Papua New Guinea’s Democracy

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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 transfer of governments to mean that the country has a robust and viable democracy (Lipset 1989; Reilly 2001). Yet many Papua New Guineans decry the performance of their political institutions of governance. In much of the country the capacities of government institutions are over-stretched: most urban and rural people suffer from collapsing roads, schools, health and other basic services. The state cannot control crime and the public are intensely cynical about politicians. Despite this, the country’s democratic political institutions survive. This paper seeks to suggest some answers to the question ‘how does PNG politics tick’? Here I first describe the current state of play in the national arena, and examine some of the factors and forces within PNG’s society and economy which influence the imperatives of PNG politics. The previous Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta sought to improve the functioning of the country’s political structures, so this paper looks briefly at the first impacts of constitutional changes intended to reform politics and improve governance. In the final section the paper examines whether key aspects of the logic of the PNG parliamentary game remain the same.

As well being rooted in the people’s social structures and cultures, developmental inequity and hence political discontent is heightened by the country’s dispersed and unevenly developed economy. Underlying the economy are the country’s topographic divisions and varied ecological and resource bases. The effectiveness of the country’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. Conflict within the 20 provincial governments, 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 PNG’s elected provincial governments, which lasted from 1978 to 1995, or examine current provincial governments in detail, although much of the analysis of the nature of PNG politics presented below also applies to this level of government.

* This paper has been written while on fieldwork in the PNG Highlands, away from regular files and libraries. The final version will be more fully referenced.
PNG’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 and by votes of no confidence. Yet governments in PNG cannot be challenged by a vote of no confidence for 30 months of the 5 year parliamentary term, in their initial 18 months, or in the fifth and last year of a parliament, which would precipitate an early election. The National Parliament is unable to exercise control over the executive during these periods of immunity or ‘grace’, as discussed further below. However critics challenge the integrity the five-yearly elections, especially after the turbulent and chaotically administered elections of June-July 2002. The late Sir Anthony Siaguru, the political commentator, described that national election 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 2002). The National Alliance party emerged from the election with the largest number of members of parliament (MPs), and according to new rules its leader was offered first chance to form a government on the floor of Parliament. Accordingly, Sir Michael Somare, although damaged by the Pelair scandal in the mid 1980s and removed as Pangu leader in May 1999, was re-elected as Prime Minister (PM) in August 2002. At Kokopo town his coalition members had made an ‘irrevocable agreement’ to stay together, but this year they have followed what appears to be a Melanesian cultural trait of political fission.

In 2000 the National Parliament had passed a constitutional amendment and Organic Law intended to ensure ‘the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates’ (known as OLIPPAC) which is really an attempt to create stability within and between parties, and hence within the executive. Aside from the leader of the strongest party being allowed first chance at forming a government after an election, the intention of the law is that MPs should be effectively locked in to whichever party which endorsed them in the election or which they first joined after voting for the PM. They are then obliged to vote with that party throughout the life of parliament on major issues such as the budget, the prime ministership of vote of no confidence, and on constitutional matters. They do, however, retain the option of abstention. The ultimate aim of OLIPPAC is to improve policy consistency and encourage better governance.

However by the end of June 2004 political interest was re-focussed on factionalism among the 104 MPs currently in the legislature. Sir Michael’s initial 18 month period of grace had expired in February 2004, and four of the ten parties in his coalition were clearly split between Government and Opposition factions. Somare in January 2004 had failed in an ill-advised effort to amend S145 of the constitution to extend the period of grace from 18 to 36 months, which split his coalition partners. In late 2003 he accused several ministers of disloyalty when they failed to support this amendment, and sacked them. But still the manoeuvrings continued, and in June 2004 Somare rejuggled his cabinet in an effort to retain a parliamentary majority. The Opposition politicking only intensified. The Integrity Law appeared not to have worked, certainly not by ensuring the

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2 PPP, PAP, URP and Pangu.
wholeness of political parties or creating stability. What continues are established patterns of politicking.

**Current national-level politicking**

Several former ministers and temporary allies of Somare openly express their desire to replace his government, without providing coherent justification. According to press commentators they have no policy motivation, only greed for power and the desire to wrest control the pork barrel and perquisites of office. The repayment of debt and macro-economic indicators -- such as the positive balance of payments and low inflation – show that the economy is being managed well, and there is no current major scandal or crisis to justify a vote of no confidence.

In January 2004 the Somare government looked as if it felt vulnerable when it adjourned parliament for 5 months in January 2004, but then the PM from July 1999, the reformist Sir Mekere Morauta, moved across the floor in early May to prop up the coalition. Despite recent bitter policy arguments with Somare over the pursuit of overseas loans, Morauta’s entire party (the Peoples Democratic Movement, PDM, recently renamed the PNG Party) moved from Opposition into Government, which is allowed under the OLIPPAC (provided the party caucus agrees). PDM had been thrashed in the 2002 election and Morauta himself was politically damaged by his government’s fiscal mismanagement, but retained twelve MPs. The twelve man PNG Party was rewarded with three ministries, and Morauta became Chairman of the National Capital District Commission. Feeling more secure, Somare then moved against several dissident ministers, and the Speaker, Bill Skate. A senior National Alliance minister told a party branch meeting in the Highlands in late May that ‘We have cut off the heads of the minor parties, and will be able to gather up the bodies’. This is a tactic previously used by PM Skate in his last desperate months in office on early 1999 (Henry Okole, Pers. Comm. April 2004).

Such parliamentary politicking, divorced from the electorate or public opinion, is what Siaguru called ‘the great game’ which can totally paralyse government in PNG for months at a time. It destabilises not only the ministry but much of the central public service and shatters hopes for policy consistency. The former PM Paias Wingti had been the founder of PDM, but kept his nominal status as an independent after the 2002 election. He has been active behind the scenes in moves to replace Somare, but first he must displace the latest Leader of the Opposition (and till May, Somare government minister), Peter O’Neill. Under the Skate government O’Neill controlled Pacific Finance, which was set up to manage the corporatisation and privatisation of the publicly owned PNG Banking Corporation, the Public Officers Superannuation Scheme and the Motor Vehicles Insurance Trust, among other state owned enterprises. These exercises became major scandals as hundreds of millions of kina of funds disappeared, and commissions of inquiry created by PM Morauta referred O’Neill for police investigation for perjury. O’Neill is now hugely wealthy and this helped him play a major role in the formation of the Somare led-coalition, and he gained a ministry until sacked in late May for plotting against his PM. Also among Somare’s henchmen in forming the government in July-August 2002 was Bill Skate, who became Speaker (for the second time) and – on
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occasion – Acting Governor-General. In July 1999 Skate had resigned in disgrace as Prime Minister to avoid a vote of no confidence, but in mid June 2004 was making a play to reinvent himself and become the next PM. In late May rivals from Opposition factions of three other parties were jockeying to replace Somare, and met with the Deputy Prime Minister Moses Maladina (who was sacked for his trouble, but since has wheedled his way back into a ministry). Clearly memories are short and people have low expectations of their politicians, or perhaps expectations other than probity and pursuit of the common good.

The survivability of PNG democracy
Life has been tough in PNG for the last 10 years, with high rates of inflation until recently and collapsing government services, yet except for the Sandline mercenary affair of 1997 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 allows the elected governments to be irresponsible and unresponsive to public sentiment. Yet in formal terms democratic rule survives in PNG, and some would say it thrives, despite poor performance and obvious institutional frailty.

Democracy means much more than the holding of free and fair elections. Aside from elections, to be an effective mode of governance democracy also requires representatives who are responsive and responsible to the electorate, and ongoing participation by citizens. There was widespread chaos and malpractice in the June-July 2002 national elections, which reduces their value as a test of public sentiment. Yet we can say that many people were able to express their disillusioned with the 109 parliamentarians. They were challenged by 2769 opponents seeking to replace them, and in the 103 seats declared only 25 per cent of sitting Members of Parliament (MPs) were re-elected. The government led by Sir Mekere Morauta from 1999 had become profoundly unpopular, and the PDM party went into the election with 42 MPs and emerged with only twelve.

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 PNG’s poor performance have been themselves government ministers, including the then Prime Minister Sir Mekere. After the 2002 election, just as in 1997, many PNG leaders have said that the electoral system was not working effectively. A broader view, argued by some Papua New Guinean academics, is that the country’s democracy system does not work and that there is widespread public disillusionment with the entire system of elected governments in PNG (e.g. Ketan 2000).

The country’s first parliamentary elections were held in 1964, 1968 and 1972, well before Independence in 1975, and since then there have been seven general elections and five prime ministers (three of whom have been recycled more than once). The 2002 poll prompted serious reconsideration of this viewpoint, with both national and foreign

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observers unanimous in their concern about what was dubbed the ‘worst election ever’,
in which the capacity of the state to manage this complex process was totally overwhelmed
in both the national capital and many rural areas. As discussed below, the intensity of
political competition reflects the weakness of both political and administrative systems.

The economy under stress
Inflation has been high in PNG after a decade of deficit financing, real incomes are
decreasing, and so is formal sector employment. People are struggling to make ends meet
in urban areas, and many are failing to do so. The country’s population has doubled since
Independence in 1975. During that time the bureaucracy and security forces have
basically remained static in numbers (with the army currently being shrunk). Despite
frequent talk of the public service being ‘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 provincial allocations of
personnel 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 than less populated areas such as the New Guinea Islands provinces, and lower per
capita expenditures. Average economic growth rates over the last three decades have
been low, less than population growth rates, and in real terms budgetary resources have
dropped. Physical infrastructure has been allowed to run down for lack of maintenance,
and 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.

Papua New Guinea had begun a socio-economic 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 and cocoa, which employed many people but which since then have lost
value in the world market. Since Independence the rural economy has largely been
ignored by both provincial and national governments. Rural production declined
seriously in the 1990s partly because of poor roads and banditry. Similarly, high security
costs 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 mine in 1995. 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, but mining has never created large-scale employment. The minerals and
petroleum sector boom of the 1990s is now in decline (with the possible exception of
natural gas).

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4 (ABC 2002; May 2003).
5 Michael Baxter, Enclaves or Equity: the rural crisis and development choice in Papua New Guinea,
6 Ibid.
Potentially renewable resources have not been well managed, and indeed politicians who can serve as gatekeepers have been bought off by foreign operators 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. The timber industry has had corrupt relationships with politicians and officials, sometimes appearing to influence not only the relevant minister but also the majority of parliamentarians, and has never been taxed effectively (despite the demands of international aid donors). The 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. PNG fishing ministers have also been rather loose in issuing fishing licences, and not adhered to the multi-lateral Pacific Islands fishing regime. PNG’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 on imported consumer durables and capital goods.

Increasingly the political and bureaucratic elites have focussed 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, PNG has become a rentier state surviving on income from resource projects, in particular large foreign companies.

Given the small private sector, the state has had a huge role in PNG’s underdeveloped economy since the colonial era. However the state does not have a large domestic income tax base and has had difficulty collecting sales taxes and their replacement, the Value Added Taxes (VAT) which are largely based on the import sector. Head taxes (poll taxes) imposed by the colonial regime were minimal, but were abandoned by local government councils in the 1970s because the state no longer had the capacity to collect them. Reinstituted 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.

State spending is a major driving force in the economy, and individuals seeking personal advancement usually do so through accessing a position in the state, or obtaining state funds through business or other means. The economic centrality of the state intensifies political competition, as educated people seek to gain advancement in the bureaucracy and resources through political means. As state revenues decline in real terms, various other opportunities are closed. Paradoxically, the under-developed state becomes the site of increasingly intensified political competition, as was shown in the 2002 election with its 21 per cent increase in the number of candidates.

Elections
The 2002 elections vividly demonstrated the varied political styles in different regions, provinces and cities. The limited capacities of the PNG state were strikingly obvious. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong in these elections, especially in the
Highlands region, and Port Moresby city, where political competition is at its most intense. There was electoral fraud in most provinces, apparently led by local political figures. Not only did basic administrative procedures fail, but the security forces were unable to maintain control of the public or even all their own personnel. Some people were killed or kidnapped before and during the polling. Serious fighting continued in the Highlands region for more than six months after the election, and over a hundred people were killed in election-related violence. In a July 2002 reference to the Supreme Court 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’.7

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 indicates their desperate desire to gain some control over state resources and services, and starkly demonstrates the fact that in many areas they were not constrained by electoral procedures intended to ensure free and fair elections. It strengthens the arguments of University of PNG political scientist Alphonse Gelu that the colonially-introduced liberal democratic political culture never took root, and that authoritarian styles of non-liberal democratic politics better reflect indigenous political mores.8

In PNG 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 of Sir Mekere Morauta by 99 votes to 10.9 Faced with poor economic conditions, a massive debt burden and ongoing fiscal shortages and internal divisions, the Morauta government was unable to make much improvement in government services in the provinces.10 People want their government to be responsive to public opinion, but unfortunately this only seems to happen at election time. Although the PDM members had access to millions of kina of government resources, and gave away numerous 4WD vehicles during the campaign, the high turnover of Morauta government MPs and ministers in mid-2002 is a sign of negative accountability in operation. By contrast, the re-election of most MPs in the National Alliance party led by Somare indicates that the most effective critics of government can be rewarded, despite the fact that some of them had been deprived of the ‘slush fund’ patronage resources channelled through 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 with 10 parties, a (recycled) prime minister confirmed (with a majority of 88 to nil) and a new ministry appointed. There was also scepticism about the integrity of a number 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 immediate deficit crisis and parliamentary committees started working after a gap of nearly a decade. In late 2002 there was some hope for the new government, but anger at the deficit and debt they had inherited from their predecessors. Nonetheless, the new government derived from a parliament which had been elected by a tainted process. Instead of being locked up in jail, according to one PNG academic, ‘corrupt politicians have taken up seats in parliament, which could be described as a house of thieves.’

**Varied political styles**

Politics is the main game, or path to improvement so many rural people and ambitious individuals seek to mobilise support among their small-scale Melanesian societies to get themselves elected. Often they use as their launching pads village, clan and tribal corporate groupings which rarely exceed a few thousand people. These should not be seen as ‘ethnic groups’, and usually several such groups share a common culture and language. In the era of colonially-imposed peace, it was believed that these communities governed themselves by consensus, with leaders (often called ‘big-men’) attracting followers and basing their influence and renown on their central position 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 valuables from outside the community, and preferably from the state itself. Generous hospitality and gifts of money are common in election campaigns in most areas, although techniques differ across the country.

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, and in 2002 it was only about half that rate. Huge state ‘slush’ funds are available to MPs but do not necessarily build up their support. Unwise distribution of such funds or failure to distribute them frequently causes resentment among the electorate and provokes opposition. These funds certainly increase the incentives for rivals to take the gamble of candidature, and with a 2002 average of 26 candidates per electorate under the first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system only a small vote has been needed to gain election. The majority of MPs in 2002 won their seats with less than 17 per cent of the vote, sixteen with less than 10 per cent.

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Since that election the 2002 legislation for ‘limited preferential voting’ (LPV) has been applied, with four by-elections completed using this system. These are Abau Open located to the east of Port Moresby (December 2003), Yangorou-Saussia Open in the coastal East Sepik province, and two seats in the Highlands: Anglimp-South Wahgi Open, and Chimbu Provincial (all in May 2004). The Abau by-election went smoothly, although in one large village the officials and police were unable to prevent some voting malpractice and there were some very minor disturbances. The Abau case was not a good test of the operation of the preferential voting (transfer vote) system, however, because the leading candidate swamped his five rivals, gaining 48 per cent of the vote on the first count.

Poor electoral administration, on the other hand, indicated 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 is intentional, organised by intending candidates who stand to gain as individuals. It facilitates multiple voting and provides an incentive for controlled/intimidated bloc voting. In the recent Yangorou-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. Nonetheless, these by-elections were very peaceful, compared to recent general elections (Standish 1996). There has been some very limited post-election violence in Chimbu in the week this paper is being written. The Highlands polls involved some bribery and some major electoral fraud, but in general involved far less conflict than usual between candidates and their supporters during campaigning, as most of them sought second or third preferences from within the base areas of their rivals. (I will refer to this by-election in more detail in my paper on Bases of Voting for this conference.)

Regardless of the major reforms associated with the (re)adoption of preferential voting, it is possible to make some generalisations about styles of politics and electioneering in different regions of Papua New Guinea. In the central Highlands valleys, with their large tribal groups, clan solidarity and tribal voting has been strong over the last 30 years, although it is breaking down as larger numbers of candidates stand, sometimes splitting the tribe or even clan which is candidates’ potential base vote. To a lesser extent, internal sectors with a degree of ethnic identity can be mobilised within electorates which cover whole provinces. This was the case in the recent Chimbu By-Election, as well as the election of 1982 which saw the defeat of Deputy Prime Minister Okuk. Local issues and identities are extremely important, far more so than party membership or policies.

In the coastal and island regions, societies are comprised of much smaller clan and village structures, and so candidates must seek to mobilise numerous small social units, sometimes across several local vernacular languages, 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 as demonstrated over the years. These qualities may include training and skills, but often factors such as

\[\text{Standish in Peter King ed., 1989.}\]
church membership and perceived piety, and personal generosity and capacity for sheer dedication and hard work.

Across the entire country, we can generalise and say that intense localism is an essential component of electoral success, along with personal style, and that national issues are not especially salient. As discussed further below, this means that people who are elected do not owe their election to membership in wider parties, although patron-client relationships with a party leader may increase the stature of particular candidates and their chances of being able to attract resources into the electorate (or at least to their core supporters).

The consequences of this, in turn, are profound. Political parties are owed little by successful candidates, and hence have limited hold over or capacity to sanction them. Withdrawal of party endorsement is usually a political death sentence in an industrialised country, whereas in PNG until the instigation of OLIPPAC it was insignificant. Indeed, it was an attempt to overcome the weakness of political parties which led to the Integrity Law. On the basis of this analysis, however, we can say that OLIPPAC has attempted a top-down approach to the problem of weak parties, whereas the irrelevance of parties to the electorate is based in the divisions and structures of Melanesian societies at large, as well as the divided topography and economy, and the concomitant 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 local people want them to be elected. At each election the majority of new MPs are Independents when elected. Clever parties are those that pick up likely winners, and the party owes more to the candidate’s base votes and resources than the reverse. Such was the case with the recent winner in the Chimbu by-election, who tried three political parties before finally being endorsed by the United Resources Party on the second last day of nominations.

**Parties, parliament and governance**

The loyalties arising from the small polities of Melanesian society are central to explaining many of PNG’s problems with executive governance and instability in the legislature. Certainly they provide alternate ideological bases for politicians, rather than national party allegiances. Although modern political parties commenced from 1965-70 with fairly strong regional identities and distinctive policy differences about the timing of Independence, political parties in PNG lost much of their regional identity after 1977. Party loyalty and voter identification with party leaders reached its peak in the 1982 election. Since then, politics increasingly has been about holding and allocating the petty spoils of office, especially when in hard economic times the chances for major development projects are minimal. PNG’s parties are now personalised vehicles for gaining and sharing power, with minimal policy differences. They remain essentially factions within the National Parliament, centred upon a leader, even leaders who may have lost their seats like the wealthy founders of two parties, such as former Prime Ministers Sir Julius Chan (Peoples Progress Party, PPP whose term ended in 1997) and Paias Wingti (who was out of parliament between 1997-2002).
Most parties only attempt to link with the wider electorate at election times. Since 2002 the OLIPPAC has encouraged parties to strengthen their organization in order to elect MPs who have formal party endorsement, but branch memberships remain low. Most parties only establish provincial branches at election time, and they still do not have mass memberships.14 Candidates will shop around asking parties for endorsement and financial support, and usually receive minimal help just at the time of nomination, which is late in what may have been a campaign of years. They owe their election to their own efforts, which might costs tens or hundreds of thousands of kina (K1=USD 0.31). Essentially parties are irrelevant to the decisions made by voters in elections (Saffu 1996). Indeed, at each election the majority of new MPs are Independents when elected.

Those who are elected are obliged to benefit their own small local constituency while in office, in the hope of re-election. Aside from recouping their own expenses, they must seek the best possible deal for their local vote base in the first instance, rather than their entire electorate. This means joining the strongest team, and until 2002 that could mean readily shedding their initial party loyalty. Once in Parliament, MPs almost invariably do join parties, and the wealthy parties like PPP have grown most between elections, especially when in power. Nothing succeeds like success, and 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’) budgetted for MPs in the Opposition. If backbenchers are in government during the period of ‘grace’ their chances of a ministry of additional lucrative appointment increases, and as ministers they can control far more than backbenchers. Hence the regular drift towards government parties in recent years, until the last few months before a possible vote of no confidence. This explains the logic behind frequent party-hopping, known as ‘yo-yo politics’, which is what OLIPPAC was intended to prevent. This process of movement between parties has continued under the OLIPPAC, with whole parties voting to be absorbed by larger ones.15 The public’s expectation of large-scale patronage places huge pressures on MPs, and several MPs and even Sir Julius Chan have stated it is one factor driving corruption.

Throughout the 1990s, the principal role of parliaments has been merely to determine which team wins executive power and controls the spoils of office. It has not been about checks and balances on the executive, or detailed advice and consent on legislative matters. Major legislation is passed rapidly, without significant debate, and with huge majorities. Generally the executive is dominant, and can buy support and ignore parliament. The executive appears to get stronger and stronger until an election, but can collapse if a vote of no confidence is possible or imminent. PNG’s annual budget has regularly been passed without serious scrutiny or debate, beyond the set piece speeches by party leaders, and budget votes have not been used to discipline governments. Annual national budgets will often contain ‘sweeteners’ for MPs, such as discretionary funds, to

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14 There has only been one mass membership in PNG, namely the ‘Tony’ cards sold around rural villages by Anthony Voutas and his komitis in the late 1960s in Morobe Province, which for a few years were converted into Pangu Party memberships. (AC Voutas 1971)
ensure they are passed without delay. Legislative committees and parliamentary scrutiny declined markedly throughout the 1990s.\textsuperscript{16} Scrutiny of governance was assisted most by the Ombudsman Commission and the Courts, rather than the National Parliament.\textsuperscript{17} However in his new role of parliamentary Speaker from 2002 Bill Skate pledged to strengthen the role of parliament and its committees. The Public Accounts Committee restarted its constitutional role of intense scrutiny of government financial operations, and has been taking an activist role and identified some bureaucratic scalps for investigation by the police and Ombudsman.

**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 imbued in the polity. In periods when a no confidence vote is not permitted, PNG governments have been able to act without regular parliamentary scrutiny. Under the constitution, a vote of no confidence (VNC) in the last year of a parliamentary term would precipitate an immediate general election. This is unlikely, not only because the Electoral Commission’s preparations take years but because most MPs fear losing their seats at each election. A VNC in that last year is essentially unthinkable. During this phase several governments have been at the apex of their power, and pushed through major reforms. It was also 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. The plan was tripped up not by parliament but by a rebellion by sections of the Defence Force and mass public demonstrations in the capital.\textsuperscript{18}

During the two ‘periods of grace’, between 18-48 months, there are windows when the executive is vulnerable and in theory parliament at its highest potential power. Yet parliament has often abdicated its oversight role during these periods, and often the quality of governance declines as a result. Since 1988 it has become standard practice for governments to adjourn parliament during much of the time when a VNC 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. Parliament in 1988 and 2000 agreed to adjourn for over six months in order to avoid the chance of a VNC, and in early 2004 commenced a 5 month adjournment, broken only by the need to re-elect a Governor-General. The admission of insecurity implied by a long adjournment also means a VNC is more likely whenever Parliament 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 and the ministry.

\textsuperscript{16} Refer here to Okole and Narokobi UNDP report.


Even on occasions when attempts to have a vote of no confidence were unsuccessful, as occurred eight times during the first three years of Sir Rabbie Namaliu’s government of 1988-92, the threat of a vote of no confidence damaged the quality of governance. Political instability causes policy paralysis and leads to attempts to pay off political waverers. Threatened VNCs can also make it impossible for the Prime Minister to remove politicians who were proven to have been corrupt. This happened in the case of former Forests Minister and Deputy PM, Ted Diro, who after his corrupt behaviour was exposed in 1987 survived a further four years, mostly as Deputy Prime Minister. Eventually he was removed following a 1991 Leadership Tribunal inquiry, but after spending 3 years in the ‘sin bin’ he was eligible to stand in 1997 and was re-elected by a forgiving public.

**Patronage and provinces**

Following lessons learnt in the colonial era, politics in PNG has mostly been about the distribution of patronage: resources (jobs and money) 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 the intense electoral competition. Until recently, MPs have controlled huge discretionary grants, known as ‘slush funds’, but as Sir Mekere Morauta pointed out in 1996 they have also lacked the planning and administrative capacity needed to spend these resources responsibly and effectively. Parliamentarians may have gained access to state resources, but have not been able to ensure transparency or executive responsiveness to public needs.

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, where the Provincial (‘regional’) MP is usually the Governor and hence the executive head. In these roles the MPs actions are largely unchecked (although several are currently facing 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, which until 1995 had been directly elected with a distinct mandate separate from MPs. As such the provincial assemblies and executives undercut the status of MPs. During the years after 1977 provincial governments were progressively starved of capital works and recurrent operating funds, while MPs annual discretionary funds grew from K10,000 to K1.5 million per annum between 1984 and 1999.

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. These new bodies replaced the largely moribund local councils, which (like the provinces) had mostly been started of resources by their superior institutions. These changes were made on the pretext of further decentralisation, but in practice the ‘reforms’ recentralised power over the bureaucracy, while giving MPs virtually untrammelled control over district operating funds and strong influence over staffing matters. Within their districts MPs have almost total control of resources and so can readily lobby for the removal of unsympathetic local-level council presidents, who combine with the MPs to form the each Provincial Assembly.
PNG’s Democracy

Corruption

PNG political discourse is dominated by talk of corruption. This big C issue is constantly being raised in the media. A hotel receptionist volunteers as simple fact: “The ministers are all corrupt”. Even sitting MPs and ministers loudly assert the persistence of corruption. Bribery and misappropriation allegations and have been major election issues since 1982. For the last 8 years, every time MPs drive to Parliament House, they pass a huge billboard proclaiming justice for the wicked. 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 had 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 benefitted, but the wider public was not convinced.

All the campaigning remains at the level of moralising rhetoric. The causes of corruption, such as the weak economy and the breakdown of resource allocation based on need, and the widespread collapse of service distribution processes, 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, expecting little from government, but lacking 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 electorate wants their MPs to gain them resources, and only complain if they miss out. Personal misappropriation is fairly well hidden. Heroically, the Ombudsman Commission has succeeded in over 65 cases of violations of the Leadership Code by MPs, thus highlighting the primary cause of concern about institutional decay, patronage politics and the (mis)use of state resources. Several MPs were (re-)elected in 2002 who had previously been dismissed for breaches of the Leadership Code. Other individuals elected in July 2002 had been criticised in the recent commissions of inquiry into the collapse of the superannuation scheme (the National Provident Fund, NPF) and the privatisation of the state-owned commercial bank. Some of those criticised in the NPF report have influence over the new government, and the well-publicised recommendations of the inquiry have not been followed through with prosecutions. The regulatory procedures seem to be failing.

The Integrity Laws

The Morauta government pushed through the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates 2000 (OLIPPAC) which requires the registration of all political donations and campaign spending. Its main focus is on ‘integrity’ in the sense of (party) wholeness, not political ethics. Its primary purpose is to strengthen political parties and hence create stability in government. Parties must register, and the aim is to annually

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19 Refer to list in the Papua New Guinea Yearbook 2004.
provide K10,000 of state funding to parties on the basis of the number of MPs which they formally endorsed at the elections. It is intended that there be a 75 percent refund of a party’s electoral expenses for women candidates who gain 10 per cent of the votes. However, very few candidates of either sex poll that well, so as this incentive to nominate women has limited value. After the crucial initial vote for the Prime Minister after each election, individual MPs who change that vote or leave their party of first choice face serious penalties, including the loss of their seat, unless they can justify their switch to formal inquiries by the Ombudsman or judiciary. The aim is to lock MPs into parties, and hence create some stability in both the legislature and executive.

The 2002 elections were only a partial test of the OLIPPAC law, which is designed to influence political behaviour throughout the parliamentary term. As expected, parties played a minor role in the 2002 election, and most new MPs were initially elected as Independents. (Since then, all bar two have joined parties.) However the process of coalition formation after the election was changed, although following the old pattern there were cases of coercion and some ruthless supporters of Sir Michael Somare locked up several hijacked ‘recruits’ overnight in a Port Moresby aircraft hangar. By mid July it became obvious that the Melanesian Alliance was the strongest party, and hence its leader would have first chance to form a government under OLIPPAC. So 88 MPs joined the bandwagon behind Sir Michael Somare, despite publicly expressed concern about his previous track record as Prime Minister.

At present party stability looks elusive. One party, Pangu, was split from the start with only half voting for Somare and the rest joining the Opposition. Its leadership contest between Sir Rabbie Namaliu and Chris Haiveta remained unresolved in 2004. Similar splits in the Peoples Progress Party and the United Resources Party have continued since October 2003. Unresolved debates about the legitimacy of resolutions by party factional meetings have allowed current moves among people originally in government to press for a vote of no confidence. The failure of the OLIPPAC to spell out clear procedures to resolve such conflicts, as well as the sheer refusal of determined politicians to follow the spirit of the OLIPACC law, explain the splits in three other parties nominally in government, but in practice sitting on both sides of the chamber. Soon after the 2002 election the PDM had collectively resolved to disband itself and chose a new name, but initially failed to do so. An attempt was also made to remove Sir Mekere Morauta as party leader, but he won a reprieve in the courts and gained control of the party is now called the PNG Party, leaving the PDM’s founder Paias Wingti an independent. A little publicised loophole allows a party caucus to decide collectively to change its loyalty. This is what the PNG Party has done.

Old habits died hard. The vote of no confidence being attempted in mid in 2004 was predicted as early as late 2002. It bears no relationship to the state of governance at the time, merely that it is legally possible because the Somare government is out of grace and has antagonised a number of its previous ministers and supporters. Whether OLIPPAC will be able to fundamentally shift existing patterns of political behaviour and create a stable parliamentary base for continuity in executive government remains to be seen, but on present indications seems unlikely.
Based on the political culture, the constitution and the electoral system, the inherent instability in government and poor performance of the Parliament has contributed to the political instability. This in turn leads to policy paralysis, and the constant reshuffling of ministers and the sacking of political appointees to statutory authorities. It all contributes to the weakness of the PNG state. In this context, national politicians have been allowed to grab resources which properly should have been allocated to provincial governments and districts which are charged with providing essential services.

Finally, 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. Three dramatic examples should suffice. National governments have:
- largely ignored bloody warfare in the Highlands for over 30 years;
- allowed the Bougainville secession crisis to drag on for eight years till 1997; and
- ignored the HIV/AIDS issues for nearly 10 years.

More recently, indifference in central government has led to the near collapse of rural health and education services and road networks, and the ruthless bleeding of the National Provident und and people’s bank the PNGBC by political cronies. Anguished statements from church and NGO leaders and letters to the editors on such topics appear to fall on deaf ears.

**National mobilisation?**

PNG politics has usually been about the local distribution of resources rather than models of development or ideological issues. As a general point, it can be argued that that the country lacks a sense of identity as a nation. 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 most sustained political critiques in recent years 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 on the media have provided a major distraction from domestic events in PNG.

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 the mid 1995, student activists helped stir up demonstrations across the country against alleged World Bank plans to register and privatise communally-owned land. This was not difficult, and five people were killed in these demonstrations, just as police shot and killed three protestors in June 2001 in Port Moresby when students and people from settlements campaigned against privatisation plans and the reduction in the size of the military. There are few cases of nationalist responses to specific issues, although occasionally politicians chose to highlight issues of 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 misguided attempt to resolve the Bougainville conflict.21

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Chan still blames the Australian government and media for his downfall. Former PM Bill Skate had opposed Sandline on nationalist grounds, with support from the military, but was less successful in stirring national resentment of the World Bank or in his attempt in the last days of his government to blame Australia for his political demise. While initially effective smokescreens, such perceptions appear not to have resonated with the wider public. The rejection of the Australian Extended Co-operation Package by several national politicians over much of the last 9 months also appears not to be widely shared, and apparently most of the political public hope the ECP will bring some improvement to public order.

Occasionally, resentment of capitalist development is expressed by local movements which have sometimes been wrongly labelled as cargo cults. The most radical attacks on symbols of modern development came from the uneducated and unemployed youth of Bougainville who attacked the Panguna copper mine but also destroyed state infrastructure such as schools and hospitals. The BRA foot soldiers can be seen 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 Highlands, and may lie behind the occasional destruction of essential public infrastructure by people who have missed out, either on the benefits of development, or who have lost political power in elections. 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 viewed through the lenses of tribe and clan.)

People in PNG are ethnically divided. By itself, this has limited explanatory value in the country’s politics, because conflict is usually about resource distribution rather than identity alone. People often identify each other by region or province of origin, but within those provinces the labels used apply to even smaller districts or tribal groups. So large regional identities are rarely mobilised, despite the attempts of politicians to do so in the mid 1970s. At the national level there is often concern about regional distribution of the top posts in the bureaucracy between people from Papua (Southern Region), the Highlands, Momase (the north coast provinces, Morobe, Madang and East and West Sepik) and the New Guinea Islands. These geographic divisions incorporate stereotypes inherited from the colonial era, and still have some impact on politics. 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 resent and even fear the recent arrivals from the Highlands.

Pragmatic alliances can override such sentiments. In 1997 Bill Skate was chosen as PM 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 respectively. Interestingly, Skate is able to appeal to the second generation migrants from

22 The late Margaret Mead in 1971 argued at the University of PNG that the country’s ethnic diversity was its best guarantee of sticking together, because no single group would be large enough to take over.
several ethnic groups in Port Moresby, especially immigrant Highlanders, which is indicative of how ethnic divisions can be overcome. (This is also believed to occur in suburban raskol gangs, 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. It is individual ministers who engage in the worst nepotistic patronage. It is individuals who build up teams of bodyguards to promote or enforce their interests in government and business. Although expected, nepotism causes considerable resentment and feeds cynicism about the political system as a whole. There is a widespread belief in both provinces and the capital that the entire political system and government as a whole is permeated by localism and cronyism.

Conclusion
As a general point, it can be concluded that that the country lacks a sense of identity as a nation. Dysfunctional localism is not universal, but reigns supreme in rural areas. The analysis above describes state-society interactions which are not producing accountable and effective governance. Despite regular elections, the logic of social groupings within the country and 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 latter, elections until 2002 became violent contests in which malpractice was almost essential for success. The recent by-elections were 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, but remain untested in a general election when the pressures are far greater and state resources spread more thinly.

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 legitimacy of government. The state and its elites have become withdrawn and isolated from the people who they are meant to serve. This is an inherently unstable situation, but people still want state power. This is illustrated most starkly by the fact that many people in the Highlands were prepared to attack electoral officials and police serving as agents of the state while conducting the election in June and July 2002. A PNG newspaper editorial stated that PNG is a ‘struggling democracy’.24 Another PNG observer, Joe Ketan, stated, ‘democracy itself is at risk in this administratively weak state’.25

There has been a major attempt through the Integrity Law to strengthen political parties in PNG in an attempt to create stability in government. Yet OLIPPAC is merely tinkering with the rules, and has been circumvented and shown to be a paper tiger.26 It does not

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26 See for example, Baker 2004, op. cit.
engage with the problems of mobilising support, or linking parliamentarians with their electorate. The first election under OLIPPAC showed little strengthening of political parties. Indeed one observer has argued that the new law has removed the real power struggle from parliament and has led 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 new parliament, but early signs are that MPs are finding ways of avoiding its attempts to solidify political parties.

A second major reform is the adoption of limited preferential voting (LPV) in all future elections, whereby people must give three preferences, most of which are bound to be distributed to stronger candidates as those with lower votes are eliminated. Eventually someone will have what is called an ‘absolute majority’ of the remaining active votes. The hope is that that all candidates will be forced to appeal to wide sections of their electorate in order to gain preferences, overcoming the intense localism under first-past-the-post, and that once elected MPs will continue to work for their entire electorate. This seems to be happening in some cases, although many candidates have been unremittingly local in their appeals, and have used preferences to block their strongest opponents (rather than build widespread support). Local political conflict appears to have been reduced in the four by-elections to date. At this stage, however, we can only speculate on whether this reform will elect candidates who have genuinely widespread support, or those with the largest base vote. It will take the lifetime of the parliament elected in the 2007 general election before we can say LPV has significantly improved the functioning of PNG democracy at the national level. To be effective, LPV will require a substantial shift in PNG’s political culture.

The parliament in PNG includes many idealistic and talented individuals, only some of whom are in the ministry. They are starting to make themselves heard, as indicated by recent revival of the committees. Ten years ago there was a review of the effectiveness of the PNG parliament, with suggestions for strengthening the institution. The Constitution specifies that there should be a full set of standing committees, but it is not yet clear whether they are all operative. Some committee roles are being allocated as perks, in attempts to lock in the loyalty of government MPs. 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. Executive governments are often unwilling to face strong scrutiny from the legislature, and it is possible that people who are subject to independent oversight may reject attempts to strengthen the institutions of accountability.

Unfortunately, given the desperate shortages of resources in PNG, any reform programmes are thought to require outside funding. Foreign assistance to promote

27 EPWolfers at ANU-UPNG Election Workshop, Gateway Hotel Port Moresby October 2002.

democracy in PNG is quite likely, given the aid donors’ recent focus on ‘good governance’, but it would involve serious political sensitivities. In relatively small ways, through specific funding for the Constitutional Development Commission, or institutional strengthening in the Ombudsman Commission and the Justice Department, Australian aid has sought to assist good governance in PNG. Yet the work of these bodies is likely to be 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 also 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 the country’s universities in recent decades will have long-term costs. PNG has vibrant if largely foreign-owned media, which hopefully will be able to continue to act as fairly effective democratic watchdogs. The fact that Papua New Guinea has its own acute critics of its political system is a real indigenous strength.

The opportunities for attempting to help strengthen PNG democracy are few, and the dangers of counter-productive unintended effects are many. As shown in the AusAID Review of the 2002 Elections,29 many of the problems of democracy in PNG are historic and systemic. They are rooted in PNG political cultures and administrative structures, and are not readily amenable to institutional engineering. To have any success, programmes attempting to strengthen democracy in Papua New Guinea require the active support of both the government and civil society, who find it difficult to work together.