

Papua New Guinea government intensifies emergency crackdown

John Braddock
21 January 2024

Last week, following the imposition of a State of Emergency in Papua New Guinea's (PNG) capital, Port Moresby, in response to widespread rioting and looting, the government threatened a complete shutdown of social media.

For 24 hours beginning January 10, simmering social discontent driven by escalating living costs, erupted into chaos in Port Moresby and other centres after police and armed services personnel walked out and protested over persistent shortages in their pay. Buildings and shops were looted and torched, and 22 deaths resulted. Calls for a nationwide strike were also raised.

With troops and armoured vehicles deployed in the streets of the capital, Prime Minister James Marape on Friday imposed a two-week State of Emergency. It contained draconian measures, including the “absolute right” of searches of private homes, property, vehicles and phones by government agents.

On January 16, ICT and Telecommunications Minister Timothy Masiu, a former journalist, declared the government would not hesitate to shut down social media sites and apps if there was “continuous abuse” of social media “spreading fake news, misinformation and disinformation.”

Masiu claimed there was a “sharp spike” in social media activity spreading “false information” connected with the destruction of properties and deaths during the previous week's events, which the media has now termed “Black Wednesday.”

The police cybercrime unit and other agencies have been instructed to strengthen monitoring and begin investigations with a view to prosecutions. Spreading “false information or confidential government information, opinions that are wrong...or hearsay and defamatory” will be subject to legal action. If people fail to adhere, Masiu declared, they will face a complete shutdown of social media for the remainder of the 14-day

State of Emergency.

The extraordinary powers granted under the emergency legislation allows the government to require telcos and other licensees who provide ICT services to restrict or delay certain communications and disclose the content of communications to the minister. The threatened activation of these measures has raised concerns by NGOs, human rights groups and others over the likely infringement of constitutional rights and privacy.

Police have meanwhile warned people holding looted items to return them or face the “consequences.” Emergency Controller and acting Police Commissioner Donald Yamasombi said that after a narrow “grace period” police would enter the homes of “people suspected of keeping stolen properties.”

The threat raises the likelihood of police searches of hundreds of homes throughout the capital without warrants, evidence or due process and followed by swift prosecutions. It portends an escalating assault on basic legal rights which will only exacerbate social discontent and resentment of the authorities.

Tensions have erupted among the political elite over the apportioning of blame. The pay deductions which triggered the protests amounted to between \$US26-80 per fortnight—about half the take-home salary for some public servants. The government claimed the issue was caused by a “glitch” in the payroll system which would be fixed—a claim nobody believes.

In order to deflect responsibility, Marape has made unsubstantiated assertions that the riots were organised, hinting at the involvement of opposition politicians. Pending a formal inquiry, Police Commissioner David Manning and senior bureaucrats in the finance and treasury departments have been suspended.

Amid government claims that sections of the police facilitated the rioting, Yamasombi last week sacked Assistant Commissioner Anthony Wagambie and warned

police to perform their duty “without fear or favour.” Many retailers reacted to the news by shutting their shops fearing repeated disorder.

The explosive tensions highlight the vast gulf that separates the poverty-stricken PNG masses from the country’s corrupt and venal political establishment. Trust in the entire ruling elite has disintegrated following decades of social deprivation buttressed by authoritarian military-police measures.

The seething social discontent that resulted in the riots is the product of widespread poverty, inequality, frustration and alienation. Elections, including the one in 2022 that installed Marape, have been mired in violence and corruption, with thousands of voters disenfranchised, and are widely regarded as illegitimate.

Port Moresby is at the centre of an escalating social crisis. The city has a large population of unemployed, many young and living in impoverished shanty settlements. They have moved from the provinces seeking refuge from rampant poverty and violence. National Capital District Governor Powes Parkop is demanding a Vagrancy Act to push people who he denounces as “not fit and proper” out of the capital.

PNG, an Australian colony until its nominal independence in 1975, is rich in natural resources but remains one of the world’s most unequal countries. Conditions for the working class and rural masses are dire and getting worse. According to UNICEF, of the 10.3 million population, 40 percent live below the extreme poverty line and 41 percent of children live in poverty.

The cost-of-living crisis comes on top of a decade of deteriorating living conditions. Inflation averaging 5 percent per year for 10 years has degraded the value of take-home pay. Cost of living adjustments for public servants have typically been around 3 percent.

The minimum wage has not been significantly increased since 2013 and is only worth half what it was. The *Post Courier* last December declared the minimum wage to be “obsolete.” Since 2016 it has been 3.50 PNG Kina (\$US0.94) per hour—a can of tinned fish currently costs K5.90. “It is a death trap for PNG families who cannot feed, clothe and manage their lives on K280 (\$US75) per fortnight,” the newspaper declared.

Unemployment is skyrocketing. The state employs about 700,000 people and the formal private sector 260,000—the latter declining from 305,000 in 2013. The COVID pandemic, allowed to run unchecked by the government, exacerbated the situation. The Seekjob website, which has 110,000 visits per month, recently

reported 86,262 people registered for just 213 jobs advertised. PNG has no social “safety net” such as unemployment insurance, welfare, Medicare or old age schemes.

An arrogant, corrupt and wealthy elite meanwhile flaunts its privileges. In October 2018 thousands joined a one-day strike to protest the purchase of a fleet of luxury cars for use during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. The government imported 40 high-end Maseratis, costing up to \$350,000 each and three luxury Bentleys to ferry dignitaries during the conference. The vehicles are currently rumoured to be languishing in a warehouse at the port.

The damages bill from Black Wednesday is K1.2 billion (\$US323.5 million) as estimated by the PNG Business Council to cover the costs of restocking and rebuilding. This does not include such items as wage support for staff who will be without work for long periods. The government is offering only K300 million (\$US81 million).

The political fallout continues, including calls for a vote of no confidence against Marape, who has responded with a major cabinet reshuffle. Seven MPs in Marape’s government have resigned. Belden Namah, a senior MP and former captain in the PNG Defence Force is the latest, his resignation another blow to the government.

Washington and Canberra are watching closely. In a threatening editorial on January 12, Murdoch’s *Australian* called the riots a “tragic lapse” for PNG and “a concern for regional security more broadly.” With PNG increasingly on the front line of preparations for war with China, an imperialist intervention is not out of the question. The US and Australia have both signed far-reaching “security” agreements with PNG in the past year giving sweeping access for their police and armed forces.



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