A Pacific Mobility Index to strategically guide the Pacific Engagement Visa

In this blog, we introduce the Pacific Mobility Index (PMI) as a tool to guide the implementation of the revolutionary Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) under its proposed annual 3,000 visa lottery ballot system.

Whilst the PMI we are proposing is currently only a concept, it promotes the strategic allocation of visas and aligns its rationale to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. It recognises the sensitive competing priorities in the region, and promotes regional agreement that aims to avoid tension. The PMI incorporates Australia’s own priorities for considerations of climate vulnerability and low access, and aims to strengthen the delivery of these highly prized visas.

The PEV is a first for Australia. It is a new visa that targets increased access to permanent migration pathways specifically for citizens of the Blue Pacific. In the interest of advancing and strengthening Australia’s ties, relationships and people-people connections to the Pacific, wider collective consultation in the region should foreground the successful delivery of the PEV.

Should the PEV roll out as initially announced by the Albanese government, citizens of 12 eligible Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste, who have access to the internet or have family members that are technology savvy, will be able to make an online pre-application for a PEV. Four members (aside from Australia and New Zealand) from the apex regional body the Pacific Islands Forum – the Cook Islands, French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Niue – are not included. Eligible citizens will have the opportunity to enter a ballot, at a nominal non-
refundable fee of A$25, to be randomly selected and then invited to apply for the visa. This is a tested and proven system that New Zealand’s Pacific Access Category Resident Visa has successfully delivered exclusively to citizens of Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tonga and Fiji.

When Labor first announced the PEV in opposition, it said that the 3,000 visas would be distributed on a pro rata basis. More recently, the government has said that visas would consider “several factors including population size, diaspora in Australia, existing migration opportunities and expected demand”.

Making population size central to the allocation of visas would mean that bigger countries like Papua New Guinea, with its population of more than 8 million, would get a much bigger share of the visas as opposed to its smaller sister island states Kiribati, Tuvalu and Nauru. Is this fair, when these smaller atoll island states are at greater risk of existential threat from climate change? Would there be other considerations to account for when determining visa allocation? Would the PEV create tension, division and rivalry within the region that can be mitigated? These are serious questions we urge Australia to consider, and for this reason we propose the use of the PMI to strengthen the PEV’s delivery.

The conversations around country inclusion or exclusion in the PEV for Blue Pacific citizens should be brokered through the Pacific Islands Forum, which has already begun consultations to develop a regional migration strategy aligned to the International Organization for Migration’s Pacific Strategy. In light of the varying views expressed in the 23 submissions to the Australian Parliament Senate Inquiry, and the fact that the ballots should be opening very soon, our PMI proposal presents a practical way forward. It aspires to establish a fair determination of visa allocations that respects and recognises the priorities of each of our Pacific family
members. It reflects the Blue Pacific 2050 virtues of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, so that all Pacific people can lead free, healthy and productive lives. For these reasons, we believe that the PEV should consider a systematic framework such as the PMI to inform its visa allocation approaches.

The PMI would operate similarly to the Human Development Index. It would rank the status of countries against three core dimensions: climate vulnerability, diaspora, and social wellbeing.

Climate vulnerability takes precedence in the PMI. To assess this dimension, geographical features of Pacific Island countries would be considered. These include mean elevation, total land mass, and coastal population. These would be used to establish the degree of susceptibility to climate threats.

The second dimension, diaspora, is cognisant of the Pacific’s extremely low diaspora numbers in Australia. To assess this dimension, the existing diaspora populations relative to the total country populations would be considered, with preference given to countries with lower diaspora-population ratios, to reflect Australia’s commitment to strengthening its ties with each member of the Pacific family.

The third dimension, social wellbeing (which includes economic wealth), considers the gross domestic product per capita of each Pacific Island country. It prioritises those that are not as economically resilient and therefore warrant a higher weighting in determining visa allocations.

In an increasingly contested region, the Blue Pacific continent has sourced its strength from working collaboratively as a region, maintaining solidarity under its framework for Pacific regionalism. The PMI aspires to the virtues of the 2050 strategy, and is consistent with the legislation introduced to operationalise the PEV. It would
guide the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs in exercising their discretionary powers in allocating PEVs. Embedding a PMI framework would demonstrate Australia’s Pacific family first approach in delivering a truly revolutionary visa.

PNG’s online electoral data remains inaccessible

Papua New Guinea is the only country in the Pacific to sign onto the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a multilateral initiative of 76 countries that aims to promote transparent, participatory, inclusive and accountable governance. When it signed in 2015, PNG adopted commitments to improve access to information of public interest.

Affected public institutions include the PNG Electoral Commission, which is required under the OGP to make election data public when elections are underway, as well as curating online repositories of past election data. “Election data” refers to information relating to aspects of the process throughout the electoral cycle. The right to information is integral to electoral rights because it is impossible to participate meaningfully without information needed to make informed electoral choices.

However, the Promoting election integrity in the Pacific Island countries report of 2021 shows that, in PNG, election data was not open for the entire electoral process, except for electoral complaints, disputes and resolutions, and the electoral legal framework, which were “mostly open”, followed by political party registration which was “partially open”.

Following the report, the Political Science Department of the University of Papua New Guinea, with technical and financial assistance from the National Democratic Institute, conducted an observation and analysis on PNG’s election data openness throughout the 2022 elections, to evaluate the transparency and openness of public-interest data related to the elections. The team monitored 15 electoral processes from December 2021 to October 2022 (see Table 1).

These 15 electoral processes were measured against minimum standards of transparency derived from OGP principles. These principles include: availability of data for free on the internet; granularity (data is available to the finest level); completeness (data is available for all items at once); analysability (data is available in CSV or Excel); being non-proprietary (no organisation has exclusive control); non-discriminatory (for example, no registration required to access data); licence-free (data is open for reuse); permanently available (data is available for an indefinite period); and timely.

A scoring algorithm was used to calculate data openness, which allocated six points for data availability, three points each for granularity, completeness and analysability, and one point each for non-proprietary, non-discriminatory, licence-free, permanency and timeliness principles. At the end of the scoring exercise, each process was given a score to determine its level of openness. A score equal to or less than 30% classifies data as not open, between 31% and 70% as partially open, and above 70% as mostly open. This method was developed by the Open Election Data Initiative, and is being used to study government data openness. Table 1 presents a summary of the findings.

Similar to the 2021 Promoting election integrity report, our findings show that only the electoral legal framework of PNG meets the data openness requirement of the OGP out of the 15 electoral processes monitored.
Whilst the *Promoting election integrity* report categorises PNG’s electoral complaints, disputes and resolutions as mostly open, we categorised it as partially open. This is because immediately following the election, the information on disputed results was not updated in a timely manner.

We found that seven other processes also fall under the “partially open” category, which at first seems like an improvement from the 2021 *Promoting election integrity* report. However, the reason there seems to be an improvement is because our observation coincided with the election period, and there were some attempts by the relevant government departments to make electoral data available online. For instance, the website and the [Facebook page of the Electoral Commission](https://www.facebook.com/electionsPNG/) published a series of voter education materials and the electoral calendar, as well as some election results.

Six of the processes observed still remain under the “not open” category.

The study revealed several reasons explaining PNG’s failure to adhere to OGP principles. First, low levels of education, lack of awareness, and low demand for election data have put little pressure on key bodies to make election data available to the public. While key legislation is publicly available, public awareness remains low.

Second, there’s [slow uptake of online connectivity](https://www.oecd.org/gov/digital-government/2196548.pdf) and making information available online. The new [Voter Roll Look-Up system](https://www.electionsPNG.com/vrl) is a welcome innovation, but its implementation is also hindered by the digital divide, low internet connectivity and digital illiteracy.

Third, difficulties we faced in gaining access to data from public institutions with key roles in the election indicate a prevalent culture of reluctance to release information of public interest. Budget and campaign finance data seemed to be the most difficult to obtain.
A lack of funding has affected the preparedness of the PNG Electoral Commission to deliver elections and ensure that key data is made available to all stakeholders – including candidates, voters and observers – in a timely manner. Poor management and limited technical capacity also contributed to ineffective and untimely implementation of electoral activities, such as publishing new electoral boundaries and the polling schedule. Official data on security incidents is especially key to assessing how ethnic fragmentation and other interrelated factors continue to drive high levels of election-related violence.

Access to information about electoral processes, including government-held electoral data, and the steps taken by government institutions to establish accountability in the electoral context, is fundamental to creating and reinforcing public confidence in the integrity of elections and the government that derives from them. It also enhances voter education, dissuades disinformation, and improves the link between citizens and government. The government intends to conduct an inquiry into the 2022 elections. This exercise must include review of access to electoral data and the constraints identified above to give confidence to the integrity of the electoral process.

Read the full report The openness and transparency of election data in Papua New Guinea: qualitative assessment of the 2022 national general election.

This blog is based on a paper presented at the 2022 PNG Update.
Will James Marape become the third PNG PM to complete a full term?

Two factors favoured James Marape going into the 2022 national elections and helped ensure his return. First, section 63 of the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) passed in 2001 (and subsequently amended in 2003) mandates that the party with the highest number of MPs elected following a national election be invited to form the government. This is why there was only one nominee – James Marape – when parliament met to elect the PM for the 11th parliament. Marape’s Papua and Niugini Union Pati (PANGU) had 36 MPs to Peter O’Neill’s People’s National Congress party (PNC)’s 14 when parliament met.

The second has to do with the political culture of PNG’s parliamentary politics. Over the life of the parliament, MPs tend to join the party of the PM. The PM’s party then goes into the elections with by far the largest number of MPs, and subsequently emerges with a higher number of MPs. PANGU’s success in 2022 is a result of this pattern, with 25 out of 32 or 78% of incumbent MPs getting elected. In late April 2019, PANGU was left with only one MP, the former Governor of Morobe Province Ginson Saonu. PANGU numbers increased after Marape was elected PM and joined the party. PNC’s numbers fell from a maximum of 48 to a low of 13 in the same period after O’Neill was forced to resign as PM. Six got re-elected in 2022.

The question now is whether Marape can stay in power once the 18-month grace period expires – within the first 18 months following the appointment of a PM, a vote of no confidence is not permitted. In a vote of no confidence, any MP – one from a small party, or an independent for that matter – can contest for the PM’s seat. Unlike immediately after the elections,
there is no special treatment for or protection of the largest party.

Only two PMs have ever completed their five-year terms. The rest were either replaced in a vote of no confidence, or resigned to avoid one, whilst the Supreme Court ruled Paias Wingti’s re-appointment as PM in 1993 unconstitutional.

Michael Somare was the first. His completion of the 2002–2007 term is often attributed to provisions of OLIPPAC which prevented MPs from switching parties. These provisions were declared unconstitutional in 2010.

Peter O’Neill was the second PM to complete a full term. He completed the 2012–2017 term partly as a result of a slew of constitutional amendments. These included extension of the grace period from 18 to 30 months, an increase in the number of MPs required to sign the motion for a vote of no confidence from 11 to 22, and an increase in the prior notification to parliament of a vote of no confidence from one week to 30 days. Because the opposition was depleted at the time, opposition MPs did not have the minimum number of MPs required to institute a vote of no confidence when the extended grace period ended. These constitutional amendments were all declared unconstitutional in 2015, but helped O’Neill prior to that.

Marape does not have the protection of OLIPPAC that Somare had, or the protection of constitutional amendments that O’Neill had. And he knows well how things can change once the 18 months grace period is over. In 2020 when the grace period following his 2019 election expired, as many as 20 MPs, led by the deputy PM and some other senior ministers, left his coalition to join the opposition. It was only through clever manoeuvring, including an unconstitutional sitting of parliament, and the use of adjournments, that Marape was able to survive as PM.
The limited window for a vote of no confidence also helped him, as a vote of no confidence is not possible 12 months before the next election. The opposition basically ran out of time trying to remove Marape as PM as the 2022 elections approached. In no term has PNG ever had more than two PMs, so the one who is second is normally secure. This time round, Marape is the first PM of the 11th parliament. To stay in power, he will have to defend votes of no confidence from early 2024 to mid-2026.

Votes of no confidence are power games, but need a narrative to succeed. Investigation into cases of alleged fraud, such as Marape’s son being linked to money laundering charges, are a risk for Marape. Inflation, delays in resource projects, and election-related violence are other issues that the opposition will likely use as grounds to mount a motion for a vote of no confidence.

Three things are in Marape’s favour. First, several political figures who led the charge to replace him in the last parliament and might be expected to in this one are not in parliament. Patrick Pruaitch lost his election, and Sam Basil passed away. Peter O’Neill has decided not to take the opposition leader’s position, suggesting that he will back an alternative to Marape rather than run himself. But, at least for now, there is no clear alternative.

Second, the Speaker of Parliament is from PANGU, and the Parliamentary Business Committee (PBC) will likely be filled with MPs from PANGU or others loyal to Marape. The PBC vets and approves motions for a vote of no confidence, and is chaired by the Speaker of Parliament. These two institutions have worked in the past to frustrate votes of no confidence.

Third, PANGU has had a convincing election result, and Marape has strategically appointed key MPs in the party to important ministerial portfolios, and retained 62% (21) of the ministries within PANGU. If Marape can keep PANGU together, he
can survive the loss of a coalition partner.

Keeping his own party united behind him will be Marape’s key challenge as he seeks to become PNG’s third prime minister to survive a full term of parliament.

2022 PNG election results: nine findings

PNG’s 2022 elections have received a lot of publicity, most of it bad, and deservedly so. The electoral roll was clearly out of date, there were bouts of violence, ballot boxes were stolen, and more than one key deadline was missed.

The shortcomings of the electoral process, as important as they are, should not lead us to neglect the results that the 2022 elections have thrown up.

117 seats have now been decided, with elections having apparently been declared failed in one seat. What can we conclude? Here, we highlight nine findings, five to do with parties, and four with MPs.

Parties

1. The election result for PANGU was the second most successful in PNG’s history. The most successful was also PANGU, back in 1982. Then PANGU won 47% of all the seats, but still the 33% this time round is an impressive result.

2. The two major parties both experienced positive swings, and PNC’s swing was actually larger. PNC picked up an additional 31% seats (compared to its number at the end of the last parliament), compared to PANGU’s 22%. These swings exaggerate
the two parties’ performance: the number of seats available also went up, with seven new electorates and nine vacancies at the end of the last parliament. Still, both PANGU and PNC did well, and, of the two, PNC did better. But PANGU went into the election with so many more seats that it came out with more as well.

3. Of the smaller parties, the United Resources Party did really well. It almost doubled its seats, from 6 to 11, though note this takes it to just above how it started the 10th parliament, when it had 10 seats. The United Labour Party, on the other hand, lost out, going down from 8 to 3. The National Alliance lost a couple of seats, or rather a couple more: it started the 10th parliament with 15 seats, ended it with 8 and went down to 6.

4. So far 23 parties have been elected to the 11th parliament, compared to 20 at the start of the last parliament and 25 at the end of it. 12 of these are one-MP parties. (See the table at the end of the article.)

5. Independents lost out. 16 independents were elected to the last parliament, but only 10 this time.

MPs

6. There was a significant increase in the incumbency rate. 62% of incumbents were returned, the highest share ever, but still not very high. The splitting of seats helped some incumbents (as they could choose which seat they wanted to compete for), but this does seem like a change. The previous highest was 52%.

7. There was no trend increase in the number of women elected. Although there were no women elected to the last PNG parliament, there have been one, two or three in most parliaments. This time there will be two. That’s better than one or none, but it was disappointing to hear the PM say that the fact that at least one woman was elected proved that no
affirmative action was needed. Rather, the fact that only two were elected proves that without affirmative action there will only ever be at most two or three women in the PNG parliament.

8. There was a big increase in number of third-term MPs. This group increased in size from 10 to 23. But the number of first-, second- and fourth-term MPs fell. In this parliament, 37 MPs were elected who have spent at least 10 years in parliament (i.e. more than two terms). In the last elections, only 25 were. 8 MPs were elected who had not been in the last parliament, but had been MPs before – a significant number of non-incumbent but rather ‘recycled’ MPs.

9. Incumbents and more experienced MPs got declared earlier. We were tracking results daily. The first result was announced on 15 July, and the most recent on 25 August. The graph below plots the declarations – now close to but still not at 100%. It also shows that more experienced MPs tended to be declared earlier, so that over the declaration period the average tenure of MPs fell (from 4 to 2 terms). Incumbents also tended to be declared earlier so that the share of declared MPs who were returned also fell from 100% to 50%. Presumably the more successful MPs win more easily, which also gives them a greater say in government formation (though this time PANGU’s success made this process much smoother than usual).

Analysis

There was a lot of electoral fraud and PANGU did very well. It is tempting to conclude that there must have been a causal relationship, and that PANGU, which went into the election as the leading party of government, engineered the electoral fraud to its advantage. The problem with this explanation is that PANGU’s main rival, PNC, had a bigger swing than PANGU did. Based on this, it seems more reasonable to conclude – as some of us have argued – that, while widespread, the electoral fraud was more locally than nationally directed.
Why then did PANGU do so well? PNC went into the 2017 elections with 55 members, and came out with only 29. The main reason PANGU did so much better in 2022 than PNC did in 2017 is that so many of PANGU’s MPs were re-elected: 24 out of 32 or 75%. Compare this to PNC’s 5 out of 13, and the overall incumbency rate of 61%. PANGU also attracted another 5 MPs who succeeded in running under a PANGU banner; PNC only attracted 2. In terms of new candidates, PANGU and PNC did equally well – 10 each. PANGU’s (or Marape’s) strength at the elections was their ability during the last parliament to attract electorally popular MPs.

Finally, this is the fourth election in a row in which the incumbent PM has been returned. Given that, Marape’s return isn’t surprising, even if the extent of his victory is. We explained before the elections how PNG’s political system (unintentionally) embeds an incumbency bias: during the life of the parliament, MPs flock to the party of the PM, and so that party goes into the elections by far the biggest, and so will probably emerge as the biggest too, making it almost certain that it will be called on by the Governor-General under S63 of the political parties law (OLIPPAC) to form a governing coalition.

If you can’t remove a PM through the electoral system, MPs will try all the harder to do so through a mid-term vote of no confidence. How to change this isn’t clear (Marape in his inaugural speech mooted a change to a presidential system), but something needs to be done – as it does about the meagre political representation of women.

This blog is based on the ANU-UPNG PNG MP Database. It was revised on 31 August and 5 September to reflect results and to correct a few errors. 117 seats have been declared. In one electorate (Lagaip Open), the election has been reported to have failed. One MP has sadly died, but is nevertheless included in the analysis. The incumbency rate is defined as the number of incumbents returned divided by the number who
competed (not necessarily in their own seat).

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**Bikpla kumul i pundaun: the political life of Sam Basil**

On the night of 11 May 2022, one day before the issue of writs for PNG’s election, Deputy Prime Minister Sam Basil, and his Close Protection Officer First Constable Neil Maino, **died in a car accident** along the Bulolo Highway. Many tributes have already been given. Here I will focus on the political life of Sam Basil, his achievements and controversies.

**Basil’s rise in politics**

Basil first contested the Wau-Bulolo Open electorate in 2002 as a candidate for the People’s Progress Party (PPP) led by Sir Julius Chan. He lost, but **in 2007 he contested again** and won. He remained with PPP until January 2011, when he switched to the PNG Party led by Belden Namah, and was appointed Deputy Opposition Leader.

When Michael Somare was removed as prime minister in August 2011, Basil served as Minister for National Planning in the new Peter O’Neill-led government for a year, before parliament was dissolved for the 2012 election. He was re-elected in 2012 as a PNG Party candidate, but the party broke ranks with O’Neill, and remained in the opposition when O’Neill formed the government. Basil was appointed Deputy Opposition Leader as well as Shadow Minister for National Planning, District Development and Health and HIV/AIDS.

In 2014, Basil left the PNG Party to become the leader of PANGU (Papua and Niugini Union Pati), one of PNG’s first
parties but one that had dwindled over time, and that had been absent from parliament since the 2013 death of Ludwig Schulze, its sole member to be re-elected in 2012. Basil continued as deputy after Don Polye ousted Namah as opposition leader in December 2014. In August 2015, he was joined by a second PANGU MP when their endorsed candidate, William Samb (also sadly recently deceased), won a by-election for Goilala Open.

Under Basil’s leadership, PANGU won a remarkable eight out of the ten seats in Morobe Province in the mid-2017 election. Three other seats were also won by PANGU candidates: Sohe Open in Oro Province, and Madang Open and Goilala Open in Central Province. Sir Mekere Morauta and four other independent MPs then joined PANGU following the election, bringing the total number of PANGU MPs to 16. PANGU was now back in a big way.

In August 2017, after failing to form a government that would displace O’Neill, and despite running on an anti-O’Neill platform, Basil announced his party’s move to the O’Neill-led government coalition. Twelve PANGU MPs followed him, but other PANGU MPs such as Bryan Kramer and Morauta protested this move and remained in the opposition.

Between 2017 and his passing in 2022, Basil held various ministries in the frequent ministerial reshuffles. When he first joined the O’Neill-Abel government in August 2017, he was given the Ministry for Communications, Information Technology and Energy, a position he held to April 2019. When James Marape resigned from the O’Neill government in May 2019, Basil was appointed as Minister for Finance, the position that had been held by Marape.

Basil supported Marape’s election as prime minister in late May 2019, and he maintained the Ministry for Finance temporarily. He was very briefly Minister for National Planning and Monitoring, but then was moved to the Treasury in a further reshuffle, where he remained from June to August 2019. He was re-appointed as Minister for National Planning
and Monitoring in August, and as Deputy Prime Minister in October 2020.

Basil was ambitious, and no doubt wanted to be prime minister himself. He deserted Marape in the November 2020 attempted vote of no confidence but, when that was unsuccessful, returned to the government in December and was re-appointed as Deputy Prime Minister, and given the Ministry for Commerce and Industry.

Basil also moved from party to party. After a prolonged dispute with the non-parliamentary wing of PANGU over his switch to the government, in May 2019 he broke away from PANGU, revived the Melanesian Alliance (another party lacking MPs), and became its leader. He took seven PANGU MPs with him. Then in late 2019, with the backing of the PNG Trade Union Congress, he formed the United Labour Party (ULP). In its first fundraising dinner in March 2020 Basil said that, “after a long and tough search for a home”, he and eight other MPs, three of them government ministers, had formed ULP.

**Achievements**

Basil’s achievements in politics should be measured against the dual roles of ‘service deliverers’ and lawmakers that PNG MPs hold. On the service delivery front, Basil was among a few MPs who put their constituency development funds to reasonably good use. Among other things, Basil’s electrification program in rural Bulolo district was lauded as a role model by PNG Power Ltd. In a country where only 13% of the population is connected to the main power grids, Basil was successful in bringing electricity to most of the district.

At the national level, Basil is best known for pushing for the establishment of the anti-corruption agency Task Force Sweep (TFS). Though O’Neill is often credited for creating the TFS, according to Sam Koim, its leader, it was Sam Basil’s idea. After realising the magnitude of corruption within the
national planning department when he took over the ministry following the change of government in 2011, Basil pushed for an inter-agency body to investigate, arrest, and recoup state funds. TFS’s successes included conviction of Paul Tiensten, a sitting MP and former planning minister. TFS was disbanded in 2014 but it remains the only anti-corruption agency to have made any substantial progress in curbing corruption in PNG.

Controversies

After cultivating a profile of a principled and non-compromising anti-corruption fighter for a decade, Basil’s switch to the O’Neill-led government in 2017 disappointed many. For the 10 years (2007-17) that Basil was in the opposition, he was a constant critic of the Somare government (2007-11) and O’Neill government (2012-17). Leading into the 2017 election, Basil embodied nationwide anti-O’Neill and anti-PNC (People’s National Congress Party) sentiments. All the incumbent MPs who lost their seats in Morobe in 2017 were either O’Neill’s PNC MPs or those who were supportive of O’Neill in the 2012-17 term.

His reason for switching sides to the O’Neill-led coalition? He said he did not want his new PANGU MPs to be deprived of their constituency funds (District and Provincial Services Improvement Program funds). But Basil had done well from being in opposition for a decade, so the reason surely had more to do with his own ambitions. Of course, switching parties and allegiances is a permanent feature of PNG politics, but many had hoped Basil would show a different way forward.

When made Minister of Commerce in early 2021, Basil increased PNG’s stock market transactions fee to a punitive 0.75%, a move that dented his credibility and reputation for being pro-development. Later in the year, after he had moved on, the fee was drastically cut to 0.03%, and refunds were offered on the higher levy.
Basil’s popularity in PNG, and especially in his home province, was immense. The people of Morobe, PNG’s most populous province, looked to Basil as a future – and PNG’s first Morobean – prime minister. The outpouring of grief and sympathy expressed in the week following his death is second only to that following the death of one of the founding fathers and the first prime minister of PNG, Michael Somare. Whatever his flaws and strengths – and he had both – Basil’s place in PNG political history is secure.

*Note: The first part of the title of this blog can be translated as “The big bird of paradise has fallen”.*

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**Prime ministerial incumbency bias in PNG**

Central to the selection of the prime minister in Papua New Guinea following a general election is Section 63 of PNG’s Organic Law on Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC), which was passed in 2001 (and then amended in 2003).

Section 63 requires that the Governor-General invites the party with the highest number of MPs following a general election to form the government. The main aim of the section is to ensure that the appointment of a prime minister after a general election is done in an “orderly way with direct relationship to the way voters expressed their wishes”.

Analysis shows that the passage of OLIPPAC has influenced government formation. First, it has increased the probability that, as is now a legislative requirement, the PM comes from the largest party. This has happened in all elections since

For example, as Table 1 shows, in 1997 the People’s National Congress Party (PNC) had the sixth highest number of MPs but still was able to put forward the successful candidate for PM.

Second, Section 63 also seems to have increased the odds of an incumbent PM being returned. Since the first post-independence election in 1977, five incumbent prime ministers have been re-appointed as PM following one of the country’s nine national elections (see Table 2). The other four times a new prime minister was appointed post-elections. The five times the incumbent was returned are 1977 (Somare), 1987 (Wingti), 2007 (Somare), 2012 (O’Neill) and 2017 (O’Neill). Only two of the five incumbent returns are before the first enactment of OLIPPAC in 2001, and the other three are all post-OLIPPAC.

These two developments are closely related. Over the life of the parliament, MPs tend to join the party of the PM, meaning that that party goes into the election with by far the largest number of MPs. For instance, PNC won 27 seats in 2012, led by the incumbent PM Peter O’Neill, and formed the government. More MPs joined PNC, and by the time the 2017 elections came around, PNC had 55 MPs. Even though PNC lost 34 sitting MPs, with only 21 getting re-elected, it added seven new MPs in the 2017 elections. This took PNC’s numbers to 28 MPs, and, after the 2017 elections, it wound up forming the government.

About half the incumbent MPs don’t get re-elected every election, but in general voters do not vote along party lines. Even if they do, and even if there is a swing against the PM’s party, because it has such an advantage going in, it is likely to emerge as the largest party as well.

In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled the restrictions imposed by OLIPPAC on the movement of MPs between parties
unconstitutional. This means that MPs can move parties in the period between when they are declared winners following the national election and the appointment of the PM. What happened in 1987, 1992 and 1997 – when parties with fewer MPs formed the government – could be repeated, Section 63 notwithstanding. All MPs would need to do is submit their letter of resignation to the party that endorsed them for the election, together with a letter of acceptance from the new party they intend to join, to the Registry of Political Parties & Candidates before the election of the PM, and their movement to the new party would become official.

However, we have not seen that happening. This is because there is little incentive for MPs in the largest party to leave if it is likely to become the party of government. Rather, other MPs will join, by joining either the largest party or the governing coalition.

The only incumbent PM not to benefit from the passage of OLIPPAC was, ironically, its architect, Sir Mekere Morauta. He did not go into the election with the largest party, and he certainly didn’t emerge from it with the largest either.

This should remind us that there is no guarantee that the incumbent PM will be returned post-election. But it does seem that Section 63 has had the unintended consequence of increasing the probability of this happening. Most view stability as a good thing, but the problem is that the more likely the incumbent is to be returned at the general election, the more pressure there will be to remove him (or perhaps one day her) by a vote of no confidence – since that becomes the only way to do it. It may be no coincidence that both PMs who have so far benefited from Section 63 (Somare in 2002 and 2007 and O’Neill in 2012 and 2017) lost power mid-term on the floor of parliament.

Note that the provisions of Section 63 of OLIPPAC do not apply to a vote of no confidence. In a vote of no confidence, any
political party (or MP) is eligible to nominate a candidate to contest for the prime minister’s seat. Even an MP without a political party is eligible to be nominated for the PM’s post.

Section 63 was passed with good intentions, but has led to a situation in which increasing stability either side of elections may be reducing it between elections.

PNG’s 2022 elections: parties, policies and women candidates

Leading up to the Port Moresby Northwest by-election in June 2021, we conducted a survey of 120 people in the electorate, to get their views on candidates, party policies, female candidates, and other issues.

The Moresby Northwest seat became vacant with the passing of Sir Mekere Morauta in early 2021. The by-election attracted 42 candidates.

The Moresby Northwest by-election was seen as a precursor for the 2022 national elections in Papua New Guinea (PNG), as old issues that are usually blamed for poor elections in PNG featured prominently, but also new challenges in the form of COVID-19 showed what 2022 would potentially look like. After the writs were issued in early April, polling was postponed twice, first due to the outbreak of COVID-19, and second due to lack of coordination between the PNG Electoral Commission and the police.

Major political parties, including PM James Marape’s Pangu
Pati, Deputy Prime Minister Sam Basil’s United Labour Party, the National Alliance Party — whose membership includes Treasurer Ian Lin-Stuckey and Minister for Forests Walter Schnaubelt — and Police Minister Bryan Kramer’s Allegiance Party, all nominated candidates.

We conducted our survey with several central questions in mind. We wanted to learn the extent to which voters considered policy issues when selecting who to vote for. Also, because women fare poorly in elections in PNG, we wanted to learn more about potential support for women. And we wanted to get a sense of the popularity of particular political parties.

Our survey was conducted online, ran for two weeks, and closed before the voting day. We asked participants who were eligible to enroll and vote in the Port Moresby Northwest election to take the survey. We didn’t limit our questions to the by-election, but also asked about the 2017 and 2022 general elections.

Urban and fairly well educated, Moresby Northwest is not a typical PNG electorate, so our findings might not hold true nationwide. Nevertheless, the by-election provided a chance to learn more about voters’ electoral views. Below are the main findings from the survey.

We asked the voters about possible factors that would determine their preference allocations (PNG uses a limited preferential voting system) for the by-election. That is, we asked how they would use their three preferences when voting. The response options we offered were chosen based on common responses in previous election studies.

The results are shown in Figure 1. Most respondents said that, with their first preference, they would choose based on candidate policies. The candidate’s experience in the public or private sector was the second most important consideration. This was a surprisingly high focus on policy issues. Quite
possibly, participants’ education levels may have affected the responses we received. Of the 120 respondents we surveyed, 72% either had a degree or were studying towards a degree. Also, we cannot say for sure that when they actually voted, participants in our survey prioritised policies as much as they said they did. At the very least though, our participants showed an awareness that policies should be important in electoral contests.

The three main issues that voters said the candidates should talk about for Moresby Northwest were law and order issues in the electorate, economic opportunities, and health services. We also asked the same policy question but with respect to the 2022 national elections. When asked to think about 2022, respondents said candidates and political parties should focus on how to deal with law and order issues, economic development, and corruption.

Regarding female candidates, 84% of those respondents who voted in 2017 said they did not cast a single preference for any of the three women who contested the Moresby Northwest seat (three out of the 35 Moresby Northwest candidates in 2017 were females). 48% of respondents who voted in 2017 said they would consider allocating one of their preferences to a female candidate in the Moresby Northwest by-election (one female candidate was standing), whilst 37% said they would do the same in the 2022 election.

These are low figures, given that our respondents were primarily well educated and voters in an urban electorate. When we asked what it would take for someone who was not planning to vote for a female candidate to allocate one of his or her preferences to a female candidate, we tended to get responses emphasising that participants would not vote for women candidates just because they were women. For example:

“She must not play the ‘gender card’ too much and concentrate on policy matters. Being male or female does
not bring about changes we hope for but the right person with good quality.”

“My preference on women candidates will depend on their education qualifications and political party and policies of the party that she was endorsed by, her leadership qualities and someone who can fight for the common good for all people.”

We also asked the respondents to pick the five political parties that they thought would win the most seats in the 2022 elections. The names that were mentioned the most were Pangu Pati, People’s National Congress, the Allegiance Party, the National Alliance Party, and the United Labour Party. However, the reasons respondents gave for selecting these parties were that these parties were either led by or, in the National Alliance Party’s case, composed of prominent individuals. Our participants clearly viewed PNG politics as being driven by prominent individuals, not parties.

Our survey participants were urban and well educated, so we cannot claim our findings hold true for all of PNG. Yet, our findings are still interesting. Voters of the sort we surveyed are at least aware that policies should be important in electoral competition. At the same time, though, our participants were under no illusions about the nature of party politics in PNG. There was no evidence that most respondents thought policies affected parties’ popularity. Rather, they primarily saw parties as vehicles for prominent individuals. Finally, despite being predominantly well educated, our participants did not vote for women often in 2017, which highlights just how tough it is for women candidates in PNG.
Should PNG abandon Limited Preferential Voting?

In early August, MP Nick Kuman sponsored a private member’s bill in Papua New Guinea’s parliament designed to replace the country’s Limited Preferential Voting (LPV) electoral system with First Past the Post. If successful, Kuman’s bill will reverse changes implemented after PNG’s 2002 election.

Unlike First Past the Post – in which voters simply placed an ‘X’ by the name of the candidate they wanted as their MP – in LPV voters rank their three most preferred candidates. Votes are counted in rounds and in each round the lowest polling candidate is eliminated. With each elimination, the ballots of people who had selected that candidate as their top preference are reallocated to their next most preferred candidate still in the running.

Kuman has personal reasons to dislike LPV. In 2017, he saw his 4,050-vote lead shrink to just 391 as preferences were reallocated. Kuman isn’t alone in his dislike of LPV though: academics have argued about its merits since the 1990s.

In the early days, these debates were as much hypothetical as real: LPV hadn’t had time to prove its worth. But there have now been three general elections using LPV. Enough to assess its costs and benefits, and to answer a more practical question: is Kuman’s proposal a good one.

Frustratingly, some evidence remains elusive. Elections don’t come cheap in PNG. It would be useful to know how much LPV added to their price tag. Cost was cited by former Prime Minister Peter O’Neill when he proposed the country return to First Past the Post in 2018. (O’Neill now appears supportive of LPV.) LPV prolongs the time taken to count ballots, so must increase costs somewhat. Yet there isn’t enough public
information to estimate exactly how large that ‘somewhat’ is. It’s true the cost of elections rose rapidly between 2002 and the first LPV election in 2007. But this was partly due to increased security after the violence of 2002. Election costs also grew considerably between 2007 and 2012, an increase that can’t be laid at the feet of LPV.

We’ve been told by aid workers previously based in PNG that the largest electoral costs come from polling station security and logistics. LPV’s longer counting process adds to this. But compared to overall election spending – at least from what we’ve been told – the increases probably aren’t outlandish.

There’s better evidence on another potential downside to LPV: vote buying. Vote buying has increased, something often attributed to LPV. LPV may have had an impact, but it’s unlikely to be the main cause. Vote buying has also increased considerably in neighbouring Solomon Islands even though it uses First Past the Post. A more likely culprit is something both countries have in common: the money emanating from extractive industries that sloshes around their politics.

One final downside of LPV is real but small. LPV is more complex. It’s easier for voters to make mistakes. In a 2019 study, we found (page 31) invalid ballots increased after LPV was introduced. But we also found the increase was small, and possibly falling with time.

LPV has come at a cost. But the costs aren’t huge. What about the benefits?

Anyone hoping LPV would transform PNG’s politics must surely have been disappointed by now. As we also showed in our 2019 analysis (pages 30 to 35), election results haven’t changed much. The vote shares of winning candidates have gone up, as would be expected given they now include reallocated second and third preferences. Vote shares haven’t gone up that much though: in 2017 the median winner still only gained 31% of all
votes cast. And, tellingly, sitting MPs are losing elections as often as ever. To the extent that turnover rates reflect voter dissatisfaction with MPs, voters seem no more satisfied than they were under First Past the Post.

And although governance, as measured by the World Bank, did improve for a while under LPV, the trend started before its introduction, and reversed in 2014.

At first it looked like LPV had reduced electoral violence. This would have been a major achievement. However, violence flared badly in the 2017 elections. Perhaps matters may have been worse still without LPV. That seems possible given deteriorating law and order more generally. But, disappointingly, LPV clearly hasn’t eliminated electoral violence.

In these areas LPV has fallen short of what was hoped.

Yet there’s more to the story. When we studied results (page 36) we found evidence that, on average, LPV provided a small boost to women candidates. A small boost is no substitute for more substantive change. But it’s helpful.

We also found (pages 38 to 44) suggestive evidence that voters used their second and third preferences in the 2017 election to vote against the unpopular government of the day. In PNG, where politics is dominated by local concerns, voting focused on national issues, even if it only involves preferences, would be an important change. It’s too early to tell, and our evidence isn’t definitive, but it hints at genuine potential.

LPV also appears popular with voters. No one has surveyed people in PNG about LPV, or if they have, they haven’t made their findings public. (MP comments reported in a 29 August Sunday Chronicle article, which isn’t online, suggest the government conducted a survey of sorts in the past, and found majority support for LPV.) There certainly hasn’t been any sign of voter backlash, and focus group research found
predominantly positive views. The reasons why voters like LPV often aren’t profound – an acquaintance told one of us he liked LPV simply because he was able to vote for all three cousins standing last election, sparing himself family friction. This isn’t transformative change, but if it helps voters, even in minor ways, and this makes LPV popular, it counts for something.

Combined, these achievements aren’t overwhelming. We wouldn’t advocate for LPV elsewhere. Yet, we think that, on balance, LPV’s achievements, and its apparent popularity, are sufficient grounds for keeping the system in PNG.

There’s another reason why it would be a mistake for PNG to abandon LPV right now. Even if Kuman isn’t motivated by his performance in 2017, other MPs may well vote using that calculus. That’s not how the rules of the political game should be written.

Electoral rules should only be changed through a structured, deliberative process, involving national public consultation, and clear assessment criteria. Anything else is just foxes redesigning the political henhouse.

Now is not the time for PNG to abandon LPV. The case for change is weak. And the process flawed.

Does MP funding work (politically) in PNG?

In Papua New Guinea, District Services Improvement Program (DSIP) funding, given to 89 MPs representing open seats, is often talked of as a tool used to maintain government
coalitions and increase an MP’s chances of being re-elected. In this post we investigate whether the funds really do help hold together governing coalitions and assist MPs in their quest for re-election.

It has been argued that DSIP funds were introduced as a tool for holding together political coalitions. Their popularity among MPs is thought to stem from their utility as a means of rewarding and expanding an MP’s support base.

As DSIP data is now available, it is possible to test if these beliefs are actually correct. Is there a relationship between DSIP funds and government tenure? And between DSIP funds and the overall election rate of open MPs?

The following charts show these relationships.

At first glance, the first chart appears to show a positive correlation between DSIP volumes (the sum of real DSIP funds disbursed in each year they were PM) and prime ministers’ tenures. Governments have lasted longer on average when real (inflation-adjusted) DSIP volumes have been higher. However, this relationship is driven entirely by two outliers: Sir Michael Somare’s tenure from 2002 to 2011, and Peter O’Neill’s tenure from 2011 to 2019. If these outliers are removed, there is no clear relationship between real DSIP funds and a PM’s longevity (r = –0.2).

Somare’s longevity does not seem to be a direct product of DSIP funds, rather it is best explained by the restrictions imposed by the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates 2003 (OLIPPAC). Among other things, OLIPPAC prevented the movement of MPs from one party to another, and required MPs to support the PM they voted for after national elections, if there was a vote of no confidence. (These restrictions were declared unconstitutional in 2010.)

Meanwhile, O’Neill’s long tenure was foremost the product of a
slew of constitutional amendments: lengthening the grace period in which no-confidence motions are allowed, reducing the number of parliament sitting days, increasing the number of MPs required to lodge a vote of no-confidence motion, and lengthening the time in advance required to lodge a vote of no-confidence motion. During O’Neill’s tenure, these amendments were eventually found to be unconstitutional, but they helped O’Neill prior to that ruling. He later made use of reduced sitting days and longer grace periods to avoid a vote of no confidence. O’Neill also adjourned parliament several times to avoid votes of no confidence. It is true that O’Neill’s long tenure appears to have been aided by his willingness to withhold DSIP funds from opposition MPs, but this wasn’t the sole source of his long stay in power.

There is also no clear relationship \( r = -0.1 \) between real DSIP funds (in the year prior to election) and open MP win rates in elections, as the second chart above shows. This would suggest that the amount of DSIP funds disbursed does not provide MPs much by way of electoral advantage.

In summary, DSIP funds may have helped hold together government coalitions in particular instances, but they haven’t been universally helpful. Increasing DSIP funds also do not appear on average to have helped MPs win re-election.

Sadly, we don’t expect these findings to diminish the enthusiasm of PNG’s politicians for the DSIP. Electorate funds have been popular with every prime minister since 1984. Even Sir Mekere, PNG’s foremost reformer, feared the political implications of ceasing MP funding when he became PM in 1999.

Ultimately, a decision on DSIP funding should be made on developmental not political grounds. Nevertheless, the fact that incumbency rates have not increased with DSIP funding is surprising, and calls for more research on how DSIP funds are spent and what the attitudes are of voters to them.
The crisis of governance in PNG’s power sector

The recent spate of power outages (70 in a week according to the Post Courier), and the sudden resignation of yet another PNG Power Chief Executive Officer after only nine months in the job have brought into stark relief the chronic crisis that afflicts Papua New Guinea’s power sector.

The electricity sector in PNG is characterised by very low access, and unreliable and expensive service.

PNG is one of the least electrified countries in the world, with only 13% of the population having access to electricity (though this doesn’t include the much higher numbers who have bought themselves a solar panel for lighting). Electricity via a grid is limited to urban centres, and is unreliable. World Bank data for 2015 shows that PNG experienced an average of more than 40 blackouts per month that year, the third highest in the world.

Power outages per month (2015)

Source: World Development Indicators
Long-distance transmission of power is currently limited to the Port Moresby, Ramu (in Morobe and Madang), and Gazelle grids. These serve PNG’s main urban centres, while 19 isolated independent power grids serve provincial centres, relying on high-cost diesel generation. Between 2010 and 2015, average residential electricity prices in PNG were approximately US 39 cents per kWh, among the highest in the world.

Despite high tariffs, lack of funding is a key problem and arises from at least two sources: government payments owed to PNG Power Limited (PPL), and high levels of electricity theft. One estimate puts the debts from the government to PPL at K460 million (about US$130 million). Illegal connections by households that do not pay for electricity cost the utility K25 million (about US$7 million) per month.

Funding shortfalls mean PPL struggles to pay private electricity providers and to upgrade its ageing infrastructure. In 2020, PASCOE International Power Ltd cut electricity to Lae due to PPL’s failure to settle a K60 million debt.

But PNG’s power sector problems run deeper than funding shortfalls and the country’s difficult topography. A recent academic article has argued that the underlying problem is a crisis of governance, and a failure to establish strong electricity institutions.

This crisis of governance has been made manifest by the revolving-door nature of PPL’s CEO position in recent years. Carolyn Blacklock was appointed to the top position in 2018, but resigned 20 months later. She cited government debts owed to PPL, but also the bullying tactics she faced from Chief Secretary of Government Isaac Lupari who, she claimed, undermined her dealings over the proposed Dirio power station. Lupari, on the other hand, accused Blacklock of involving herself in corporate and local politics, and undermining established procedures.
Douglas Mageo was then made acting CEO until Flagon Bekker was appointed in late 2020. On 24 June 2021, the PPL union (which had opposed Bekker’s appointment from the start) called for the CEO’s resignation, claiming the restructuring he was pushing would affect their jobs. Three days later, Bekker resigned. Just two months earlier, at the end of March, he had unveiled his four-year reform plan.

Clearly, both political interference and opposition from PPL unions have undermined the prospects for power sector reform and improved performance.

It is not just the CEO’s position that is vulnerable. PPL Chair Peter Nupiri was dumped in January this year after less than three years in that role. His farewell comments noted PPL’s “militant union”, the slowdown in reform after Blacklock’s departure, and the destabilising impact of political interference.

In the meantime, a lack of affordable, reliable power is hurting PNG’s economic growth. Surveys of businesses constantly show electricity as one of their major concerns. For example, this World Bank report from 2019 cites an INA survey that ranked the state of electricity infrastructure as the fifth biggest constraint to business activities and investment in PNG in 2017.

Small businesses are affected the most by problems with electricity access and constant blackouts. In a 2015 World Bank survey, 4.2% of all firms surveyed, but 11.5% of small businesses (with five to nineteen employees), reported that electricity was their biggest obstacle.

PNG, along with some major international partners, announced a grand plan at the Port Moresby APEC summit in 2018 to provide electricity to 70% of the population by 2030. Despite recent donor funding announcements, given the crisis in the power sector, it is unclear how this target can be met. Unless PNG’s
electricity institutions are strengthened, outages will remain common and expansion a pipe dream.

Ultimately, reform is a matter of political will. Most of PNG’s MPs represent rural areas, where PPL is hardly present. What is the prospect of these same politicians, as a group, getting serious about power sector reform? Until they do, the sector will continue to stumble from one crisis to another, and from one outage to the next.