

SEEKING OPTIMISM: WESTMINSTER IN PNG

There are grounds for optimism when considering Papua New Guinea's political system, argues **Sean Jacobs**

Papua New Guinea's recent constitutional and political crises have given fresh currency to the view that its institutions of state are unsuitable for the country's needs. PNG's Constitution was made following widespread public consultations around the country in the lead-up to independence. The Constitution is frequently described as 'home grown.' Seen as a 'poor fit' with its culturally complex society, PNG's Westminster legacy has met constant criticism in a wide variety of circles since independence.

Little has been said, however, about the value of PNG's Westminster tradition in applying stability, acting as a federal national for managing disagreements, and harnessing the collective opinion of society through eight unbroken national elections—a rare feat among post-colonial states. Although recent and past events hardly inspire faith in state performance, one can at least find a degree of optimism in PNG's core political institutions. Paired with an economically positive future, the country may perhaps be in a better position to meet current and future challenges than is sometimes broadcast.

Given PNG's bumpy post-independence ride since 1975, this is an understandably ambitious claim. Paralysing votes of no confidence in the national parliament, compounded by seemingly endless ministerial reshuffles, made for brittle governments throughout the 1980s and 1990s. It was not until 2007 that a government, led by Sir Michael Somare, completed a full five-year post-independence term in office.¹ Chaotic politics have, of course, spelled misfortune for many of PNG's citizens. Even

the most disruptive events in PNG's short history—the decade-long Bougainville Crisis and the 1997 Sandline Affair—have simply been the outer crust of an underlying state shortfall to deliver services, weed out corruption, and stay on top of crime.

Uptake of parliamentary process

Amid the turbulence, however, there are a number of points to keep in mind. First is PNG's record of parliamentary democracy. In textbook Westminster form, PNG's unicameral parliament has, despite some extremely destabilising ordeals, maintained its status as the default forum for selecting the nation's leaders and hosting political compromise. Although there will always be discussion on whether PNG was ready for democracy, it is hard not to be struck by the rapid uptake of parliamentary process and debate in the early years of independence. Somare's 1975 autobiography, *Sana*, for example, provides a rare but insightful account of the initial heated exchanges to take place during PNG's first parliamentary sittings.²



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Visceral disagreements have thus featured heavily in PNG politics over the last three decades but never at the expense of nationwide violence. A military coup or authoritarian government has, despite predictions and some close calls, consistently failed to happen. Although this is a seemingly low watermark from which to measure progress, it is nonetheless important, given that so many developing democracies have descended into violence and civil war following self-government.

Unlike some experiences in post-colonial Africa, PNG's earliest statesmen were not military men. In the lead up to independence, the Constitutional Planning Committee (CPC) was dominated by the 'big man'—PNG shorthand for a community leader—but not the 'strong man' in the authoritarian sense. Figures like Somare, for example, who chaired the CPC, and his deputy, John Momis, a priest and member of parliament (MP), had held diverse non-military positions before election.

Acknowledgement for the lack of large-scale conflict must also be directed towards PNG's estimated thousand-plus cultural groups, which act as a brake on one group dominating the political landscape. Some political scientists propose that it is highly unlikely that a warlord such as Liberia's Charles Taylor or Somalia's Mohamed Aidid would emerge in PNG, simply because there is no one group strong enough to challenge the state.³ Even Francis Ona, the late rebel leader of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, could never galvanise a movement beyond the province of Bougainville.

Although cultural fragmentation clearly frustrates political reform by undermining consensus, it has been beneficial for PNG in this narrow, and maybe unintentional, regard. A national parliament, when looked at broadly, has provided a solid foundation for PNG's national leaders, while also serving as a 'shock absorber' for the maze of cultural groups to coalesce and troubleshoot, giving some local endorsement to Winston Churchill's adage that 'to jaw jaw is always better than to war war.' There is thus strong validity to former PNG Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan's recent comments that if

the political chaos of 2011–12 had taken place anywhere else, there would have been widespread looting, excessive disruption, and full-state collapse.⁴

Efficient elections

A second point to keep in mind about PNG is its elections. In July 2012, PNG held its eighth consistent post-independence election, placing it in a unique category among developing states. The country is even rarer in the sense it has changed its voting system many times, from optional preferential voting to first-past-the-post (in 1975) and a limited preferential system (in 2001).⁵

A key observation of elections in PNG is that it is one of the few times that the state operates with a high degree of efficiency, especially when basic services are next to non-existent in nearly all parts of the country. Leaders have much at stake during the electoral process as it involves the servicing of patronage networks, favours and deal-making. The job of a PNG politician is not long term. At elections, many MPs lose their seat—not necessarily a bad outcome for raw accountability. Cyclical patronage politics, however, carries obvious downsides. As illustrated in well-developed democracies, maximising fuller returns on a Westminster system clearly requires movement beyond patrimonial relationships and personalised politics.

Heterogeneous societies such as PNG also carry obvious pressures to carve out additional electoral boundaries and seats to accommodate the multitude of cultural groups. PNG's electoral fixtures, however, have remained stubbornly rigid. It was not until recently, for example, that two seats were added to the nation's 111-seat parliament, prompted by the creation of two more provinces.

Localised irregularities at the ballot box—vote-rigging, voter intimidation, and so forth—expose further shortcomings of PNG's elections, yet the broad integrity of the system remains largely intact. Votes are cast, and leaders are elected and not prescribed. Recent elections suggest some element of learning from previous electoral disruptions. As displayed in the 2012 elections,

administrative problems such as public safety can be easily improved through additional security measures.

An independent media

The most effective check on government is said to be an independent media. Here, PNG scores well. Every day, PNG's national newspapers—*The Post Courier* and *The National*—feed a strong appetite for political awareness, while many more people have access to radio.

Although concerns were triggered in 2011 over what appeared to be more rigid media censorship laws, there was more progress than regression. In 1984, for example, veteran correspondent Sean Dorney was expelled from PNG for events cascading from an interview with West Papua activist James Nyaro—a laughable sanction today.⁶ Despite the at-times sharp rhetoric, PNG's leaders do not habitually expel journalists or individuals from the country.

Although the Westminster system cannot claim credit for a free media, it is certainly enhanced by one. The recent liberalisation of PNG's telecommunications market, supplemented by the growth in social media, will make it more difficult in future years to muzzle the media or free speech.

An independent judiciary

Judicial independence, another area of state accountability, has taken a severe lashing in recent years. Most emblematic is the recent saga of two prime ministers and two defence commanders, which had its direct origins, at least administratively, in the executive refusal of a judicial ruling.

Underneath the turbulence, however, exists a coordinated web of legal scaffolding that includes an ombudsman commission, office of the auditor-general, and a public accounts committee to offer some degree of scrutiny to the affairs of the state. The findings of these institutions do not always gather dust. In the 1980s, for example, PNG's auditor-general played a crucial role in revealing financial irregularities in local and provincial government—decent work that helped expose

the shortcomings of decentralisation in a state like PNG.⁷ Although state-level corruption is clearly rife, it would be much worse if PNG employed no such institutions.

Fiscal strength

Another area to consider is the state's broad fiscal performance. Recent budgets, for example, have been characterised by record-breaking surpluses. Even in the 1980s—the decade of neoliberalisation—PNG's governments introduced pro-market measures such as retreating from unproductive state assets and relaxing labour laws to stoke productivity.⁸

PNG's growing fiscal strength, however, is merely a symptom of its economy, which has been held up for some time by resources, agriculture and associated commercial activity. Many are surprised to find that PNG's rate of growth now trends above India's (6.25%) and just below China's (8.25%), elevating the country's economy to one of the fastest growing in the world.⁹ Although estimates show that less than 5% of the population earn a wage in the formal economy, it is hard to envisage greater opportunities emanating from an alternatively low-growth or non-dynamic economy.¹⁰

PNG's primary economic concern may then perhaps be too much growth as opposed to a lack thereof. Inflation, driven partly by high wages and a shortage of secure land, will continue to test the autonomy and responsiveness of the Bank of Papua New Guinea (PNG's Reserve Bank), which is staffed by a high number of well-trained and technically competent personnel. Alongside rapid population growth, inflation has the capacity to undercut gains in growth, and as a 'hidden tax,' reduce the value of the small amounts of kina that most Papua New Guineans have at their disposal.

In addition to high crime rates and tangled politics, another current item of news from PNG is the colossal 30-year US \$15 billion Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) Project, which is expected to fundamentally alter the country's economic trajectory.

In response to this uptick in projected growth, steps are being taken to park associated proceeds into a number of sovereign wealth

funds. Similar moves have, of course, taken place before in the form of the 1980s Mineral Resources Stabilisation Fund, which eventually came under severe stress due to poor returns, badly synchronised fiscal policy, corruption, and the evaporation of Bougainville's essential copper revenues.¹¹ How the LNG Project will play out for PNG in fiscal, economic and social terms is to be seen, yet ones hopes previous mistakes are not repeated.

Westminster institutions

While PNG has undergone tremendous change since independence, discussion in many circles still lingers on whether the lateral transfer of Westminster institutions into PNG was a good idea. The difficulty is these discussions do not offer any operative solutions to the country's problems.

Demographics are also exposing the slim value in endlessly criticising PNG's Westminster legacy. The average age of a Papua New Guinean in 2012 is 21, implying that most of the population have grown up in a Westminster state that includes a national parliament supplemented by a judicial system, a Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary, and a host of other sovereign constitutional offices and arrangements. Clearly, one of the many challenges for this generation is to not wipe out the institutions and start again—as some may be tempted—but to work within the set framework of the state to improve its functions. The democratic tools exist.

PNG can find a degree of comfort in the observation that post-colonial states that try to shed their Westminster legacies do not fare well. Zimbabwe, for example, got rid of its Westminster system in 1987 and the results, when combined with other factors, are not appealing. In the 1970s, the Solomon Islands tried a quieter and less brazen experiment in redirecting its Westminster system towards a governing council that dispersed executive functions across a series of committees. Following criticisms of secrecy and a lack of leadership, they reverted to a Westminster system of a chief minister and council of ministers after only four years.¹²

Conclusion

Although we should take great care in stating that the Westminster system has benefitted PNG, we must take equal caution in dismissing it wholesale. Chaotic politics have been a feature of PNG since independence, yet the contortions have taken place within its institutions—a good outcome when considering the list of undesirable alternatives. Alongside some surprising characteristics, from economic growth to a free press, PNG does have certain grounds for optimism amid its many troubles. While PNG is commonly known as 'the land of the unexpected,' it can expect to have its Westminster system for some time—not necessarily a bad characteristic—lurching forward.

Endnotes

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- 6 Sean Dorney, *Papua New Guinea: People, Politics and History Since 1975* (Sydney: Random House, 1990), 2.
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- 11 Mekere Morauta, 'Managing the Boom in Mineral Revenue in Papua New Guinea,' *East Asia Forum* (2 January 2012).
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