

Can Papua New Guinean democracy really survive without the Opposition?



by Bal Kama

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With a rapidly depleting Opposition, the National Capital District Governor, Powes Parkop, made a controversial remark at a public gathering in Port Moresby, that **'PNG democracy can survive without the Opposition'**. According to Governor Parkop, the members of the O'Neill-Dion government are capable of holding the Executive accountable and democracy can flourish under this condition.

The Registrar of Political Parties, Alphonse Gelu, is **concerned** that the mass exodus of members of the Opposition to the coalition government is 'very dangerous' for Papua New Guinea's democracy. But for Governor Parkop, it appears the Opposition is unnecessary. As evidenced by **commentators** [log-in necessary] on social media, the remark is controversial for three reasons.

First, it comes at a time when the Opposition is vocal and has been responsible for bringing to light the 'Parakagate' affair. It was the Opposition Leader, Belden Namah, who raised the issue in Parliament and tabled the alleged evidence, including the **purported letters** implicating the prime minister.

Namah's deputy, Sam Basil, continues to release media statements challenging the government, while Dr Allan Marat appeared to engineer awareness on many of the complex legal issues implicating the government. Given the size of the Opposition (three out of 111 MPs), their achievements in keeping the government accountable in an era of unprecedented socio-economic development is commendable. Putting a stop to the Opposition is unimaginable.

Second, PNG's political history has clearly indicated that the Executive should be held accountable to greater scrutiny. While members of the government, including Governor Parkop, may try to make some noise against the Executive in an attempt to demonstrate accountability, one can hardly hear them raising the most critical issues. The silence during Parakagate is an example, and Governor Parkop is an individual example of such silence. He initially threatened to **challenge the Manus**

deal in the Supreme Court, but has remained quiet and the task now falls to the Opposition.

It is likely that the silence within government ranks on these critical issues was to maintain solidarity within the coalition government or, as the Opposition claims, it could be due to the apparent threat to withhold \$4 million of District Support Improvement Project (DSIP) funds from the MPs – a charge dismissed by the government.

Whatever the reasons, the Supreme Court, in handing down its decision in the 2011-12 constitutional impasse, reinforced the need for scrutiny of the Executive. In that case, the Court criticised an abusive Executive with a tendency to exploit 'fundamental gaps' in the PNG constitution for 'political convenience rather than acting in the best interest of the country' (per Deputy Chief Justice Gibbs Salika, para 271).

The recent criticisms by members of the Executive against the decision of the Ombudsman Commission to recommend Prime Minister O'Neill to the Public Prosecutor for alleged misconduct in office further reinforce the need for scrutiny of the Executive. That cannot be achieved within the government ranks, as Governor Parkop seemed to suggest, but externally, and the Opposition is best placed to make sure it happens on the floor of Parliament.

Third, a comment coming from a learned parliamentarian raises some serious questions about the durability and relevance of the current Westminster system of government in PNG. Finance Minister James Marape dismissed fears that 'weak opposition is bad for our country' as mere 'western political idealism' but he or Governor Parkop failed to prove that the alternative can work.

The constitutional drafters were very cautious in accepting the Westminster system (CPC Report 1974) and Sir Michael Somare recently admitted that he 'rushed many things' in claiming PNG's independence. Could this be one of those 'rushed things'? Maybe it is time for PNG to reassess these systems as the country nears its 40th year of independence. Australia may also need to reassess its objectives in dealing with that system.

But for now, a vibrant Opposition is critical for Papua New Guinea and must be encouraged.

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