WESTMINSTER PRACTICES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: GOVERNANCE IN A MELANESIAN STATE

[DRAFT ONLY]

Henry Okole
School of Humanities & Social Sciences
University of Papua New Guinea
Henry.Okole@upng.ac.pg

Political Culture, Representation and Electoral Systems in the Pacific

University of the South Pacific (Emalus Campus)
Port Vila
Vanuatu
South Pacific

10th-12th July 2004

Organized by the Pacific Institute of Advanced Studies in Governance and Development (PIAS-DG), University of the South Pacific & the Institute of Policy Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.
Introduction

Like most Commonwealth member countries, Papua New Guinea (PNG) inherited the principal institutions of government from Great Britain. The Westminster model of government and the judicial system were passed on through Australia’s colonial administration. Some significant changes to the institutional structures have been done since PNG gained its independence in 1975. Nonetheless, pieces of legislation that have been passed were meant to address specific areas as was deemed necessary by the government.

This paper will describe the Westminster model of government in PNG. A retrospective look over 28 years of nationhood reveals that many of the institutional designs that PNG adopted are now either unworkable or outmoded in the face of the country’s fast-changing socio-political landscape. National elections have espoused highly unusual results compared to what the applicable literature describes. The party system has been dubbed a “deviant” case, given its incomparable characteristics compared to other developing democracies (Reilly 1999). The House of Parliament, at least over the last 12 years, has gone from a genuine chamber of the people to one that has been progressively controlled by the executive (see Okole 2002). All the while, democracy in PNG prevails as if all the main institutional pillars of the government are effectively functioning. At present, the country remains one of a handful of countries from the developing world that has maintained an unblemished record of democratic continuity (see Lijphart 1999).

Challenges of an Emerging State

Germany and Great Britain were the early colonizers of PNG. Germany annexed parts of the northern and eastern parts of present-day PNG on November 1 1884. It became known then as German New Guinea. In response, Great Britain annexed Papua on November 5 1884, and was called British Papua. Both colonial powers had their own interests in these territories. Great Britain relinquished control of Papua to Australia in 1906, which subsequently assumed control of New Guinea at the start of World War I (WWI) in 1914. The League of Nations allowed Australia to continue its administration of New Guinea under a mandate in the interwar years. A joint administration of Papua and New Guinea began in 1946 and lasted until the 1970s.

The institutionalization of any system of government in Papua New Guinea was bound to be restricted by two natural characteristics of PNG: the deep fragmented population and the rugged topography of parts of the country. Papua New Guinea is home to over 800 languages, and is spoken by approximately 5.2 million people (current estimate). In the past, the divisions
among the population were reinforced by inter-group rivalries too which in turn inhibited the mobility of people. The other natural characteristic was the rugged topography of the PNG, and particularly the interior of the island of New Guinea. One scholar was to remark that PNG offered “greater obstacles to travel that perhaps any other country in the world” (Mair 1970:4).

These natural characteristics of PNG contributed, both directly and indirectly, to the type of political and economic development of the country. First, the lack of uniformity in the existing political structures among the many native communities meant that the colonial powers found it difficult to exert firm control through traditional power structures (Dinnen 1998). A practice colonizers often used in many parts of the world was to co-opt traditional leadership structures into their line of control, and this was lacking in PNG. In addition, there was the difficulty to expand colonial control due to the rugged landscape and hostile inhabitants in many areas. Thus, while Germany and Great Britain annexed New Guinea and Papua respectively, their colonial control was limited only to where they each had settlers and specific interests. It was only when the Germans and British introduced their respective police forces with the inherent criminal code that rudimentary control structures were imposed (see Mair 1970:66-67). These structures served as the critical linkage between the many local communities and the colonial power centers in both Papua and New Guinea. Over time, the constabulary forces were to facilitate a gradual assimilation of the people and the colonial administrations.

The second consequence was that many parts of the country experienced uneven exposure to the outside world during the colonial period. While many coastal areas had experienced extensive contact with foreigners, the interior was relatively untouched until much later. Thus, in terms of a state building process, many communities in accessible areas were slowly imbued in the veneers of modern political practices and administrative organizations while others in more remote areas were very much living in traditional communities as they always did for hundreds of years with their own folklores and justice systems. While Rabaul town on New Britain Island had a cab service, a local branch of the Chinese Kuomintang party, and saw the first industrial unrest in the 1920s, the highlands region of mainland New Guinea with the biggest concentration of people was still to be discovered by the outside world (see Mair 1970; Nelson 1974).

The third consequence was to become apparent much later in PNG’s political history was a lack of nationalism. There was hardly a sense of oneness among the people right up until independence in 1975. One reason of course was the fragmentation of the population. Some tribal groups in parts of the country did not share commonality with one another for centuries. What superceded
nationalism were micro-nationalism, regionalism, and separatism as the fast changing political environment ushered in uncertainty and confusion to different parts of PNG (see May 1982). In addition, the various colonial arrangements that PNG had since the late 1800s failed to congregate or assemble the many social cleavages where it would have been possible to recognize an overarching nation. In sum, it suffices to say that the creation of PNG is one in which the concept of a modern state was superimposed on hundreds of sovereign traditional communities.

**A Budding Democracy: 1950s-early 1970s**

Given the complex fabric of the PNG society, its haphazard political development, and an almost non-existent experience with foreign political institutions, a highly centralized governing structure was inevitable by the end of World War II (WWII). That was how colonial control was imposed from the capital in Port Moresby, and particularly through the establishment of village councils. The village councils came under the umbrella of the Legislative Council, the main legislature of the time that represented Papua and New Guinea (see Waddell 1979). The Legislative Council had a simple composition, as displayed in Table 1. There were two categories of representatives. There were the officials who were headed by the Administrator of the colony. The Administrator served directly under the tutelage of the Australian government. The non-officials comprised representatives (both elected and appointed) of the people and various significant interests.
Business of the pioneering legislative body was constrained for three reasons. First, many non-officials were often more than willing to readily agree with the positions taken by the officials, and especially on policy issues. To some degree, this showed the inaptitude of these representatives. Second, the three indigenous people failed to participate fully in the Council’s meetings due to their inability to speak or understand English and even any general knowledge of democratic procedures (see Nelson 1974:124). Third, village councils were not established in most parts of the country due to inaccessibility to the interior of the country (Waddell 1979:187).

Under these circumstances, increasing the educational levels of indigenous people would have been an ideal policy initiative. Although Australia emphasized the importance of education, most of its support was concentrated on primary schools (Woolford 1976:4). Australia feared that politically conscious nationals could potentially cause problems for the colonial administration. The aim was to remain “two or three jumps ahead” of local demands for self-governance (Ryan 1969:110). Just how national leaders were to be sufficiently educated for a budding democracy was difficult to fathom.

By the early 1960s pressing circumstances and repeated calls by the United Nations’ Trusteeship Council cajoled Australia to start preparing PNG for independence. The first nation-wide election was held in 1964 and another two were held in 1968 and 1972 respectively before independence in 1975. The introduction of universal suffrage in the 1960s encouraged the establishment of political parties even though they proved ephemeral for much of the decade. However, an incipient party system appeared in the House of Assembly after the 1968 national election. It was at this time that serious debate among political

---

### Table 1
Composition of the Legislative Council

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Officials</th>
<th>Non-officials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Administrator</td>
<td>A total of 12, as follows:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 other government officials</td>
<td>3 elected by European population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 indigene appointees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Christian missions’ representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 representatives of other interests (mainly business).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Information from Hughes (1965:9).*
parties occurred in relation to the timing of independence for PNG. In April 1972, the first ever indigenous-led government took power under the stewardship of Michael Somare and his Pangu Pati. This event set in motion other preparations for eventual self-government and independence.\(^1\)

**A Westminster System of Government and Decentralization**

During the term of the first House of Assembly (1964-1968), the Australian colonial administration was effectively the executive branch. In 1968, the *Papua and New Guinea Act*—the document that outlined the governing institutions of the territory—was amended to allow for ministerial participation by selected indigenous members of the House (7 ministers and up to 10 assistant ministers) (Wolfers 1998:42-44). By 1970 most Australian officials were leaning toward a Westminster system of government. What mattered most was a system of government that could facilitate the reconciliation of the diversity of the people with the unity of the country. A federal system was rejected in favor of a unitary system because a strong central government had proven useful in dealing with many intractable problems during colonial rule (Waddell 1998:114). Australia abdicated much of its day-to-day administrative responsibilities with the formation of the first national government. However, Chief Minister Somare was still responsible to Australia’s Minister of External Territories on more significant matters (Hegarty 1998:197).

Overall, the legislative design and composition has gone through a number important transitional phases since the early 1950s. Each phase reflected the state of political representation by the indigenous people in relation to the receding control of the Australian colonial administration. Table 2 shows these legislatures.

---

\(^1\) Of great symbolic importance also in the early 1970s was a name change for the country. The formal name, the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, was changed to simply Papua New Guinea. Not only did this signify the unity of the country, but it also elevated the former colony to the same level as its departing colonizer, well ahead of independence. An Australian high commissioner was sworn into office in Port Moresby on self-government day. The high commissioner then swore in Michael Somare as head of government. The House of Assembly became the House of Parliament. Thus, in the big picture, the territory was independent in every way, except for formal recognition by the international community. That was to come two years later.
Table 2  
The Legislatures of Papua New Guinea and Membership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Legislature</th>
<th>Membership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1951 Legislative Council     | Administrator  
16 Official members  
9 Appointed members (3 Papuans and 3 New Guineans)  
3 Elected Europeans |
| 1961 Legislative Council     | Administrator  
14 Official members  
10 Appointed members  
6 Elected Europeans  
6 Elected Papuans and New Guineans |
| 1964 House of Assembly       | 10 Official Members  
10 Members from special electorates  
44 Members from open electorates |
| 1968 House of Assembly       | 10 Official Members  
15 members from Regional electorates (candidates must have territory intermediate or equivalent)  
69 members from open electorates |
| 1972 House of Assembly       | 4 Official members  
18 members of regional electorates  
82 members of open electorates  
Up to 3 members nominated by the House |
| 1977 House of Parliament to the present | 20 elected regional seats  
89 elected open seats |


Within a period of twenty-six years, the degree of transformation has been nothing less than astounding. Some members of the older generations in PNG
lived through profound changes that took hundreds of years to accomplish elsewhere.

Meanwhile, a debate regarding how “centrist” the national government should be under a unitary arrangement was to continue among indigenous members and in the wider community. In light of the existing micro-nationalist movements, the most delicate issue of all was how to balance power between the central government and the country’s various regions. Nonetheless, the Constitutional Planning Committee (CPC), a parliamentary group established to design the national constitution, staunchly stood by its conviction that a decentralized provincial system of government was needed.

Somare, in contrast, was unwilling to grant more governing responsibilities to secondary governments at a time when the whole country was going through a delicate transitional phase. After secession threats by the Napidakoe Navitu and Papua Besena, and a careful evaluation by Somare, a provincial government system was initiated in 1976 under the Organic Law on Provincial Governments (OLPGs). By 1980, nineteen provincial governments and a city commission for Port Moresby had been established (Dorney 1990:Chapter 5). The OLPGs was replaced in 1995 by the Organic Law on Provincial Governments and Local Level Governments. The intent was to bring political control closer to the people by empowering the local level governments.²

Sources of the Features evident in PNG’s Parliament

What type of Westminster government is practiced in PNG? Given PNG’s truncated political history as has been cursorily explained, electoral behavior and parliamentary practices were bound to be affected one way or another. The end results have constituted a Westminster government that has mirrored its own evolutionary phases. Hence, “despite its inherited Westminster-style parliament and democratic institutions, Papua New Guinea’s political system has rapidly evolved its own mores and distinctive practices” (Dorney 2000:40). However, to understand the features that define the inherent characteristics of PNG’s National Parliament and government machinery, it is prudent to underscore the definitive sources.

The first source is a reciprocal relationship between voters and parliamentarians in many electorates of the country. While such a relationship is perfectly normal for most democracies, it bears more importance and significance in PNG since the performance of Members is measured by how much they deliver to the

² The new system has largely failed to achieve its desired goals (see Okole, Narokobi, and Clements 2003).
electorate. This voter-politician relationship is also to be understood against a
history of dependence on the government that was developed prior to
independence (Parker and Wolfers 1971). The expectation that arose was that the
government was supposed to be the source of everything; from road and schools
to business opportunities and a source of capital. The Member was merely the
conduit to pass on to the people what they desired. Former Prime Minister Sir
Julius Chan has an explanation:

I have often read foreign commentators refer to our politics as ‘crazy and
without ideology.’ Ideology is a luxury marginal members cannot afford.
It becomes a case of delivering the goods – a pragmatic approach. Just as
it is in Australia before election day, with both sides offering election
bonuses. The Australian parties at every Federal and State election. For
us it is a full-time job! (Dorney 2000:47 original emphasis).

Politicians have reacted accordingly since their own political survival is
dependent on how much they deliver. This type of delivery system may have
surpassed their original constitutional duties as legislators. Years after
independence, Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta was to lament that the
country had fared worse off than the immediate voters of Members (Dorney
2000:79).

A second source that has contributed toward the characteristics of PNG’s
National Parliament is the use of the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system.
The voting system was last employed during the 2002 national elections after a
new system, the limited preferential voting (LPV) system, was adopted in 2001.
The FPTP system otherwise was used for six elections at five years interval from
1977 to 2002. Its impact was clearly observed when more candidates were
contesting for the 109 seats in Parliament, as shown in Table 3.
### Table 3
Candidates and Electoral Competition, 1964-2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Type of Electoral System</th>
<th>No. of Elective Seats in the Legislature</th>
<th>No. of Candidates</th>
<th>% Increase in the No. of Candidates</th>
<th>Average No. of Candidates per Electorate</th>
<th>Average Increase in Candidates per Electorate</th>
<th>% Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>OPV</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>OPV</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>OPV</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>611</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>879</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>1125</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>1513</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>1655</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>2371</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>2878</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: OPV = Optional Preferential Voting System; FPTP = First-Past-the-Post Electoral System (also known as the Plurality system)

There were 298 candidates in 1964, a time when many ordinary citizens did not really understand the role of parliamentarians, and particularly the procedures of the legislature. By the time the FPTP system was introduced in 1977, the total number of candidates had increased to over 800. In 2002, the total number of candidates stood at 2878. Accordingly, the increasing number of candidates means that the degree of support for each winning candidate is likely to decrease with each new election. That has been the case in PNG and Table 4 displays the numbers.
Table 4
Winning Percentages of Candidates, 1977 to 1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Seats</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>106*</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>103**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Three electorates postponed their elections after candidates passed away just before polling.
** Six seats from the Southern Highlands province were declared ‘failed’ after the 2002 national elections. The by-elections were held in mid-2002.

Nonetheless, it is clear from the table that between 1977 and 1997 more people entered Parliament with reduced support. In 1977 18 candidates acquired majority support from their respective electorates when they were endorsed by more than 50 percent of their voters. At the other end, no candidate won a seat with 9 percent or less, but 10 candidates did with 19 percent or less. The picture had drastically changed by 1997 when only four candidates secured at least 50 percent of the votes. In contrast, 60 candidates won seats with support at 19 percent or less. In 2002 only one candidate captured more than 50 percent of the votes.

The FPTP electoral system has affected PNG’s parliamentary democracy and the quality of governance in a number of ways. At least for one thing, representative democracy means anything but that in PNG. On another level, the electoral system atomized support for the contesting candidates. This in turn enticed problems relating to hyper-electoral competition, including endemic bribery, vote buying, and gun-related violence in the more recent elections. In relation to parliamentary performance, the restricted support for winning candidates meant that some Members were often serving a fraction of the voters they represented in each electorate, a point that adds clarity to the reciprocal relationship highlighted above.

The Westminster design of the PNG National Parliament is a third source for the peculiar features evident in the country’s legislature. The Parliament is another
arena with its own set of game rules. The behavior of MPs in Parliament is dictated to a greater degree by how it is designed. Since 1977, there have been 109 seats in the unicameral chamber (see Table 2). One MP is voted the Speaker which leaves 108 members. A group of MPs normally under political parties then vie for control of at least the barest minimum of 55 seats. Which ever side gets to acquire 55 members of more then earns the mandate to take control of the executive.

In an ideal two-party system, the bigger party gets to control the executive and the smaller party occupies the opposition side. In a coalition government, the side with the highest number of MPs gets to control the executive. Parliamentarians and their parties that find themselves in government can then be given ministries or other responsibilities. A MP stands a reasonable chance of being a “power wielder” if he or she is a member of the ruling coalition. The government side of the aisle is where MPs may acquire resources that enable them to meet or fulfill their electoral promises. The display of public largesse in front of the voters, needless to say, is also a form of ongoing campaign for the next election. Some fortunate members on the government side are allocated ministries. For others, there are statutory bodies, public enterprises, and special ad hoc tasks. However, not everyone in the governing coalition will be allocated a political post.

In contrast, the opposition side of the aisle provides hardly any opportunities to honor commitments or provide pork to one’s constituents. Before the introduction of the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (henceforth the Integrity Law) in 2001 (see discussion below), the best available option was to look for ways to join the government side. This was done by crossing the floor of Parliament, especially if the government offered positions. However, such offers were usually selective and linked to certain conditions. Thus, most opposition members had an underlying incentive to seek a complete change of government through a no confidence motion. Ultimately, an insidious game of opportunism took place with no real issues or policy stances dividing the various parties. Instead, excuses for no confidence measures were routinely fabricated for public consumption.

A fourth source of the features of PNG’s Parliament has been the country’s very weak party system. This is a shortcoming for parliamentary democracy that is not unique to PNG. The weakness of political parties is due principally to a lack of support and membership among the populace. Furthermore, parties in PNG

---

3 Scott Mainwaring (1999) has theorized that most ‘third wave democracies’ have weak party systems for reasons that places them in stark contrast to developed democracies. This in turn has affected the performances of governments. For more on third wave democracies, see Huntington (1991).
are not founded on ideologies, belief systems, specific issues, or historical circumstances that would galvanize and sustain support over time. Political parties exist because they are the means used for coalition formation in Parliament. In retrospect, while the issue of independence created party divisions in Parliament in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there has not been one controversial issue since then that would have separated the positions of parties. The role of political parties was then limited to two particular reasons: the sponsorship of candidates and subsequently coalition building.

A fifth source that has impacted the performance of the PNG National Parliament has been individuals’ attitude toward political power. This has become an area of concern due to the manner in which power has been misused and perhaps misperceived in the country. There are two key but related reasons why individuals crave political power. First, many of the traditional PNG societies place high emphases on the social status of individuals. Upward social mobility is associated with success in various acumen, which very often is displayed through wealth, fighting and hunting skills, and so forth.

In modern days, success also includes better education, business skills, and the like. Intricately woven into all these success categories is the perceived ability to be a leader. What has often been referred to as a culture of ‘bigmanship’ represents in part endeavors to achieve this end. The parliamentary arena is the ultimate pinnacle in which one can advance politically (see Hegarty 1983). The second reason why individuals want to be parliamentarians is that the position offers opportunity for them to advance their own interests. Very often these interests are manifested in the form of business opportunities. It is not surprising therefore that politicians are entering business either while still in power or as soon as they leave politics (see Kavanamur 2001).

Consequential Features of the PNG Parliament

The first major consequence that is directly related to the voter-politician reciprocal relationship is the performance of the Member. For most parliamentarians, there is almost a permanent preoccupation with fulfilling the wishes of the voters as part of the bargain. Failure to impress voters often ends with a candidate losing his or her seat. That PNG has a high attrition rate for incumbent MPs is explained in part by this rigid relationship between voters and their respective representatives (see Okole 2003).

Many of the peculiar characteristics of PNG’s National Parliament emanate from multiparty coalition politics. With weak parties in existence, the formation and survival of coalition governments are very much dependent on the wishes of partners at given moments. Not only are party members not always fully
committed to their respective parties, but relations between parties vis-à-vis prolonged alliances were not always guaranteed. The end result has been continuous change of coalition governments since independence.

Weak party affiliation by Members is exacerbated by the unicameral design of the legislature. To reiterate, an executive with a bigger numerical support is mandated to form the executive. However, successive executive sides have often been formed by loose alliances comprising weak political parties. There are three developments that arise from this situation. First, there is a gravitational pull toward the executive side in the legislature because of the ministries and other positions that a prime minister can distribute among his coalition partners. This sway to the executive is further explained when one comes to realize that a Member is better off being a Minister or an appointee of political positions since he or she gets to have access to resources that can be used for pork barrel purposes.

The second development is that over time there has been an apparent reordering of the sitting arrangement in the legislature. The opposition has progressively become smaller in size since few political parties want to be in that side of the aisle. Parties and individuals have preferred to be with the executive, even if that would be in the backbenches. The constant change of government means that a being a backbencher does not have to be for the long haul. The third development relating to PNG’s Parliament has been the popularity of the middle-benches. Occupying a position between the executive and opposition is a better option particularly since the Members and parties are not strictly allied with either side and, therefore, are more readily available for coalition formation when a situation warrants it.

Another feature of PNG’s Parliament is an array of practices that have been invented by Members to enhance their chances of political survival. These practices ultimately did, and still do in some respects, affect the performance of the national legislature. When it became obvious that a change of government was as easy as amassing the required number of Members to topple the incumbent, it set in motion insidious activities that basically left no prime minister and his government safe from voracious politics. The big parties since the 1970s like the Pangu Pati splintered to different parliamentary factions. Some Members opted for the ‘smallness’ of parties since it was easier to maneuver them in and out of coalition groupings. Some of these parties were nothing more than printed names on paper. Even some parliamentarians were members of more than one party at any one time (Saffu 1996).
More Strategies of Survival

By the 1990s, governments began employing tactics of survival even among the coalition partners. Trust even among cabinet colleagues was at its lowest ebb that things were done extraordinarily simply to survive. While most of the strategies targeted MPs, the public had to be kept on side either by directly appealing to them through both rhetoric and action, or working around their ignorance particularly in cases where laws were used.

A number of strategies were known to have been applied in the 1990s; some of them bordering constitutional crisis cases. The first was that a prime minister at times had to offer special favors, bribery, and sometimes blackmail to change or maintain the status quo. A prime minister with the best of intentions for the country is to have one eye on governance and the other on maintaining his coalition. Former Prime Minister Chan once complained about how much time and effort he had to commit to addressing his fellow politicians’ desires:

[I am wasting time in] coping with requests for special favours of all kinds, financial and otherwise, from individual politicians. I will be even franker and say that if a Prime Minister is determined to stay in office he can do so quite easily if he is prepared to grant enough favours. . . . I can’t speak for my predecessor, Michael Somare, but I would be most surprised if he didn’t face the same problems and I cannot see how any alternative head of government could avoid them (quoted in Kavanamur 2001).

Bribes can induce members to remain in current positions, cross to the government side, or defect to the opposition. In that light, a prime minister can bribe even cabinet colleagues just to maintain their support. Literally, the odds of coalition partners leaving the government were high that prime ministers had to induce support in whatever ways they could.

A second strategy was to look for loopholes in the laws and use them to a prime minister’s advantage. This is exemplified by one renowned case. In August 1993, after fourteen months in office, Prime Minister Paias Wingti resigned from office and then got himself re-elected by a dazed Parliament the next day. Wingti’s Government term was approaching the end of the eighteen-month grace period and his action was supposed to earn another eighteen months. Wingti ended up resigning a year later following a Supreme Court ruling that invalidated his action (Saffu 1995:221-222) (Narakobi 2002:74).
A third strategy was executed by perpetrators who would lure a party and then co-opting it by removing the party head. The ploy starts when a party is allowed to join the governing coalition. The ordinary members of the new party are offered comfort by being given ministries and other positions of responsibility. After some time, the party leader is removed or dumped often for some dubious or trivial reasons. The other party members are then placed in a precarious situation where they have to choose between following their fallen party leader and thereby abandoning all the benefits that are difficult to acquire, or stay put and pledge a new commitment either to a new party or as an independent.

A fourth strategy that was seen at least in the late 1990s was when the government deliberately withheld the Electoral Development Funds (EDFs) belonging to parliamentarians in the opposition. Such funds were allocated to Members which they could use for whatever projects in their respective electorates. Needless to say, such the EDFs served the purpose of ingratiating the legislators with their electorates. Denying the opposition members their allocation was meant to coerce more parliamentarians to cross to the government side.

The perceived sources and consequences of parliamentary practices in PNG need to be understood against the poor economic background of the country. While the country is well endowed in natural resources with a relatively small population, it has been difficult for governments since independence to record good economic growth. Hence, “the paradox for Papua New Guinea is seen in terms of its rich endowment of natural resources and high levels of aid on the one hand, and its poor social indicators and disappointing growth record on the other” (quoted in Dorney 2000:81). The reasons for a negative growth rate vary, and they include lack of political instability in Parliament, bad policy choices, poor infrastructure linking urban centers to the countryside, law and order, civil unrest, natural disasters, and the complication of laws governing natural resources (see discussion in Cole 1997). In 1990 PNG recorded a -3.0 percent annual growth and it dropped further to -3.5 percent in 2001 (World Bank 2003).

The impact that a poor performing economy has on politics adds up to hyper-competition for the limited resources. The role of the private sector is restricted or suffocated by the layers of disincentives vis-à-vis investment. The state institutions then become the means to which self-aggrandized individuals

---

4 This particular strategy was often used during the 1997-2002 parliamentary term. A Member of Parliament who served for only one term during this period explained this strategy to the author.

5 The EDFs have been severely abused over time, particularly in terms of misappropriation for one’s own use (see Ketan 2000:69).
pursue their own goals. Generally, politics then becomes the only game left in town.

**Coalition Instability and the Integrity Law**

The end result of all these developments led to the perpetual change of government that has taken place since independence. In fact, no government has served out a full five-year term. Table 5 shows these government changes.

**Table 5**

**Coalition Governments since 1972**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Prime Minister</th>
<th>Deputy Prime Minister</th>
<th>Precursor of Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Michael Somare (Pangu)</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Michael Somare (Pangu)</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>Iambakey Okuk (NP)</td>
<td>Vote of No Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Michael Somare (Pangu)</td>
<td>Paias Wingti (Pangu)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Paias Wingti (PDM)</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>Vote of No Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Paias Wingti (PDM)</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Rabbie Namaliu (Pangu)</td>
<td>Ted Diro (PAP)</td>
<td>Vote of No Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Paias Wingti (PDM)</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>Chris Haiveta (Pangu)</td>
<td>Court ousted PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Bill Skates (PNC)</td>
<td>Chris Haiveta (Pangu)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Mekere Morauta (PDM)</td>
<td>John Pundari (PAP)</td>
<td>Incumbent PM resigned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Michael Somare (NA)</td>
<td>Allan Marat (PPP)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key:** Pangu = Pangu Pati; PPP = People’s Progress Party; NP = National Party; PDM = People’s Democratic Movement; PAP = People’s Action Party; PNC = People’s National Congress; NA = National Alliance.

The government has changed hands ten times since 1977. Five changes have come through elections, three by votes of no confidence, and one each through a court ruling and a resignation. These numbers do not include numerous occasions when coalition partners changed but the main party remained at the helm, the number of unsuccessful and aborted no confidence motions, or frequent party jumping by members of Parliament (MPs). The last successful vote of no confidence took place in 1988, although coalition instability has worsened since.

Coalition instability became a permanent feature of PNG’s national politics from the mid-1980s (see Okole 2003). Coming out of the 1982 national elections, the Pangu Pati under the leadership of Michael Somare was to become the most
successful party at any elections in the history of PNG when it won 50 out of the 109 seats. However, the party was to succumb to internal divisions by 1985, the year that Somare lost the prime ministership for the second time since independence (see Table 5). From then on, party politics became haphazard and extremely volatile.

In 2001 the government of Sir Mekere Morauta introduced the Integrity Law. This piece of legislation was designed specifically to stabilize politics in the National Parliament. The Integrity Law came into effect after the 2002 national elections. One of the key provisions prohibited Members from switching political parties at will unless for reasons specified by the law. Some political developments since 2002 have tested the Integrity Law, though more time is required to see how effective it can be in dealing with PNG’s instability problem.

**Parliamentary Committee System**

Sections 118-123 of the National Constitution provide for permanent parliamentary committees. In recent years this constitutional provision was further consolidated with the introduction of the *Permanent Parliamentary Committees Act 1994*. The committee system attempts to be inclusive in that it tries to accommodate as many backbenchers as possible. Therefore Ministers are prohibited from membership of permanent parliamentary committees. There are 13 parliamentary committees in the PNG Parliament.

The parliamentary committee system has not been performing well at least over the last 15 years. Lack of finance has been one area that has hampered their performances. A better performing committee system would have immensely assisted the national government in a number of ways. Since committee groups are to be formed by Members who are not Ministers and from both the government and opposition sides, their respective responsibilities would have served to give ordinary parliamentarians something recognizable to do apart from ministries. Also, the close cooperation forged among Members through the parliamentary committees would have served to further enhanced transparency, accountability, and trust; qualities that are badly missed in the country’s legislature. Moreover, parliamentary committees could have been useful training grounds for freshman parliamentarians. Finally, a government cautious not to get embroiled in sensitive issues can use the committee process of inquiry and reporting to ascertain public support and policy options (see Okole, Narokobi and Clements 2003).

What is disturbing, however, is that committee members are able to collect their sitting allowance even if they do not meet at all. However, the revival of the
Public Accounts Committee (PAC) since 2002 has been successful and has won public praise. There is hope that other committees would do the same.

What might prevent or restrict the restoration of the parliamentary committee system is the availability of funds. But given the circumstances as they have been since the 1990s until today, people have also been questioning the impartiality of the Speaker. The committees come under the control of the Speaker and he is chosen from among the main parties in a coalition government (Narokobi 2002). The point is whether a Speaker would have the will to restore confidence in the parliamentary committee system. Also, what would motivate a Speaker to prevent committees from performing their constitutional duties?

**Conclusion**

This paper has given an overview of the manner in which PNG got to have a Westminster system of government. The system was transplanted to PNG through Australia’s colonial rule. A legislature was established to represent the colony by the 1950s, but the first election was held in 1964. Over a period of a little over 20 years, the incipient democratic setting became a fully-fleshed modern democracy in 1975 when the country gained its independence. A notable point is that the Westminster system was considered the most appropriate model of government given the pressing circumstances, and particularly with Australia at the helm. A unitary arrangement was preferred over federalism, and unicameral legislature was chosen as better suited in the country’s formative years.

What is clear from this paper is that while the PNG government possesses all the institutional features of a Westminster democracy, its performance has espoused other characteristics that are similar but not entirely comparable to other countries that have adopted the Westminster model too. One fundamental reason relates to the reciprocal relationship between voters and their elected representatives, and especially the behavior of the latter group in the National Parliament. Voters desire an array of tangible benefits while Members seek re-election. How these sides hold each other accountable to their respective ends of the bargain is what explains in part the haphazard performance of the legislative body.

Another fundamental reason for PNG’s brand of Westminster democracy is the existence of many fluid political parties. Parties at times are no more than parliamentary factions, but they are indispensable to coalition governments. More often than not, parties are stepping stones for coalition formation and dissolution. That no political party has canvassed popular support and sustained it over time explains the nature and motive of such parties. “They
remained politicians’ parties, not mass parties” (Oliver 1989:10), or cadre parties as Duverger (1966) categorized them. Other features of PNG’s Westminster system has evolved with time. For example, the strong executive arm at the expense of a vibrant opposition, and the attraction of the middle benches, are consequences to the manner in which politics has been played out on the floor of Parliament.

The PNG National Parliament may be in serious need of reform (see Okole, Narokobi, and Clements 2003). Some of the basic features of the Westminster model of government have been rendered ineffective by the ever-changing political temperament of the country. The adoption of the Integrity Law in 2001 was the first serious attempt to stabilize politics in the National Parliament. As to where PNG goes from here with its Westminster government, only time would tell.

References


