

# Deepening political crisis around Papua New Guinea elections

By John Braddock  
18 July 2017

Following the resignation of Papua New Guinea's Electoral Advisory Committee (EAC) last week, the crisis surrounding the country's parliamentary elections has intensified. Polls closed on July 8, ending a two-week voting period dominated by widespread reports of vote rigging, incomplete electoral rolls, ballot box tampering and bribery.

The three members of the official watchdog collectively resigned, accusing the Electoral Commission that is running the poll of not allowing them access to basic information. The members—Chief Ombudsman nominee Richard Pagen, Transparency International nominee Richard Kassman and lawyer John Luluaki—declared the committee was “prevented from performing its constitutional duties and roles.” It had not been equipped with “baseline data and information, nor have we been party to regular reporting.”

The resignations are further evidence that Prime Minister Peter O'Neill's government is trying to cling to power through fraud. The EAC operated for less than a month. Legislation establishing the body was passed following discredited elections in 2002. However, nothing was done to set up the EAC until two weeks before this year's poll.

Electoral Commissioner Patilias Gamato flatly denied the commission had been obstructive, and described the resignations as “premature.” The EAC's role was to “give advice and recommendations,” he said, “not to judge the election.”

None of the opposition parties contesting the election has any alternative to the government's austerity policies. Like the government, they represent the interests of the business elite, including the transnational companies that dominate the country's economy.

Opposition leaders seized on the resignations to repeat the charge that the elections were rigged and demand a re-run. Don Polye, the main opposition leader in the last parliament, warned that if the results are allowed to stand, people will not accept it and “this could result in violence.”

Former Prime Minister Mekere Morauta, who came out of political retirement to run as part of a coalition with several other prominent figures, said the resignation sent “a loud and clear signal that the conduct of the election had been hijacked.” Like thousands of others, Morauta found his name missing from the electoral roll when he went to vote.

Only two seats from a total of 111 were declared by last Friday, even though counting has been underway for more than a week. A final result is not expected for several weeks. There are predictions that the “chaotic” situation that marked the election will produce highly suspicious counts.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported that the results from the first seat declared, Tari Open in the Highlands, saw Finance Minister James Marape re-elected with just over 30,000 votes. His three rivals got a similar total between them, yet there are fewer than 42,000 voters on the roll.

Transparency International PNG chairman Lawrence Stephens told the ABC the election was “shameful,” describing it as “certainly the worst election I have seen.” He blamed incompetence and an attitude among officials who “begin to think they are above the law.” Whatever the result, he predicted the outcome would be “undesirable.”

Fresh allegations continue to surface. A group of 28 candidates in Jiwaka's North Waghi electorate filed a petition objecting to the counting of six particular ballot boxes. They alleged unfairness around the

polling, with a heavy presence of security forces creating an intimidating environment. Scrutineers were prevented from monitoring the process. Video footage appears to show polling officials mishandling ballot papers.

Despite the criticisms, international observers moved to legitimise the vote. The Commonwealth observer team, led by former New Zealand governor-general Anand Satyanand, declared the need for a thorough review of the electoral process and “urgent improvements” to the electoral roll. It also acknowledged the significant number of eligible voters whose names were not on the common roll and several reported incidents of alleged vote buying by incumbent MPs.

Notwithstanding his team’s “serious concerns” with the rolls, Anand absurdly declared the results “should reflect the wishes of the people who participated in the 2017 national elections.”

Washington and regional powers, Australia and New Zealand, have deep concerns over the deteriorating situation in PNG. All have vital commercial and strategic interests in the country. Almost 5,000 Australian companies conduct business there, with total investments worth \$A5.8 billion. The \$US19 billion ExxonMobil natural gas venture is a major US asset.

O’Neill originally took office in 2011 through an illegal parliamentary manoeuvre after the ousting of his predecessor Michael Somare, who was regarded by Canberra as too close to Beijing. O’Neill welcomed an expanded Australian police and “advisor” presence, while supporting Australia’s interests in the wider region.

In April, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was accused of interfering in the election when he delivered a speech in Port Moresby, praising O’Neill for his co-operation in the “vitaly important fight against people smuggling” and commitment to “strengthening relations” between the two countries.

The Australian government provided extensive training and logistical support for the elections, as well as assistance in updating the electoral roll. Canberra, however, has distanced itself from the ensuing turmoil. Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop bluntly stated: “PNG is a sovereign nation; it is the PNG government’s responsibility to deliver this election.”

In a July 12 editorial, the *Australian* warned that the

“fragile state of democracy in our nearest neighbour provides serious cause for concern.” The editorial issued a series of edicts about what the incoming PNG government should do to counter corruption and “instability.”

Australia and New Zealand have no interest in “democracy” in the Pacific. The region has become a focus of geo-strategic rivalry, fuelled by Washington’s strategy, begun under President Barack Obama and extended by Donald Trump, to militarily encircle and prepare for war against China. New Zealand, Australia and the US are all seeking to maintain their hegemony in the southwest Pacific against China’s growing economic and diplomatic influence.

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