

PNG should try a national unity government

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While Papua New Guinea's competing leaders have their eyes on the valuable election war chest that comes with the prime minister's office, they should also realise that a protracted leadership struggle is unlikely to win significant public support.

The country's voters are growing increasingly disillusioned with big-man politics and politicians who pursue their self-interest at the expense of the people.

The origins of the constitutional crisis can be traced to prime minister Michael Somare's departure from PNG in April this year for heart surgery in Singapore, ultimately being unfit for duties for five months.

His prolonged absence from the country led to the opposition claiming, in an August sitting of Parliament, that the office of prime minister was vacant. The Speaker, Jeffrey Nape, accepted the claim and allowed a vote to fill the position. Peter O'Neill, who was Somare's treasurer, formed an alliance with members of the opposition and other deserters from the National Alliance party and won a vote of 70 to 24.

The Supreme Court then ruled on Monday in a 3-2 decision that the election of Peter O'Neill in August was unconstitutional as there was no vacancy in the office of prime minister at the time of his election. The court also ruled that Michael Somare should be restored to the office of prime minister.

After a stand-off on Monday night and Tuesday – during which O'Neill's government passed retrospective laws making their actions in August legal, confirmed O'Neill as the prime minister in Parliament, had Michael Somare's seat declared vacant and made their case to the Governor-General – the Governor-General Michael Ogio on Wednesday decided to swear in Somare's cabinet.

Even for the notoriously unpredictable nature of politics in PNG, the constitutional and legal events of this week have been unprecedented. Differing interpretations of the constitution and confusion among lawmakers and worryingly, in the Governor-General's office, have cast doubt on the capacities of those responsible for implementing the nation's laws.

Somare still does not have the support of the majority of members of Parliament and has suffered from a loss in public support after nine years in power. He will struggle to build the confidence necessary to govern. The O'Neill government, while far from perfect, offered hope and a chance at a fresh start for PNG at a critical time in its development. It promised to take action on corruption and appeared committed to reforms.

There are huge benefits to being the government in PNG now. First, the government has primary responsibility for managing the resources boom. PNG's economy is growing at 9 per cent in 2011. The promised bounty from the \$15 billion ExxonMobil liquefied natural gas investment is but one source of increased wealth. Second, occupying ministerial offices leading up to elections in June 2012 is immensely advantageous. Having access to cash reserves and resources to invest in a campaign and fund the financial inducements that are crucial to success cannot be underestimated.

PNG has a robust and vibrant democracy. The impressive contribution of social media – Twitter, Facebook and the blogosphere – to providing information and encouraging debate throughout this crisis has highlighted the role an engaged and youthful citizenry in PNG can make to the nation. Addressing the expectations of the country's burgeoning younger generation for a fairer share of the nation's growing wealth and for better government services will be important for whatever government forms after the elections.

PNG would be better served by a fresh, younger and energetic government – like that O’Neill promised – capable of mobilising the nation’s wealth to improve living standards. But it is also in PNG’s interests to maintain the rule of law and respect for the constitution and for the separation of powers. These factors, together with the effective functioning of the key institutions of state, prevent PNG from becoming a failing state and help maintain confidence in foreign investors, which is vital for the nation’s future. To date the public has not resorted to violence and there is no threat of the military interfering. The rule of law has prevailed among the intense political confusion.

The political impasse does not augur well for confidence in political actors as PNG prepares for general elections in June.

There have been suggestions that a way out of the political impasse could be found by the formation of a government of national unity. While it would be hard to convince the competing prime ministers and it may be outside the remit of the constitution, there are merits to this suggestion. A national unity government would be only temporary as it would be dissolved when the election writs were issued. It would force both sides to act in the national interest, enable the passage of vital legislation and give the public confidence in the political system following the current crisis. Importantly, it would remove the political advantage that the governing side has before the elections and establish a more level playing field for genuine and open electoral competition.

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