applied until recently in Fiji. The new law aims “to outline the objectives and strategies for the use of media as a tool for development,” but less than two weeks were provided for submissions. The law has been described by media freedom advocates as “the thin edge of the web of state control.”

As for Tkatchenko, it is likely that Marape will not take long to express his forgiveness by reinstating the unpopular minister, either in his previous role or in another high-profile position—a move required to keep his unstable coalition government intact.



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