

# Assorted MPs, assorted parties: James Marape's coalition

by Michael Kabuni

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Four months post-election, PNG PM James Marape is working to secure support (Credit: PNG Post Courier)

On 10 September 2019, the Opposition Leader of the Government of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and leader of the National Alliance party, Patrick Pruaitch **joined** the government coalition led by Prime Minister James Marape, a member of the Pangu Pati. Such **fluidity** in PNG politics is nothing new. It was even expected, after National Alliance members Allan Bird, Walter Snaulbelt, Ian Ling-Stuckey and Peter Isoaimo, along with other opposition MPs, including Mekere Mourata and Garry Juffa, **joined** the Marape-led coalition at the end of August 2019. What is of interest is the composition of the government coalition: Mekere Mourata, the opposition nominee who challenged Marape for the prime minister's position on 30 May 2019; Patrick Pruaitch, the opposition leader who **sought** a Supreme Court reference questioning Marape's election; and about six MPs who did not vote for Marape on 30 May.

As part of the recent reshuffle, Marape **removed** the People's National Congress (PNC) led by former Prime Minister Peter O'Neill from the coalition on 26 August, and took away the treasury portfolio from senior PNC MP Richard Maru, giving it instead to National Alliance MP Ian Ling-Stuckey. Marape was a member of the PNC four months ago. All 22 current PNC MPs, and those who resigned from the party before and after the 30 May election, voted for Marape as PM. Some PNC MPs, like Justin Tkachenko, Minister for Housing, have said they will **support** Marape's government, which has been seen by many as a bid to avoid losing their ministerial portfolios. On 28 August Peter O'Neill said that all 22 PNC MPs, including the eight ministers would **remain** with the government despite having been asked to leave the government. Two days later, Marape **reiterated** Pangu Pati's position saying that they had severed ties with PNC as coalition partners. However, he added that it was up to the PNC party and MPs to choose whether they wished to remain with the government or leave. On 16 September, Nick Kuman, PNC MP and Minister for Higher Education in the Marape government announced his **resignation** from the party.

Marape is now surrounded by an assortment of MPs: those who voted for him,

those who did not vote him, and those who wanted to see his election declared null and void. This assorted pattern extends to political parties.

Of the 28 MPs of the Pangu Pati, only six are original Pangu Pati MPs who contested for and won under the Pangu Pati banner in the 2017 elections. The other 22 are an assortment from PNC and other parties who joined Pangu between April and May 2019. Nine of the original Pangu Pati MPs are now members of the Melanesian Alliance party, after leaving Pangu Pati in April 2019. Melanesian Alliance is also in the coalition, led by former Pangu Pati leader Sam Basil. Some are single-member parties – Gary Juffa (People’s Movement for Change), Kerenga Kua (Papua New Guinea Party) and Brian Kramer (Allegiance Party). Kua and Kramer **left** the opposition to join the government in early June 2019 after Marape’s election, and were given the Ministries for Petroleum & Energy and Ministry of Police respectively. Neither MP voted for Marape. Kua voted against Marape and Kramer was absent during his election. At the moment, Marape lacks the **support of a strong** political party. This coalition of assorted parties is not even united by clear policies.

For instance, at the **2019 PNG Update**, Marape implied that he would remove tuition-free education for secondary schools. Such a move goes against his Pangu Pati’s position, which, along with coalition partner National Alliance, advocate for “**subsidized**” school fees. Coalition partners Social Democratic Party and People’s Progress Party support free education. It remains to be seen whether Marape is serious about abolishing free education.

What explains the movement of MPs to the government side? In previous articles (**here** and **here**), I argued that ministerial portfolio allocations seem to be a possible explanation for coalition politics in PNG. However, governors who have moved from the opposition to the government cannot take on ministries. Reforms introduced in 1995 make it mandatory for a governor to **relinquish** their position if they are appointed a ministerial portfolio. Some open MPs like Mekere Morauta, who is eligible for a ministerial portfolio was not given one.

Why are MPs content to move to the government despite no ministry allocation? There are three possible explanations. First, Marape says he invited the MPs because of their **experience**, such as Mekere Morauta to rescue the economy. It may be that Marape wants experienced MPs regardless of their party. Second, Marape may want to keep on his side all those MPs who would otherwise be critical of the government and who have the ability to sway public opinion. This would help to explain Brian Kramer and Kerenga Kua’s presence, and now Gary Juffa and Alan Bird. Many in PNG credit these MPs with bringing down Peter O’Neill. Third, Marape needed a major coalition partner in National Alliance with its 19 MPs to replace

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PNC. All of these MPs who moved recently have accused Peter O'Neill of corruption and at times called for him to **step down** as PM. They would be content to see Peter O'Neill moved to the opposition and subsequently investigated. Gary Juffa said his **condition** for moving to the government had been that PNC and Peter O'Neill were removed from the government side.

The assorted MPs and parties in the Marape coalition government are loosely held together by ministerial portfolio allocations, Marape's desire to strengthen his coalition and employ experienced MPs, and a common desire to see PNC and Peter O'Neill removed from the government and investigated.

*Correction 24/09/2019: Kerenga Kua belongs to the PNG National Party, not the PNG Party as originally stated. Also, in the recent reshuffle Marape took away the national planning portfolio from Richard Maru, a senior PNC MP and gave it to Sam Basil, leader of Melanesian Alliance, who at the time had the treasury portfolio. The treasury portfolio was then given to National Alliance MP Ian Ling-Stucky.*

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