

The unexpected political effect of PNG's OLIPPAC

by Russel Yangin

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Polling booth in Goroka, Papua New Guinea, June 2022

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Papua New Guinea's Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) was designed to bring stability to PNG's parliament and political parties. Since its introduction in 2001, major **parts of the law have been ruled unconstitutional**, and a number of academics have questioned the law's impact. In this blog I will show that OLIPPAC has had one clear impact on PNG's politics, although its effect wasn't necessarily one that the law's designers were intending.

To demonstrate this, I am going to use a measure called the **effective number of parties** (ENP). The ENP is a measure of whether a country's parliament is dominated by a few large parties, or whether parliamentary power is fragmented among many small parties. In an earlier Devpolicy blog post **Maholopa Laveil used it** to compare party fragmentation in PNG with other countries.

To calculate the ENP the following formula is used: the ENP is the reciprocal of the sum of the squared share of seats won by each party. In strong established political party systems, with just a few major parties, the ENP is usually lower than 3. When the ENP is higher than 3, it indicates a system where political competition is fragmented among many parties.

In 2006 Henry Okole, in his paper '**The "Fluid" Party System of Papua New Guinea**', applied the ENP to show that PNG's party system had become increasingly fragmented after independence. Okole argued the ENP increase from 3.39 in 1972 to 16.16 in 2002 showed how under-developed PNG's party system was.

Table 1: ENP, largest party seat share, and number of parties in PNG’s parliament (1972-2002)

	1972	1977	1982	1987	1992	1997	2002
Effective number of Parties (ENP)	4.0	4.5	3.8	9.9	12.6	16.0	16.2
Largest party seat share	n/a	n/a	n/a	24	18	15	17
Number of parties in parliament	n/a	6	7	1	9	13	22

Source: ENP and number of parties from Okole, 2006; largest party seat share from PNG Elections Database.
Created with Datawrapper

OLIPPAC was supposed to address the fragmentation in the party system and promote the development of political parties in PNG. As many commentators have noted, OLIPPAC has not brought a stable, strongly institutionalised party system in its wake. Unnoticed by most observers, however, there has been a clear fall in the ENP since OLIPPAC was introduced.

Table 2: ENP, largest party seat share, and number of parties in PNG’s parliament (2007-2022)

	2007	2012	2017	2022
Effective Number of Parties (ENP)	11.9	10.8	9.3	6.8
Largest party seat share	25	24	26	33
Number of parties in parliament	21	21	20	24

Source: 2022 and 2017 data are from the PNG MP Database; 2012 data are from PNG Electoral Commission; 2007 data are from Okole, 2012.
Created with Datawrapper

Calculating the ENP is difficult in PNG as it involves deciding how to deal with independent MPs (in this analysis I have simply excluded them when I have undertaken the calculation). However, the same trend visible in the ENP data is also

visible in a simpler statistic, also shown in the tables above, which isn't affected by independent MPs: the share of MPs in the largest party after each election. By both measures party fragmentation has fallen.

Why has this occurred? The answer is to do with section 63 of OLIPPAC (the amended 2003 legislation). Section 63 states that the registered political party with the most elected candidates after each election will be invited to form government. This doesn't guarantee that the party will succeed in pulling together a governing coalition, but it does give that party an important first mover advantage when government is formed.

As a result, powerful politicians have a strong incentive to invite strong candidates to join their parties at election time. Also, as [Michael Kabuni and Stephen Howes have pointed out](#), it gives sitting MPs a good reason to join the prime minister's party at election time: at present, sitting prime ministers are more likely than anyone else to be prime minister after the election. And as [Maholopa Laveil has shown](#), members of the prime minister's party are more likely to get ministerial roles. If you are an MP, joining the prime minister's party before an election offers a potential pathway to becoming a minister in the next government.

And so section 63 of the OLIPPAC has increased the importance of the largest party in the process of forming government in PNG. The consequence has been an influx of MPs joining the political party that has occupied the executive government prior to each election since 2002. As a result, party fragmentation as measured by the ENP has fallen.

This is not quite the same thing as strong stable parties being formed. Indeed, the fortunes of individual parties still fluctuate rapidly at times: the National Alliance, for example, elected 27 MPs in 2007, but only seven in 2012. And, as the tables above show, the actual number of parties with MPs elected to parliament in each election has not fallen since OLIPPAC was introduced. Nevertheless, the fall in the ENP, and the rising electoral power of the leading party at election time, is an interesting change in PNG's political dynamics. Sometimes political rules can have surprising consequences.

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