

# The dynamics of Papua New Guinea's democracy: an essay

Bill Standish

Visiting Fellow, College of Arts and Social Sciences, The Australian National University

Some observers have taken the frenetic participation by Papua New Guinea's peoples in national elections and the country's constitutional and smooth changes of prime ministers and transfers of governments to mean that the country has a robust and viable democracy.<sup>1</sup> Yet, asserting their citizens' rights as consumers, many Papua New Guineans decry the performance of their political and bureaucratic institutions of governance. For them, 'the system' is not delivering. In much of the country the capacities of government institutions are over-stretched: most urban and rural people suffer from collapsing roads, and declining schools, health and other basic services. The state cannot control crime and the public are intensely cynical about politicians. As R.J. May argues, 'policy-making tends to be short-term and capricious, governments have difficulty implementing decisions' (2001:323). Despite this, the country's democratic political institutions survive, with a frenzy of participation each five-year elections cycle. Once a new government is formed political participation declines and the country's well-designed accountability processes often lose effectiveness.

Topographic divisions and varied ecological and resource bases underlie

Papua New Guinea's modern and traditional subsistence economies and population concentrations, and in turn they greatly influence political contestation. The dispersed and unevenly developed economy, as well as social divisions rooted in the people's social structures and cultures, heighten developmental inequities and hence political discontent. The effectiveness of Papua New Guinea's political institutions, both in the constitutional sense and in recurrent patterns of political behaviour, is also influenced by its colonial and post-colonial history. Since independence in 1975, conflict within the 20 provincial governments,<sup>2</sup> and between provinces and the national parliamentarians, has fostered the growth of crude 'money politics' and weakened the quality of governance nationally. This paper does not explore the history of provincial governments, although much of the analysis of the nature of Papua New Guinea's national politics presented below also applies to this level of government.

Papua New Guinea's political leaders resent any criticism of the quality of their democracy, and point to regular, highly contested elections and the seven smooth constitutional changes of government after

general elections, resignations or the three successful votes of no confidence in the 1980s. However, critics have queried the integrity of parliamentary elections, especially after the turbulent and chaotically administered elections of June–July 2002 (Chin 2003; Gelu 2003; Standish 2003). The late Sir Anthony Siaguru, the distinguished bureaucrat, lawyer and commentator, described those elections as ‘a debacle’, and said that the country needs to ask ‘whether the electoral process has been so seriously compromised because of a combination of disenfranchisement and manipulation that democracy in Papua New Guinea has been put at risk’ (*Post-Courier*, 28 June 2003).

This essay seeks to suggest some answers to the deceptively simple question ‘How does PNG politics tick?’ Here I examine some of the factors and forces within Papua New Guinea that influence the imperatives of PNG politics. The first of these is the shape of the economy and its linkages with the state. The next are the fundamental building blocks of the Melanesian societies in Papua New Guinea. Sir Mekere Morauta (Prime Minister 1999–2002), initiated institutional reforms in order to improve the functioning of Papua New Guinea’s constitution and ultimately the processes of politics and governing that we call governance. This paper looks at the early impacts of these changes to voting systems and the regulation of political parties. It then explores whether the logic of the PNG parliamentary game has really changed. I briefly examine whether the vote of no confidence mechanism enables the legislature to control the executive, and the anti-corruption agenda. The essay concludes that the interaction of highly localised electoral politics and provincial power structures under the constitution has helped preclude the development of a national political agenda, and ultimately of responsible and responsive government.

## The survivability of PNG democracy

Life has been tough in Papua New Guinea for much the last 10 years, with high rates of inflation until 2003 and declining government services; yet, except for the Sandline mercenary affair of 1997,<sup>3</sup> there has been no mass protest demanding the overthrow of the government. In fact governments appear to be almost immune to public opinion, and the fickleness, cynicism or forgetfulness of the public allow elected governments to be unresponsive to public sentiment. In formal terms, democratic rule survives in Papua New Guinea. Some would say it thrives, despite poor performance and obvious institutional frailty.

Democracy means much more than the regular holding of free and fair elections. To be an effective mode of governance democracy also requires an executive which is responsible to the legislature, and representatives who are responsive to the electorate; ongoing participation by citizens is essential. The country’s first parliamentary elections were held in 1964, 1968 and 1972, well before independence in 1975. Since then there have been seven general elections and six prime ministers (three of whom have been recycled more than once). The performances of successive parliaments and governments have been identified by PNG commentators as the cause of poor governance (Okole 2002). Often the strongest critics of Papua New Guinea’s politics have been government ministers, including the then Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta (Standish 2000). There was widespread chaos and malpractice in the June–July 2002 national elections, which reduced their value as a test of public sentiment. Yet we can say that many people were able to express their disillusionment with the 109 parliamentarians. They were challenged by 2,769 opponents seeking to

## Policy dialogue

replace them; and, in the 103 seats declared, over 75 per cent of sitting Members of Parliament (MPs) were rejected (Fraenkel 2004).

After the 2002 election, just as in 1997, several PNG leaders said that the electoral system was not working effectively. In 2002 both national and foreign observers were unanimous in their concern about what was dubbed the 'worst election ever' (Chin 2003; Gelu 2003; May 2003), in which the capacity of the state to manage this complex process was totally overwhelmed in the national capital and in many rural areas. Some Papua New Guinean academics argue that the country's democracy system does not work and that there is widespread public disillusionment with the entire system of elected governments.

The National Alliance led by Sir Michael Somare (from 2005 Grand Chief Sir Michael) emerged after the mid 2002 elections as the largest party, with 19 of the 103 MPs. According to the new rules, discussed below, its leader was offered first chance at forming a government on the floor of the National Parliament. Accordingly, Sir Michael, although damaged by the Pelair scandal in the mid 1980s,<sup>4</sup> and replaced as Pangu party leader in May 1988, was re-elected for his fourth term as Prime Minister in August 2002. At Kokopo town the coalition members had gathered to make an 'irrevocable agreement' on policies and to stay together. Somare's government has survived, but with some changed composition, including four deputy prime ministers. Almost from its inception, there were attempts by cabinet members to replace the Treasurer, Bart Philemon, who was resented because of his tight economic management, but he hung on in government until April 2006. Within two years there were signs that several parties had followed what appears to be a Melanesian cultural trait of political fission. The Opposition New Guinea Party (the

rebadged Peoples Democratic Movement) led by Morauta saved the government in May 2004 by crossing the floor. Morauta's particular concern appeared to be damage which he expected a change of government would cause to responsible economic management.

### The economy and state capacities

The intensity of political competition reflects the weakness of both the political and administrative systems, but the logic of PNG politics also derives from the structure of the society and its economic base. The state can only deliver what the economic base provides, so the economy strongly influences politics and government programs. The state in Papua New Guinea faces significant fiscal constraints, and since 1999 any fiscal discipline imposed has lapsed in the run-up to elections.<sup>5</sup> Until recently, inflation has been high after a decade of deficit financing, real incomes have been declining, and formal sector employment is almost static. People are struggling to make ends meet in urban areas. The country's population has doubled since 1975. During that time the bureaucracy and security forces have not grown much (indeed the Defence Force has been halved since 2001). Despite claims the public service is 'bloated', this relates more to the state's capacity to pay, rather than the public's need for state services. Public servants are often unable to perform their roles for lack of operating funds, combined with lack of training, rather than because their designated roles are unnecessary.

The allocations of personnel to provinces still reflect the levels of development in the late colonial era. Less-developed provinces in the Highlands, for example, have proportionately fewer health and teaching staff, and lower per capita expenditures, than areas with smaller populations such as the

Policy dialogue

New Guinea Islands provinces. Average economic growth rates over the last three decades have been low, less than population growth rates, and in real terms budgetary resources have declined. Physical infrastructure has been allowed to run down for lack of maintenance. State services, particularly education, health and agricultural extension, have declined markedly in most mainland provinces, especially since the revenue shocks and structural adjustments resulting from the closure of the Bougainville copper mine in 1989, and the 1994 currency devaluation and subsequent float.

Papua New Guinea had begun a socioeconomic modernisation revolution in the colonial era. Since then economic change has been uneven and spasmodic, leading to disappointed expectations. In the 1960s the economy was dominated by plantation-based commodities such as coffee, copra and cocoa, which employed many people but which in recent decades have lost value in the world market. Since independence the rural economy has largely been ignored by both provincial and national governments (Baxter 2001). Production declined seriously in the 1990s, partly because of poor roads and banditry. Similarly, high security costs in towns and cities have inhibited small scale private sector foreign investment. Successive governments have put all their efforts into capturing benefits (rent) from the export of raw materials—logs, metal ores and hydrocarbons.

Large-scale mining had restarted spectacularly with the Bougainville copper and gold mine in the early 1970s, followed by the Ok Tedi copper mine in 1985, and Misima, Porgera and Lihir gold mines in the 1990s. Mines are easy to tax and their revenues have funded the state for decades, until recently roughly matching the real-term decline in aid revenues since independence. Mining has never created large-scale employment; however. The minerals and

petroleum sector boom of the early 1990s was in decline for several years (Baxter 2001). Then with tax incentives from 2004 exploration started to increase and the recent global commodities boom has led to increased investment, but with major delays in the exploitation of natural gas.

Despite the growth of new sectors in the economy development has not been broad-based, and engaged many people or electorates. In particular, potentially renewable resources have not been well managed, and indeed politicians who can serve as gatekeepers to foreign operators have allegedly been bought off on many occasions. The logging industry boomed for ten years from the mid 1980s until the Asian economic crises of 1997–98, but was never a large employer of PNG nationals. Corrupt relationships have been documented between parts of the timber industry and politicians and officials, with the former appearing to influence not only the relevant minister but at times the majority of parliamentarians. The industry has never been taxed effectively, despite the advice of international aid donors and the World Bank, so this potential revenue stream has never been realised, and there been profligate loss of the resource and environmental damage. Timber exports are currently expanding again, mainly to feed booming demand from China. Interestingly, the industry sees the need to run a constant public relations campaign asserting its contribution to the national economy. Several PNG ministers for fishing have also been rather loose in issuing fishing licences, and not adhered to the multi-lateral Pacific Islands fishing regime. Papua New Guinea's manufacturing sector is minimal, sometimes heavily protected with sweetheart monopoly deals such as those for cement and sugar, and the urban economies are essentially confined to service industries and imported consumer durables and capital goods.

## Policy dialogue

Increasingly the political and bureaucratic élites have focussed their energies on the readily taxable, big money-earning sectors such as mining, and have concentrated on the distribution of state funds and resources rather than growing the country's income and employment base. In summary, Papua New Guinea has become a rentier state, surviving on income from resource projects, in particular large foreign companies, and exports. These revenues are collected by the central government, which for most provinces is the source of about 90 per cent of revenues. Unless they have a rich minerals or petroleum economy, provinces have little capacity to influence the national government. There are few central government controls over large royalty revenues paid to the mining and petroleum provinces, and these are often dispersed casually and wasted. Political action is directed towards the central government which may issue the licences, but the state is also locked in through a shareholding. Except in the case of Bougainville, which shares control over any mining proposals, provinces have little power over major economic projects.

Given the small private sector, the state has had a considerable role in Papua New Guinea's underdeveloped economy since the colonial era. There is not a large domestic income tax base and the state has had difficulty collecting sales taxes and their replacement, the value-added tax, which is largely based on imported goods not domestic production. Poll taxes, known as 'head taxes' and imposed by the colonial regime, were minimal, but were abandoned by local government councils in the early 1970s because the administration no longer had the capacity or will to collect them. Reinstated local-level government head taxes were authorised in the 2004 Budget although in almost all areas the state still lacks the capacity to collect them. The

inability to tax its own population is one sign of a politically weak state.

State spending is a major driving force in the economy, and individuals seeking personal advancement usually do so through gaining a position in the state, or obtaining state funds through business or other means. The economic centrality of the state politicises public employment, as educated people seek to gain advancement in the bureaucracy and resources through political means. Aside from the narrow surge in minerals revenues from 2005 onwards, state revenues have declined in real terms and various other opportunities are shrinking.

The political impacts of this history are profound. Paradoxically, despite its limited capacities and lack of resources, the underdeveloped state attracts intensified political competition, as was shown in the 2002 election with its 21 per cent increase in the number of candidates. MPs now have discretionary control of the limited funds available to provinces, after public servant and teachers' salaries have been paid by the national government, and so voters are desperate to elect their candidate in order to control a slice of the shrinking available revenues. People see politics as the only way of obtaining benefits that they once obtained from the state in the form of services.

### Varied political styles

Politics can become the quickest path to self-advancement for educated people, so many rural people and ambitious individuals seek to mobilise support among their small-scale Melanesian societies to get elected. For their launching pads most use village, clan and tribal corporate groupings that rarely exceed a few thousand people. These political bases should not be described as 'ethnic groups' (*contra* Reilly 2001); ethnic group is a term best applied to new identities that are

Policy dialogue

constantly evolving in urban areas. Often the vote bases of many candidates share a common culture and language. Although the peoples of Papua New Guinea do still speak 840 vernaculars, there are some languages whose speakers cover several electorates each of 30,000 or more voters. In the Highlands, for instance, there are two languages spoken by over 100,000 people, who share a culture but are also divided along administrative (district) lines. Their indigenous social structures are clans and tribes from 1,500 to 10,000 people. In the era of colonially imposed peace, it was believed that these local communities governed themselves by consensus, with leaders (then often called 'big-men') attracting followers and basing their influence and renown on their linking role in the nexus between groups, and redistributing valued goods produced within the local economy.

This model of Melanesian tradition has influenced the ideology of contemporary politics, although today a clever politician will show that he (usually 'he') knows how to obtain and manipulate the distribution of resources from outside the community, and preferably from the state. Generous hospitality and gifts of money are common in election campaigns. In a few areas, including Port Moresby, some candidates try to adapt this model using cash, or gifts to churches and sporting teams or dance groups, claiming this is traditional behaviour, not bribery. In the Highlands, especially, some candidates spend up to a million kina.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes this rash spending works and the candidate is elected, but mostly it fails.

What developed late in the colonial era was the role of parliamentarians as local 'bosses', with considerable patronage to distribute. Patron-client politics is played with state resources across the country, but with varying degrees of subtlety and success in linking leadership aspirants with the

community. Usually only about 45 per cent of MPs are re-elected. As noted above, in 2002 the success rate was nearer half that. Clearly the 'slush' funds available to MPs—with a whole calendar year's allowance paid before the mid-year election—do not necessarily create enough support to ensure re-election. The public's demand is insatiable, and an MP's unwise distribution of such funds or failure to distribute them frequently causes resentment among the electorate. Some MPs agree that the system creates antagonism and provokes opposition, but argue that their electorates now expect these handouts. They feel locked in to this wasteful system. These funds certainly increase the incentives for challengers to oppose them. With an average of 26 candidates per seat in 2002 under the first-past-the-post voting system, only a small vote was needed to gain election. The majority of MPs won their seats with less than 17 per cent of the vote; 16 won with less than 10 per cent (Fraenkel 2004).

It is possible to make some generalisations about styles of politics and electioneering in different regions of Papua New Guinea.<sup>7</sup> First of all, very few women are elected, four in 30 years, and only one of 62 women candidates won in 2002. Second, campaigning is most intense in the Highlands, where clan groups are much larger and concentrated geographically than the dispersed clans of coastal areas and islands, and where candidate numbers per electorate have often been double the numbers campaigning in lowland areas.

In the central Highlands valleys, clan solidarity and tribal voting was strong from 1964 to 1987. There may have only been one candidate among several tribes in the 1970s, so they had a large base vote. Although it is inappropriate to claim that the number of candidates is a proxy for the number of clans, and each clan has a candidate,<sup>8</sup> clan members do often want a clan candidate. The women as much as the men take pride in

## Policy dialogue

nominating one of their number, benefit directly from campaign generosity and enjoy the excitement in specially constructed campaign houses (McLeod 2002). In the last decade the previous large scale group cohesion has been breaking down as more and more candidates stand, sometimes splitting the tribe or even the clan base vote. In Chimbu in 2002 such splits led to assassination, and serious gun fighting and scorched earth tactics.

Local issues and identities are extremely important, far more so than party membership, policies or even money. As Joe Ketan (2004) argues, group pride is of supreme importance in Mount Hagen society, and over the years inter-group relations are carefully managed for use in elections. He calls this the Hagen mega-cycle. Local loyalties are reinforced by gifting within clans and tribes and beyond as candidates seek to lock in a large base vote. Electoral alliances are created through warfare, marriages, funerals and other exchanges of wealth. It is often argued that these are traditional units, but they need to be reinforced. They can be fragmented if a rival seeks support among the same communities and obligates people by competitive gifting. People accept election sweeteners from more than one candidate and then have to choose between them, or they vote more than once for different candidates (Lakane and Gibbs 2003). This is one reason why over the past 20 years some candidates have used firearms as a stick to enforce their carrots, and ensure that they receive votes in return for their campaign inducements. Firearms are displayed before elections to pressure voters, and sometimes on voting day to intimidate polling teams and ensure that every available ballot paper is used. These weapons may not be fired in anger until after the election, when in the cold light of defeat bad losers too often take out their anger on people who had clearly failed to deliver the promised or expected votes.

PNG politics has often been described in ethnic terms, and around 25 years ago researchers tested out class analysis. Only rarely can large internal sectors of a province or electorate share a degree of ethnic identity that can be mobilised effectively, sometimes with a degree of coercion. This was the case in the 2004 Chimbu by-election when there was only one candidate from Chuave District. It also happened in the Chimbu election of 1982. After a series of killings by men from then Deputy Prime Minister Okuk's tribe, southerners calling themselves Bomai united behind a single Gumine candidate, John Nilkare; and at the same time 11 fellow northerners together split Okuk's base areas, thereby enabling Nilkare to hold the lead under the first-past-the-post system.

Interestingly, there are elements of ethnic mobilisation among immigrant communities in the big cities, Port Moresby and Lae. Some of these people from the Highlands are large enough to win or and definitely influence results in urban seats. Port Moresby city has seen rough-house politics in the last 15 years, with commentators saying Highlands-style politics has come to town. In mid 2002 some supporters of a Highlander had their house and business burnt, and tactics such as stealing ballot boxes and papers has occurred in the national capital since 1992. Competition is intensifying in Lae, with an attempt to unite a Morobe province resistance to outsiders.

In the coastal and island regions, societies are comprised of much smaller clan and village units, and some villages comprise several clans. In these regions candidates must mobilise numerous small social units, sometimes across several local vernacular languages (or ethnic groups), to have a chance of winning an election. Candidacy and campaigning are reportedly far more individualistic, based very much on the personal qualities and family relationships of the individual. These

Policy dialogue

qualities may include training and skills, but often include factors such as church membership and perceived piety, as well as personal generosity and capacity for dedication and hard work. Campaigning may include cosmopolitan modern men sponsoring traditional funerals, compensation payments and dance groups, but what has come to be called 'money politics' and extravagant campaign generosity is far less prominent, and less successful than in the Highlands.

Across the entire country, intense localism is an essential component of electoral success, along with personal style. National issues are not especially salient in the 89 Open electorates, or even in the 20 seats covering entire provinces. As discussed below, this means that MPs do not owe their election to membership in national political parties, although close relationships with a national party leader may increase the stature of candidates and their perceived chances of being able to attract resources into the electorate.

### The 2002 elections

The last general election vividly demonstrated the varied political styles in different regions, provinces and cities. As so often occurs, electoral administration and public behaviour were much better in the Islands region. On the mainland, however, the limited capacities of the PNG state were strikingly obvious. Everything that could go wrong in administrative terms did go wrong in these elections, especially in the Highlands (Standish 2002) and Port Moresby city, where political competition is usually at its most intense. There was fraudulent use of the over-large electoral roll in many provinces, apparently led by local political figures. Not only did basic administrative procedures fail, but in the Highlands the security forces were unable to maintain control of the public or

even all their own personnel. Policemen destroyed ballot boxes at Henganofi in the Eastern Highlands. A policeman was killed and a candidate and policeman kidnapped before the polling in the Southern Highlands. Polling officials were attacked in the Eastern and Western Highlands; a young girl was shot dead during the count in Chimbu. Serious post-election fighting spread across most of the Highlands region and in Enga continued for more than six months after the election. Precise figures have never been announced, but I estimate that over one hundred people were killed in election-related violence (Standish 2003b).

As had been widely predicted, firearms were used throughout the polling in the Southern Highlands, where serious warfare had been under way since late 2001. In a July 2002 reference to the Supreme Court to determine whether the elections in the Southern Highlands Province could be deemed to have 'failed', the Attorney-General, Francis Damen, cited

...violence, intimidation, threats, destruction of ballot [boxes] and/or ballot papers, riots, sacking of polling booths, holding hostage people entitled to vote, spoiling of papers, tampering with ballot papers, forging of signatures, giving of false names and addresses [and] the prevention of voting of people entitled to vote (*The Australian*, 22 July 2002).

Such actions were undertaken by ordinary villagers at the behest of educated and wealthy candidates. The fact that people went to such extremes over an election reflects their desperate desire to gain some control over state resources and services. At times people voted en masse in a bloc vote, and officials were coerced to allow the poll to be taken over by strong arm supporters of candidates. Sometimes this was done in the name of group consensus, but several



## Policy dialogue

candidates in Chimbu acknowledged it was coerced (Standish 2002). Voters were not constrained by electoral laws and procedures intended to ensure free and fair elections. These elections strengthen the argument of PNG political scientist Alphonse Gelu that the colonially-introduced liberal democratic political culture never took root, and that authoritarian styles of 'non-liberal' politics better reflect indigenous political mores (Gelu 2000).

In Papua New Guinea there is often a wave of relief at the removal of a government, and a rush of optimism after each new government is formed. That was particularly marked after the government of Bill Skate imploded in July 1999, to be replaced by that led by Sir Mekere Morauta which the National Parliament voted in by 99 votes to 5 (Standish 1999:24). Faced with poor economic conditions, a massive debt burden and ongoing fiscal shortages, as well as its own internal divisions, the Morauta government was unable to make much improvement in government services in the provinces (Standish 2001). People *want* their government to be responsive to public opinion, but unfortunately this only seems to happen at election time. Although the People's Democratic Movement (PDM) members had access to many millions of kina from government resources, and gave away numerous 4WD vehicles during the 2002 election campaign, the failure of 30 of PDM's 42 government MPs and ministers in mid 2002 displays negative accountability in operation. By contrast, the MPs in the National Alliance party had been effective critics of government and most were re-elected, even though some of them had been denied the 'slush fund' patronage resources that benefited government MPs.

Following the June-July elections, at the national level and on the surface, state institutions appeared to function properly in late 2002. The new parliament met, and

included a large number of talented new MPs with a wide range of experience. A government was formed of 10 parties and a new ministry appointed. There was, however, scepticism about the integrity of several of the new ministers and MPs. The ministers took over their portfolios, senior officials were replaced, a mini-budget was passed to deal with the inherited deficit crisis and a few parliamentary committees started working after a gap of nearly a decade. In late 2002 there was some hope for the new government, and anger at the debt they had inherited from their predecessors. Nonetheless, the government that took office was derived from a parliament that had been elected by a tainted process. According to one PNG academic, instead of being locked up in jail, 'corrupt politicians have taken up seats in parliament, which could be described as a house of thieves'.

Village people sometimes say their election activities are pointless. All too often, new MPs are heavily in debt once elected, and even reformists are vulnerable to offers of rewards and incentives by wealthy party leaders. They often stay in the capital and lose touch with their electorates, unable to meet their constituents' unrealistically high expectations for development. In the Highlands some members find they cannot return to their electorates without being harassed in parts of their electorate. The desire to widen their electoral support and hence increase the representativeness of MPs is what led to the reintroduction of preferential voting which had been dropped in the 1975 constitution.

### Preferential voting

The legislation for 'limited preferential voting' (LPV) has been applied since 2003, with ten by-elections completed using this system by August 2006, five in the

Policy dialogue

Highlands, and all closely monitored.<sup>9</sup> The hope is that that all candidates will be forced to appeal to wide sections of their electorate in order to gain preferences, and overcome the intense localism highlighted under first-past-the-post. However many candidates have been unremittingly parochial in their appeals. Some set up three candidates within their tribal catchment, so as not to preference any rival groups. Others, for similar reasons, have urged their voters not to channel support towards worthy candidates. Instead, they have asked their supporters to preference weak candidates which will prevent any drift of preferences towards prominent rivals. The votes are usually wasted on candidates already eliminated. Such votes are deemed exhausted and drop out of the count, with up to 90 per cent of votes exhausted in each of the final eliminations. Even when there are over 20 candidates, which is common, eventually someone will gain an 'absolute majority' (50 per cent plus 1) of the remaining active votes, but that may only be a third of the original total. It is hoped that once elected MPs will work for their entire electorate, but it is unusual for candidates to gain preferences widely.

In general, we can say that under LPV so far campaigning has been more relaxed and accommodative, and that candidates have mostly been able to move freely, and indeed distribute largesse more freely, but not in every instance. These by-elections elections have been peaceful in comparison to recent general elections—though there have been a few cases of polling day violence, some post-election fighting and deaths and serious destruction of property in some instances. Several candidates have spent six or seven figure sums in their campaigns and two of these were successful in the National Capital District and Koroba-Lake Kopyago. In two cases the support of a powerful political patron—the Enga Governor and the Prime Minister—assisted winners.

However very local issues and alliances are identified in detailed analyses of voting.<sup>10</sup> Some observers say the achievement of an 'absolute majority' is a major achievement (Reilly 2006), but the mathematics makes that inevitable. With over 20 candidates, up to 66 per cent of votes have dropped out of the count at the last stage, deemed exhausted. Note that the winners do receive increased mandates when primary votes and preferences are combined, as a percentage of valid first count primary votes, usually 10–20 per cent higher than in 2002. However the overall mandate received in most instances was only 25–30 per cent of valid votes lodged. This will not change unless the number of candidates is reduced greatly, but there is no incentive for that to happen with LPV, and in fact candidate numbers are likely to increase.

Once again, poor electoral administration of this complex system—and in one case a fraudulent count (Standish 2006)—has illustrated the weak capacities of the PNG state in rural areas. One major underlying problem is that electoral rolls of 'eligible voters' have been cumulatively inflated over the decades, with up to three times as many names as adult persons. This situation is intentional, organised by intending candidates who stand to gain. It facilitates multiple voting and provides an incentive for 'controlled' or intimidated bloc voting. In the 2004 Yangoru-Saussia by election, as in the Highlands' by-elections, multiple voting occurred on a large scale, but was monitored (and prevented) haphazardly by the police security force. The Highlands' polls, even by-elections, involved major electoral fraud in the form of multiple voting. Since 2005 the Electoral Commission has been trying to create new rolls and eliminate excessive names from the roll, with some success, but acknowledges that Highlands electorates still contain more names than adult citizens, and there are signs many people have not (re-)enrolled.

## Policy dialogue

A major concern is that as Highlands candidates have become aware of the value of preferences, which are the same vote transferred to another candidate, they are now saying that in 2007 they will control their voters' allocation of all preferences. The ballot is not secret in the Highlands, and bloc voting is common in the name of the group. This is sometimes described as consensus, but if it is voluntary then there should be no need to enforce it.

### Political parties and the integrity law

The consequences of intense localism in electioneering are profound. Successful candidates owe little to political parties, and hence parties have limited hold over or capacity to sanction MPs. In industrial countries the loss of party endorsement usually means political death, whereas in Papua New Guinea it matters little. Indeed, it was an attempt to overcome the weakness of political parties that led to the 'integrity law', formally known as the Organic [constitutional] Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) (Baker 2005; Gelu 2005; PacLii 2006). After the crucial initial vote for the Prime Minister following the election, individual MPs who change that vote or leave their party of first choice should face serious penalties, potentially losing their seat, unless they can justify their action during formal inquiries by the Ombudsman and Leadership tribunal. The aim is to lock MPs into parties, and hence create some stability in both the legislature and executive, and ultimately more consistent policymaking and better governance.

OLIPPAC is designed to strengthen parties, both in parliament and in the electorate. However the near irrelevance of parties to the electorate is based in the

divisions and structures of Melanesian societies, along with the divided topography and economy, and the related spread of powers between the provincial and district government structures. Candidates usually do not win elections on the basis of party policies and membership, but because enough local people want them to be elected. At most elections the majority of new MPs are Independents when elected, but soon join parties. During the campaign clever parties pick up likely winners, and in these cases the party owes more to the candidate's base votes and resources than the reverse. Only about a quarter of candidates have taken party endorsement in the recent by-elections.

Fluid party loyalties have been identified by Okole (2005). These arise from the small polities of Melanesian society and are central to explaining many of Papua New Guinea's problems with executive governance and instability in the legislature. Localism and speaking on behalf of the 'grassroots' provide alternate ideological bases for politicians, rather than national party allegiances. Although modern political parties commenced from 1967–70 with fairly strong regional identities and distinctive policy differences about the timing of independence, political parties in Papua New Guinea lost much of their regional identity after 1977. Party loyalty and voter identification with party leaders reached its peak in the 1982 election. It became cheaper to recruit winners after the election, but under OLIPPAC parties now have a strong incentive to increase their endorsed winners, namely the chance to form government. Party activism appeared to rise in 2002 with Somare's National Alliance, and could do so again in the 2007 election with the emergence of the New Generation Party.

Since the 1980s, national politics increasingly has been about gaining and allocating the spoils of office, especially when in hard economic times the chances for major development projects are minimal. Papua

Policy dialogue

New Guinea's parties remain personalised vehicles for gaining and sharing power, with minimal policy differences. As mentioned, they are essentially factions within the National Parliament, centred upon a leader; even leaders who may have lost their seats such as the wealthy founders of two parties, former Prime Ministers Sir Julius Chan (Peoples Progress Party, whose term ended in 1997) and Paias Wingti (who was out of parliament between 1997 and 2002).

Papua New Guinea's parties only attempt to link with the wider electorate at election times, bursting into flower. Some 43 parties were registered before 2002 elections (an increase from about 15), and 22 parties were represented in the House. After elections, however, many parties wilt, and even those represented in the legislature remain dormant in the electorate. By 2006 there were only 29 parties registered, with 15 in Parliament. Several small parties have voted to be absorbed by larger ones. Under OLIPPAC parties are expected to strengthen their organization in order to elect MPs with formal party endorsement, but most parties only establish provincial branches at election time, and they still lack mass memberships. Candidates in 2002 shopped around asking parties for endorsement and financial support. The successful ones received only minimal help at the time of nomination, very late in their campaigns which last for years. The winner in the 2004 Chimbu by-election had approached three political parties before finally being endorsed by one faction of the United Resources Party on the second last day of nominations. MPs primarily owe their election to their own efforts, which can cost many thousands of kina. Parties are largely irrelevant to the decisions made by voters (Saffu 1996).

If they hope for re-election, MPs are obliged to benefit their own small local constituency while in office. Aside from recouping their own expenses, sometimes from state coffers, they must seek the best

possible deal for their local voter base in the first instance, rather than their entire electorate. This means joining the strongest team; and until OLIPPAC commenced that could mean shedding their initial party. Elected Independent MPs almost invariably join parties, and in the past the wealthy parties like Peoples Progress Party have recruited well between elections, especially when in power. Nothing succeeds like success. Opposition is not a fruitful stance for MPs, except for core faction members buoyed by the hope of regaining executive power. Two recent prime ministers held back electoral development funds or district support grants (the notorious 'slush funds') budgeted for MPs in the Opposition. The public's expectation of large-scale patronage places huge pressures on MPs, and several MPs, including Sir Julius Chan have often stated that such demands drive corruption. But the system also increases the leverage of the executive over the legislature.

Until OLIPPAC, it was easy for Opposition members or government backbenchers to swap parties and overthrow a prime minister, or increase their chances of a ministry or other additional lucrative appointment carrying ministerial privileges. Hence, there is usually a drift by MPs towards government parties, until the last few months before a vote of no confidence became possible. Such party-hopping, known as 'yo-yo politics', is what OLIPPAC was intended to prevent. In theory, the law makes it impossible for individual MPs to swap parties, although Sir William Skate was allowed to leave his Peoples National Congress in 2005 and join the government. By contrast, Independents can move into parties at the time of their choice. And, by a caucus vote, whole parties can decide to change sides, as occurred in May 2004, or they may collectively change their vote on major constitutional issues, a vote of no confidence or on the Budget.

## Policy dialogue

In 2003 Prime Minister Somare obviously felt vulnerable because he tried unsuccessfully to persuade the parliament to amend the constitution and double the period of immunity from a vote of no-confidence to 36 months. In a drawn out struggle he sacked several ministers who opposed this move. For two years four parties were split on factional lines behind rival leaders. It took court cases and years before OLIPPAC was applied to enforce parties to meet and resolve their leadership disputes. Indeed, political movement has continued under the OLIPPAC. The Prime Minister has used his power to choose ministers, over-riding the nominal leadership of other parties, and by constant reshuffling of his ministry playing divide and rule tactics. One of his senior ministers in May 2004 described this as 'cutting off their heads, enabling us to destroy them politically'. It was a tactic regularly used by PM Skate, as well.<sup>11</sup>

### Parliament and the Executive

Throughout the 1990s, the principal role of parliaments has been merely to determine which team wins executive power and controls the spoils of office. MPs have not concentrated on monitoring the executive, or providing detailed advice and consent on legislative matters. Major legislation is passed rapidly, without significant debate, and with huge majorities. Generally the executive is dominant; it can buy support and ignore parliament. Support for the executive appears to get stronger and stronger until an election, but can collapse if a vote of no confidence is possible or imminent. Papua New Guinea's annual budget has regularly been passed without serious scrutiny or debate, aside from set piece speeches by party leaders. The granting of supply has not been used to discipline governments, although it has been used to pressure early payment of

slush funds. Annual national budgets often contain 'sweeteners' for MPs, and allegedly cheques for discretionary funds are issued to ensure the budget or major laws are passed without delay.

Scrutiny of governance is assisted most by the Ombudsman Commission and the Courts, rather more than by the National Parliament (Ghai 1997). Legislative committees and parliamentary scrutiny declined markedly throughout the 1990s (Okole et al. 2003). Bill Skate as Speaker in 2002 pledged to strengthen the role of parliament and its committees. Indeed, the Public Accounts Committee restarted its constitutional role of intense scrutiny of government financial operations, and took an activist role and identified some bureaucratic scalps for investigation by the police and Ombudsman. Other committees, however, exist solely on paper. The legislature rarely uses its routine accountability powers to create a responsible government, although it retains the ultimate power to dismiss a government, some of the time.

### Votes of no-confidence

A vote of no-confidence should be the legislature's main chance to overthrow an incompetent or corrupt executive, and as such is an essential sanction in a country where the gentlemanly conventions of Westminster are not entrenched. Under the national Constitution, governments cannot be challenged by a vote of no confidence during their first 18 months in office. Then in the fifth and last year of each parliament a vote of no-confidence would precipitate an early election. That is unthinkable, not only because the Electoral Commission's preparations take years but all MPs fear of losing their seat. During these periods of immunity or 'grace' the National Parliament is denied its strongest power over the

Policy dialogue

executive, except voting on the budget or adverse publicity. Some governments have been at the apex of their power, and pushed through major reforms in this phase, including those of Morauta and Sir Rabbie Namaliu. There is a tendency for governments to make reckless decisions in their last year. It was in its last six months in early 1997 that the Chan government hired the infamous Sandline mercenaries in an attempt to solve the Bougainville secession conflict. That plan was tripped up not by parliament but by a rebellion by sections of the Defence Force and mass public demonstrations in the capital (Dinnen et al. 1997; Dorney 1998; O'Callaghan 1999).

Between the two 'periods of grace', between 18 and 48 months, there are windows when the executive is vulnerable and in theory parliament is at its highest potential power. Yet parliament often abdicates its oversight role during these periods, and the quality of governance declines as a result. Since 1988 it has become standard practice for governments to sway MPs to give up their power and allow the adjournment of parliament during much of the time when a vote of no-confidence is possible. MPs are able to spend more time in their electorates, if they wish, and often seem happy as long as they have some funds to distribute. In 1998 and 2000, parliaments agreed to adjourn for over six months thereby avoiding the chance of a vote of no-confidence. In early 2004 parliament commenced a five-month adjournment, which was broken only by the need to elect a new Governor-General. The admission of insecurity implied by a long adjournment also can increase the chance of a vote of no-confidence when Parliament eventually reconvenes. In 1999, once the period of immunity expired and it became constitutionally possible to change the guard, backbenchers from all sides and even ministers colluded and enforced a change of Prime Minister; the ministry remained very similar.

Even on occasions when attempts to have a vote of no-confidence were unsuccessful, as occurred eight times during the first three years of Namaliu's government, the threat of a vote of no-confidence damaged the quality of governance. Political instability causes political paralysis and leads to attempts to pay off political waverers. Threatened votes of no-confidence can also make it impossible for the Prime Minister to remove politicians who are proven to have been corrupt. This happened in the case of the former Forests and Foreign Minister, and army General, Ted Diro. After his corrupt behaviour was exposed in 1987, Diro survived a further four years, mostly as Deputy Prime Minister. Eventually, he was removed following a 1991 Leadership Tribunal inquiry, but after spending three years in the 'sin bin' he was eligible to stand in 1997 and was re-elected by a forgiving public.

Old habits died hard. The vote of no-confidence attempted in 2004 had been predicted as early as 2002. It bore no relationship to the state of governance at the time, merely that it was legally possible because the Somare government had been in office 18 months, was out of 'grace' and had antagonised a number of its previous ministers and supporters. However the government-controlled Private Business Committee disallowed the motion, which drew strong legal criticism (Nonggorr 2004). Whether OLIPPAC will be able to fundamentally shift existing patterns of political behaviour and create a genuinely strong parliamentary base for continuity in executive government remains to be seen, but on present indications that seems unlikely. The weak party system results from the interaction of local groupings with the electorate system and provincial patronage structures, and encourages poor parliamentary performance and executive instability. This in turn leads to the constant reshuffling of ministers and the sacking of political

## Policy dialogue

appointees to departmental headships and statutory authorities. It all contributes to policy inconsistency and the weakens the state capacities.

### Patronage and provinces

Following lessons learnt in the colonial era, politics in Papua New Guinea has mostly been about the distribution of patronage: resources (jobs and funds) and pork-barrel projects. Politics is perceived as a zero sum game, in which the winner takes all, at the electorate level as well as in the National Parliament. Hence, electoral competition is intense. Until recently, MPs have controlled huge discretionary grants, known as 'slush funds', but as Sir Mekere Morauta pointed out in 1996 they lack the planning and administrative capacity needed to utilise these resources effectively. Parliamentarians may have gained access to state resources, but have not been able to ensure transparency or executive responsiveness to public needs. Meanwhile, indifference of central government has led to the near collapse in mainland provinces of rural health and education services, and road networks. Anguished statements from church and non-government organisation leaders and letters to the editors on such topics appear to fall on deaf ears.

Since the 1995 provincial government 'reforms', backbench MPs have undertaken strong executive roles in the allocation of District Support grants within their electorates and in the provincial governments. The Provincial ('regional') MP is usually the Governor and hence the executive head. In their local roles the MPs actions are largely unchecked, although many eventually face Ombudsman Commission investigations and Leadership Code cases for misappropriation. Most basic services, such as minor roads, schools and medical facilities, are the responsibility of

provincial governments. Until 1995 provincial assemblies were directly elected with a mandate separate from MPs, and 14 had been suspended at some stage for maladministration. The provincial assemblies and their executives undercut the status and local roles of MPs. During the decades after 1980 provincial governments were progressively starved of capital works and recurrent operating funds, while between 1984 and 1999 MPs' annual discretionary funds grew from K10,000 each to K1.5 million per annum.

The 1995 Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Governments was pushed through parliament by PM Chan on the pretext of further decentralising power to local-level governments. Usually three LLGs replaced each of the largely moribund district-level local government councils, which had mostly been starved of resources by the provinces. Few of the new LLGs have the resources or skills to operate effectively. In part, the '1995 reforms' served to recentralise power over the bureaucracy, while giving MPs virtually untrammelled control over district operating funds and strong influence over staffing matters in their electorates. National politicians are now able to grab resources that properly should be allocated to provincial governments and districts that are charged with providing essential services. They have almost total control and so can readily lobby for the removal of unsympathetic local-level council presidents; in that way the MPs influence the composition of each Provincial Assembly. In 2006 there were proposals to further entrench MPs' powers within their districts, including the selection of public servants. This would only serve to intensify local political competition. Note that there are a few exceptions, such as East New Britain, where MPs sensibly transfer their funds to local-level governments and provincial and district administrators,

leaving local government to local leaders and avoiding the inevitable political backlash.

## The anti-corruption agenda

PNG political discourse is dominated by talk of corruption, a 'big C' issue that is constantly being raised in the media. At the mention of politics, a hotel receptionist volunteers as simple fact: 'The ministers are all corrupt'. MPs and even ministers use parliamentary grievance debates to loudly assert the persistence of corruption. Bribery and misappropriation allegations have been major election issues since 1982. Every time MPs have driven to Parliament House since 1996, they have passed a huge billboard proclaiming

WHEN THE RIGHTEOUS ARE IN AUTHORITY

*The People Rejoice*

WHEN THE WICKED RULE

*The People Suffer* (Proverbs 29)

KAIKAI BILONG TINGTING

[Food for thought]

Corruption was frequently alleged in the last parliament and criticised in the media, and during 2002 was a major concern for civil society groups, especially churches, which backed a media-led community campaign against corruption. Nevertheless, Morauta government candidates spent huge sums (one estimate is K300 million) in the run-up to the elections. The small groups of supporters of government members may have benefited, but the wider public was not convinced.

However, most of the anti-corruption campaigning remains at the level of moralising rhetoric. The causes of corruption, such as the weak economy and the breakdown of resource allocation according to need, and the widespread collapse of

service distribution, have served to foster the politics of money. The dreadful logic of failing government services is that in this situation people grab what they can, where they can. They expect little from government, but lack the means to effectively utilise whatever resources they do obtain.

Clearly the rhetorical chorus against corruption has not worked. The incentives remain and the sanctions only hit a few. The electorates want their MPs to gain them resources, and only complain if they miss out. Personal misappropriation is fairly well hidden from the electorate. Heroically, the Ombudsman Commission had succeeded in raising over 67 cases of violations of the Leadership Code by leaders by late 2003 (Gomez 2004:16–18), and more since. This highlights the primary cause of concern about institutional decay, patronage politics and the (mis)use of state resources (Ketan 2000; Okole 2002). As in 1997, several MPs were (re-)elected in 2002 who had previously breached the Leadership Code. Other individuals elected in July 2002 were later targetted in the recent commissions of inquiry into the collapse of the super-annuation scheme (the National Provident Fund, NPF) and the privatisation of the state-owned commercial bank PNG Banking Corporation. Some of those criticised in the NPF report have influence in the present government, and very few of the well-publicised recommendations of the inquiry have been followed through with attempted prosecutions.

The regulatory and accountability procedures appear to need strengthening, but the reverse has occurred. PNG governments for years have faced fiscal crises and have not provided sufficient funds for crucial accountability institutions such as the Ombudsman Commission and the courts. In 2006 the House passed a law restricting the Leadership Tribunals which handle cases brought forward by the Ombudsman



## Policy dialogue

Commission. These are administrative tribunals but are now required to apply full legal rules of evidence. Executive governments are often unwilling to face strong scrutiny from the legislature, and it is not surprising that legislators who are also subject to independent oversight may reject attempts to strengthen the institutions of accountability.

### National mobilisation

As argued above, contemporary PNG politics is usually about local loyalties and the local distribution of resources rather than models of development, ideological or even national issues. This is clear to any observer of parliamentary discussions. As a concomitant, it can be argued that the PNG people lack a sense of shared history and national identity which can be the basis of citizenship and democratic accommodation. Related points were made by Sir Anthony Siaguru.

It is something we lack in my country. It is not a matter of governance as such. It is the basic identity of the people with the national interest that we lack, or rather, a political system that affects that identity, and it is its absence which, by my reckoning, makes it difficult to have good governance in Papua New Guinea...The electorate grumbles...but the electorate is held captive (2001:11–12).

In the 1960s and 1970s there was no sustained anti-colonial nationalist movement, although there was prolonged discussion about the constitutional distribution of state power. The strongest political campaigns in recent decades have come from non-government organisations concerned about human rights, especially women's rights, and the environment. In the 1980s the major issue drawing people onto

the streets was crime. In the last 15 years, the regular diet of Australian Rugby League football in the media has provided a major distraction from domestic events in Papua New Guinea.

Yet the public is not entirely quiescent, and can be quite volatile at times, even when it is likely to attract heavy-handed state repression. In mid 1995, student activists helped stir up demonstrations across the country when it was alleged that the World Bank planned to register and privatise communally owned land. It is easy to inflame the public about land matters, and five people died in these demonstrations. In June 2001 in Port Moresby students and people from settlements rallied against privatisation plans and the reduction in the size of the military, but the protests ended when the police shot and killed three students on the University of Papua New Guinea campus. This incident damaged Prime Minister Morauta and nearly cost him his seat in 2002.

There have been some large-scale nationalist responses to issues, and occasionally politicians choose to appeal to national pride and sovereignty. This was done by both supporters and opponents of the South African-based Sandline mercenaries brought in by former PM Sir Julius Chan in early 1997 in a desperate attempt to resolve the Bougainville conflict (Dinnen et al. 1997; Dorney 1998; O'Callaghan 1999). Chan still seeks to justify that action. Bill Skate MP opposed Sandline on nationalist grounds, arguments echoing Defence Force officers, but he was less successful in the last days of his leadership in mid 1999 when he tried to arouse nationalist resentment of the World Bank and to blame Australia for his political demise. While initially effective smokescreens, his allegations appear not to have resonated with the wider public. The nationalist rejection among some politicians of Australia's Enhanced Cooperation Package (ECP) with its 250 police and

Policy dialogue

regulatory officials in 2004–05 appeared not to be widespread; apparently most of the political public hoped the ECP would bring some improvement to policing and public order.

Occasionally, resentment of capitalist development is expressed in ideological terms by local movements, which have sometimes been wrongly labelled as cargo cults. The most radical attacks on symbols of modern development came from the undereducated and unemployed youth of Bougainville who attacked the Panguna copper mine and also destroyed state infrastructure such as schools and hospitals. These Bougainville Revolutionary Army foot soldiers can be interpreted as the deprived victims of large-scale development, and aside from conflicts between local groups the rebellion incorporated aspects of class resentment. Similar resentments are sometimes heard in the Highlands, and may lie behind the occasional destruction of essential public infrastructure by people who have missed out on the benefits of development, or who have lost political power. Although usually manipulated by elite political interests, aspects of class conflict can also be identified in the occasionally anarchic eruptions of crowd violence and looting in Port Moresby, Lae and Madang. In the Highlands, such conflicts are usually seen through the lenses of tribe and clan.

The peoples of Papua New Guinea are ethnically divided. By itself, this has limited explanatory value in the country's politics, because conflict is rarely about identity alone. People often place each other by region or province of origin, but within those provinces the labels used apply to ever smaller districts or tribal groups. Large regional identities are rarely mobilised,<sup>12</sup> despite the attempts of some politicians to do so in the mid 1970s. At the national level there is often concern about the regional

balance of the top posts in the bureaucracy between people from the Southern Region (coastal Papua), the Highlands, Momase (the north coast provinces, Morobe, Madang and the Sepiks, East and West) and the New Guinea Islands. Since 2002 the term 'Sepik Tsunami' has been used to describe the numbers of senior officials appointed under the Somare government. Such geographic divisions incorporate stereotypes inherited from the colonial era, but still have political potency. Nevertheless there is also jealousy and lack of trust within these broadly brushed regions. People from areas with the best education in the colonial era, who previously held all the best jobs, sometimes express resentment and even fear of the recent arrivals from the Highlands.

Pragmatic alliances can override such regional sentiments. In 1997 Bill Skate was chosen as prime minister partly because a coastal Papuan was wanted, but his candidacy was promoted by former prime ministers from the Highlands and Islands, Paias Wingti and Sir Julius Chan. Skate, who died as Sir William Skate in early 2006, was able to appeal to second generation migrants from several ethnic groups in Port Moresby, especially immigrant Highlanders, which indicates how ethnic divisions can be mobilised and also overcome. Similar fusion politics is also reported to occur in suburban *raskol* criminal gangs (Harris 1988), but I know of strong contrary examples.

Most governments make sure they have representation in the ministry from all provinces, and these people work well together. Individual ministers engage in the worst nepotistic patronage. It is individuals who build up teams of bodyguards to promote or enforce their interests in government service and business. Although expected, nepotism causes considerable resentment and feeds cynicism about the political system. There is widespread belief in both provinces and the capital that the

## Policy dialogue

political system and government is permeated by localism and cronyism, known as *wantokism*, using the word for people of one language (talk). Finally, it can be argued that Papua New Guinea's democratic institutions have not (yet) created a shared sense of identity as a nation.

### Concluding discussion

The analysis above describes state-society interactions that are not producing accountable and effective governance. The lives of rural people are seen as economically irrelevant to the survival of the state, unless they start to rebel around major money earners like mineral or petroleum projects. Viewed from the provinces, Waigani, the headquarters of government, is seen as a foreign country. Although there are many dedicated officials, the political class is widely believed to turn its back on the bush people and the urban settlers.

The failure to have an executive responsible to the parliament, and a parliament responsible to the electorate, has contributed to the lack of government concern for national problems. Four dramatic examples show the lack of focus by national governments, which

- largely ignored bloody warfare in the Highlands for over 30 years
- have not halted the spread of high-powered firearms and ignored the Guns Summit report of 2005
- allowed the Bougainville secession crisis to drag on for eight years until 1997; and
- largely ignored HIV / AIDS issues for 10 years.

Despite regular elections, the logic of social groupings within the country and their political mobilisation has meant that MPs have not had to serve their entire electorates, or the nation as a whole. Political parties

have not differentiated themselves on policy platforms, or made binding links with the wider public to mobilise support. Elections are highly localised and have become either individualised contests, as in many Islands areas, or inter-group contests, as in the Highlands region. In the Highlands elections were increasingly violent until 2002 when malpractice was seen as being essential for success.

Parliamentary grievance debates can be lively, but democratic accountability has not worked either in the legislature and its relationship with the executive, or between elections at the electoral level. The net impact of an ineffective parliament is to weaken the state, and reduce the capacities and legitimacy of government. The state and its élites have become withdrawn and isolated from the people they are meant to serve. This is an inherently unstable situation, but most people still seek to gain power in the state. This is illustrated most starkly by the fact that many people in the Highlands were prepared to attack electoral officials and police conducting the election in June and July 2002. A PNG newspaper editorial argued that Papua New Guinea is a 'struggling democracy' (*The National*, 19 July 2002). Another PNG observer, Joe Ketan, stated, 'democracy itself is at risk in this administratively weak state'.<sup>13</sup>

There has been a major attempt through the integrity law to strengthen political parties in Papua New Guinea in an attempt to create stability in government. Yet OLIPPAC is mainly tinkering with the rules of Parliament, and has been circumvented. It cannot teach parties to mobilise popular support, or to improve the links between legislators and their electorates. The first election under OLIPPAC showed little strengthening of political parties. However, one observer argued (in a closed seminar) that the new law has removed the real power struggle from parliament and eventually

Policy dialogue

would lead to intensified political competition and conflict at the electoral level. It remains to be seen what the long-term effect of OLIPPAC will be in the next parliament, but from 2004 signs were that MPs had found ways of avoiding its attempts to solidify political parties. Nonetheless in early 2007 parties were increasing their efforts in the run up to the June-July elections, so the law may have greater impact in the next parliament.

The second major reform is the adoption of limited preferential voting (LPV) in all elections. The recent by-elections have been both local and personalised contests. They showed that under preferential voting the possibility exists for considerable widening of candidates' support bases, and that a peaceful election can be held where massive state resources are applied. The new system will soon be tested in a general election when the pressures are far greater and state resources such as police spread more thinly. To be effective, LPV will require a substantial shift in Papua New Guinea's political culture. It will take the lifetime of the parliament elected in the 2007 general election before we can say whether LPV has significantly improved the quality of MPs and the functioning of PNG democracy at the national level.

The parliament in Papua New Guinea includes many idealistic and talented individuals, only some of whom are in the ministry. Some started to make themselves heard, as indicated by the revival of a few committees. Fourteen years ago there was a review of the effectiveness of the PNG parliament, with suggestions for strengthening the institution (Lindley 1993). The Constitution specifies that there should be a full set of standing committees, but very few are operative. In attempts to lock MPs behind the government, some committee chairs are allocated as paid perquisites, but the committees rarely if ever meet. The current

House has allowed itself to be used, under ruthless control by the Speaker and the Leader of Government Business, and with a tiny Opposition not able to assert its autonomy, let alone control the executive.

Unfortunately, given the desperate shortage of resources in Papua New Guinea, any reform programmes are thought to require outside funding. Foreign assistance to promote democracy in Papua New Guinea is quite likely, given the aid donors' recent focus on 'good governance', but it also involves major political sensitivities. The work of accountability bodies such as the Ombudsman Commission is clearly resented by politicians seeking to avoid close scrutiny. The critics of the state, such as civil society leaders, are perceived by politicians as likely future rivals. State leaders sometimes fear the younger generation of politically active citizens, such as university students, which may be one reason why universities are starved of resources. The weakening of most of the country's universities in recent decades will have long-term costs. The fact that Papua New Guinea has its own acute critics of its political system remains a real indigenous strength, however.

The media hopefully will be able to continue to act as fairly effective democratic watchdogs. The sole (commercial) television station is fairly bland. Unfortunately, the provincial network of radio stations has been allowed to run down badly since 1995, a wasted opportunity for nation-building and leadership. Papua New Guinea has a fairly vibrant if small and largely foreign-owned press (not forgetting the special pleading by *The National* on behalf of its owners in the logging industry).

It is clear that the people of Papua New Guinea want political participation, and in that sense are democrats. As argued above, however, many of the problems of democracy in Papua New Guinea are historic and systemic. They are rooted in Papua New

## Policy dialogue

Guinea's political cultures and administrative structures, as well as in the pattern of the national economy. These deeper issues are not readily amenable to institutional engineering. To strengthen democracy, Papua New Guineans will need to find ways to engage the active support of both the government and civil society. Public servants often find it difficult to work together with community groups, but such cooperation is slowly starting to spread beyond the services delivered by churches. In the last few years of the Somare government, there have been signs that civil society activism is spreading in Papua New Guinea, and that community groups are gaining confidence. Therein lies a great hope for the future of Papua New Guinea's democracy.

### Notes

This essay is a sketch for a larger project; and was first drafted during fieldwork with no access to a library. It was presented to the University of South Pacific Conference on Political Culture, Representation and Electoral Systems in the Pacific in Port Vila, Vanuatu, July 2004.

- 1 Such arguments have been made by Lipset 1989; Reilly 2001.
- 2 Strictly speaking there are now 18 provincial governments, which since 1995 have been dominated by national parliamentarians including the provincial governors, plus the Autonomous Government of Bougainville and the National Capital Commission.
- 3 This complex history is summarised in Dinnen et al (eds) 1997, and detailed in Dorney 1998 and O'Callaghan 1999.
- 4 For some of this history see Moore and Kooyman 1998:405–6, 410.
- 5 The same is alleged in 2007. 'K52m for MPs' poll funds: Bart', *The National* 20 March 2007.
- 6 PGK 1.00 = AUD 0.44 approximately.
- 7 See, for example, my summary of the October 2002 University of Papua New Guinea/Australian National University Workshop on

the 2002 election (Standish 2003a). Abstracts of the papers on electorates are available from State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project (2003).

- 8 As suggested by Reilly and Phillpot 2002:918–19.
- 9 Six of these are analysed in Standish 2006.
- 10 See Gibbs 2006 and similar unpublished research by Nick Kuman and Ben Tomba on Anglimp-South Wahgi.
- 11 Personal communication Henry Okole, December 2004.
- 12 The late Margaret Mead in 1971 argued at the University of Papua New Guinea that the country's ethnic diversity was its best guarantee of sticking together, because no single group would be large enough to dominate the others.
- 13 Personal communication, November 2002.

### References

- Baker, L., 2005. 'Political integrity laws in Papua New Guinea and the search for stability', *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, 20(1):100–17.
- Baxter, M., 2001. *Enclaves or Equity: the rural crisis and development choice in Papua New Guinea*, Australian Agency for International Development, Canberra.
- Chin, J., 2003. 'The worst election ever? Papua New Guinea at the polls', *Catalyst*, 33(1):48–61.
- Dinnen, S., May, R.J. and Regan, A.J. (eds), 1997. *Challenging the State: the Sandline Affair in Papua New Guinea*, Regime Change/Regime Maintenance Discussion Paper No. 21, National Centre for Development Studies and Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Dorney, S., 1998. *The Sandline Affair: Politics and the mercenaries and the Bougainville crisis*, ABC Books, Sydney.

Policy dialogue

- Fraenkel, J., 2004. 'Electoral engineering in Papua New Guinea: lessons from Fiji and elsewhere', *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, 19(1):122–32.
- Gelu, A.R.M., 2000. 'The emergence of non-liberal democratic political culture in Papua New Guinea', in M.A. Rynkiewich and R. Seib (eds), *Politics in Papua New Guinea: Continuities, Changes and Challenges*, Point 24, Melanesian Institute, Goroka:87–119.
- , 2003. 'Political Decay in Papua New Guinea: the conduct of the 2002 national election', *Catalyst*, 33(1):4–28.
- Gelu, A., 2005, 'The failure of the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates', *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, 20(1) 2005: 85–97.
- Ghai, Y., 1997, 'Establishing a liberal political order through a constitution: the Papua New Guinea experience', *Development and Change*, 28(2):303–30.
- Gibbs, P., 2006. 'Limited preferential voting and Enga political culture', *Catalyst* 36(1):3–25.
- Gomez, B. (ed.), 2004. *Papua New Guinea Yearbook 2004, The National and Cassowary Books*, Port Moresby.
- Harris, B. M., 1988. The rise of rascalism: action and reaction in the evolution of rascal gangs, *Discussion Paper 54*, Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research, Port Moresby
- Ketan, J., 2000. 'Leadership and political culture', in M.A. Rynkiewich and R. Seib (eds), *Politics in Papua New Guinea: continuities, changes and challenges*, Point 24, Melanesian Institute, Goroka:44–86.
- , 2004. *The Name Must Not Go Down: political competition and state-society relations in Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea*, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, Suva.
- Lakane, J. and Gibbs, P., 2003. 'Haves and have-nots: the 2002 elections in the Enga Province of PNG', *Catalyst*, 33(2):96–116.
- Lindley, J.A. 1993. 'Committee Reform in the National Parliament of Papua New Guinea: report to the Clerk of Parliament', Port Moresby (unpublished).
- Lipset, D.M., 1989. 'Papua New Guinea: the Melanesian ethic and the spirit of capitalism, 1975–1986', in L.J. Diamond, J.J. Linz and S.M. Lipset (eds), *Democracy in Developing Countries*, Volume 3, Asia, Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., Boulder.
- McLeod, A., 2002. 'Where are the women in Simbu politics?', *Development Bulletin*, 59:43–46.
- May, R.J. 2001, 'From promise to crisis: a political economy of Papua New Guinea', in R. J. May, *State and Society in Papua New Guinea: the first twenty-five years*, Crawford House, Adelaide:302–23.
- , 2003. 'Disorderly democracy: political turbulence and institutional reform in Papua New Guinea', Discussion Paper 2003/03, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra. Available from <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia/>
- Moore, C. with Kooyman, M. (eds), 1998. *A Papua New Guinea Political Chronicle 1967–91*, Crawford House, Bathurst.
- Nonggorr, J., 2004. 'No-confidence horse trading', *Post-Courier*, Focus, 1 and 8 November.
- O'Callaghan, M., 1999. *Enemies Within: Papua New Guinea, Australia and the Sandline Crisis: the inside story*, Doubleday, Sydney.

Policy dialogue

- Okole, H., 2002. 'Institutional decay in a Melanesian parliamentary democracy', *Development Bulletin*, 60:37–40.
- , 2005, 'The fluid party system in Papua New Guinea', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 46(3):362–81.
- , Narokobi, B. and Clements, Q., 2003. 'Strengthening a parliamentary democracy for the 21st century', Legislative Needs Assessment Board: National Parliament of Papua New Guinea, United Nations Development Programme, Suva.
- Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute, 2006. Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates 2003. Available from [http://www.paclii.org/pg/legis/consol\\_act/olotioppac2003542/](http://www.paclii.org/pg/legis/consol_act/olotioppac2003542/) (accessed March 2007).
- Reilly, B., 2001. *Democracy in Divided Societies: electoral engineering for conflict management*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- , 2006. 'Political reform in Papua New Guinea: testing the evidence', *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, 21(1):187–94.
- Reilly, B. and Phillpot, R., 2002. 'Making democracy work', in 'Papua New Guinea—Social capital and provincial development in an ethnically fragmented society', *Asian Survey*, 42(6):906–27.
- Saffu, Y., 1996. 'Continuity and change in PNG: electoral politics', in Y. Saffu (ed.), *The 1992 Papua New Guinea Election: change and continuity in electoral politics*, Political and Social Change Monograph 23, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Siaguru, A., 2001. 'The great game: politics of democracy in Papua New Guinea', Annual Address, Centre for Democratic Institutions, The Australian National University, Canberra, June.
- State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project, 2003. 'Abstracts of workshop papers', The Australian National University, Canberra. Available from [http://rspas.anu.edu.au/papers/melanesia/conference\\_papers/2002/UPNG-Elect-Conf2002-Abstracts.pdf](http://rspas.anu.edu.au/papers/melanesia/conference_papers/2002/UPNG-Elect-Conf2002-Abstracts.pdf)
- Standish, B., 1999. *Papua New Guinea 1999: crises of governance*, Information and Research Services, Research Paper 4, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra.
- , 2000. 'Papua New Guinea reflects', *Journal of the Pacific Society*, 23(3–4):1–10.
- , 2001. 'Papua New Guinea in 1999–2000', *Journal of Pacific History*, 36(3):285–98.
- , 2002. 'Electoral governance in Papua New Guinea: Chimbu Poll Diary, June 2002'. Available from [http://exkiap.net/articles/miscellaneous/bill\\_standish\\_20020628.htm#BillStandish](http://exkiap.net/articles/miscellaneous/bill_standish_20020628.htm#BillStandish) (accessed February 2007).
- , 2003a. 'Workshop report by Bill Standish', The Australian National University, Canberra. Available from [http://rspas.anu.edu.au/papers/melanesia/conference\\_papers/2002/UPNG-Elect-Conf2002Standish-Rep.pdf](http://rspas.anu.edu.au/papers/melanesia/conference_papers/2002/UPNG-Elect-Conf2002Standish-Rep.pdf)
- , 2003b. 'Papua New Guinea's most turbulent election', *Catalyst*, 32(2):230–48.
- , 2006. 'Limited preferential voting in Papua New Guinea: some early lessons' *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, 21(1):195–211.