

# Does political stability consolidate irresponsible government? PNG 2012-2018

by Michael Kabuni

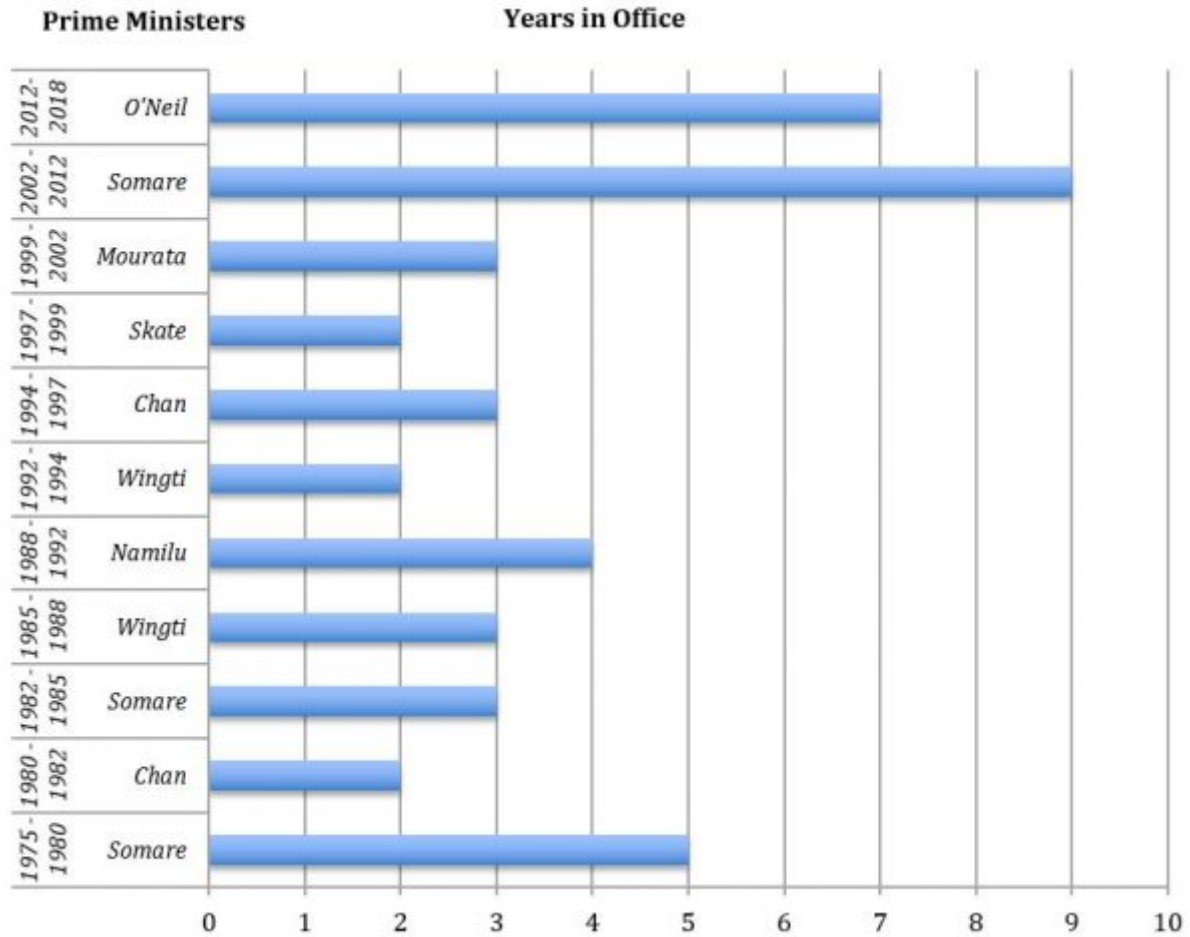
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Michael Kabuni presenting at the 2018 Pacific Update

Proponents of political stability **argue** that stability is necessary for the government to devise and implement policy programs to bring development and provide a favourable business environment, and that changing governments disrupts the implementation of development programs. This view may hold some relevance for Papua New Guinea (PNG). From independence in 1975 to 2002, successive votes of no confidence have removed prime ministers and sometimes replaced the executive in its entirety. No government has ever had the chance to fully implement its policies. In 2002, Ben Reilly **noted** that Papua New Guinea's unbroken record of democracy has not been accompanied by economic development. Figure 1 shows how unstable PNG politics was before 2002. Between 1975 and 2018, even though PNG has had only nine national elections, there were **15 changes** to the prime minister's position, many more than just the six times prime ministers were removed after elections.

## Figure 1: Number of years of prime ministers occupying office



Source: Adapted from *Gelu* (2005:86), additions made for 2003–2018. The figure excludes acting prime ministers.

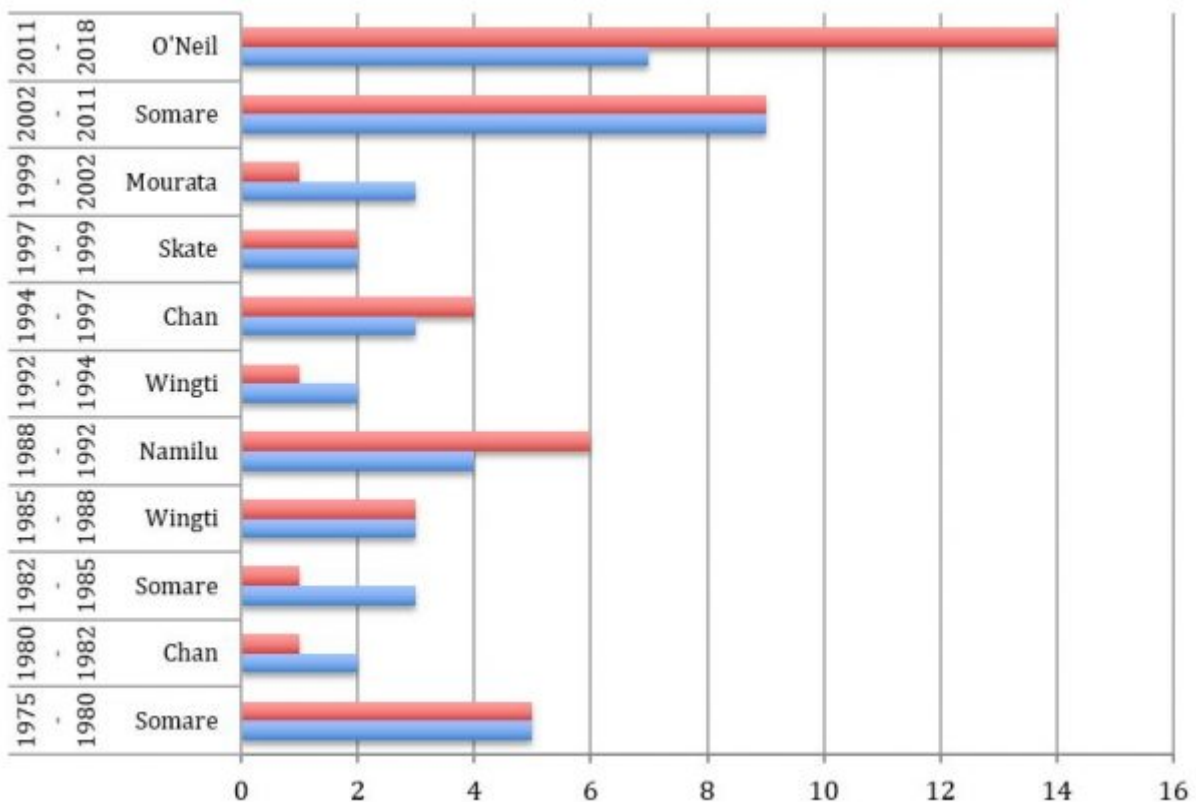
Other scholars take the opposite view. They argue that political stability is only a symptom of a much deeper problem. For instance, Jon Frankel and his co-authors argued in 2008 that political instability in Melanesia is a result of MPs who consider access to elected office as the main avenue for power and wealth, and the outcome of a struggle by those MPs not in control of the resources to oust the executive. Those in the executive controlling the resources are then forced to use bribery, coercion and all kinds of malpractice to remain in power. Given this state of affairs, political stability would simply allow the malpractice of an irresponsible government to continue.

PNG has had relatively stable governments since 2002, but it is important to examine the era of political stability to put the PNG case into perspective. I examine three executive actions in the second era of consecutive political stability from 2012 to 2018, namely: the extension of the grace period; the appointment of departmental heads; and the allocation of District and Provincial Service Improvement Program (DSIP/PSIP) funds.

### ***Extension of grace period***

The red bars in Figure 2 show the total number of amendments made to the Constitution by various prime ministers. (The blue bars show length of tenure, as in Figure 1.) The era between 2011 and 2018 stands out for two reasons: first, the O’Neil government has amended more provisions of the Constitution than any other government, and second, the coalition succeeded in amending controversial provisions where others have failed. One of the most controversial amendments was the **extension** of the grace period (the period in which votes of no confidence are not allowed).

**Figure 2: Amendments to the Constitution by each PM**



Source: [Paclii](#) (updated 13<sup>th</sup> May 2018)

Prime Minister Michael Somare tried unsuccessfully to push for a **further extension** of the grace period to 36 months after his **coalition got into power in 2002**. Peter O’Neill used his numerical superiority to increase the grace period after elections in 2012, from 18 months to 30 months. Since there are 60 months within the five-year term, 42 months (30 after elections and 12 before the issue of writs) were then covered by a grace period, leaving only a short 18-month window where the prime minister could be challenged. The minimum parliamentary sitting was also reduced from 63 days to 40 days in a year. This meant that the opposition **only had** 60 days in the 18-month window to remove the prime minister. After the first 30 months were over, the government used the reduced sitting days to avoid a vote of no confidence. As the 12 remaining months before the issue of writs drew near,

parliament was adjourned. The next parliamentary sitting was scheduled to fall well within the grace period, eliminating any chance of a vote of no confidence. The Supreme Court ruled this adjournment and amendment invalid. The parliament met but the prime minister successfully overcame the vote of no confidence.

### ***DSIP/PSIP funds***

Initially designed as electoral discretionary funds in 1984, these funds reached their height in 2013. K10 million was allocated per year for each of the MPs representing one of the 89 open electorates/districts through the DSIP; K5 million per electorate for each provincial MP (through the PSIP); and K500,000 for each local-level government. The relevant **legislation** and **guidelines** governing these funds do not state the **specific dates and amounts** to be given to the respective MPs. The government has been accused of exploiting this vacuum by deliberately withholding the DSIP and PSIP funds belonging to parliamentarians in the opposition, while releasing the funds to MPs who support the government. For instance in August 2016, the governor for Oro Province, Gary Juffa, who was critical of the government's decisions, claimed that the national government only released K1 million for Oro Province instead of K10 million (i.e., K5 million each for the two open electorates in Oro). **Sam Basil**, the MP for Bulolo District, Belden Namah, the MP for Vanimo Green, and **others** made similar claims. A month after Peter O'Neil formed government in 2017, Sam Basil led 12 other MPs from Pangu Pati to cross over to the government side. As Pangu joined the government, Basil **explained** this decision as being driven by his MPs' need to be able access DSIP funds, which he claimed may have been denied had they stayed in opposition.

### ***Politicisation of the public service***

The O'Neil government has **secured control** of appointments of senior positions by replacing the role of the Public Services Commission by the Ministerial Executive Appointment Committee, chaired by the minister responsible for the relevant department. Appointments to senior positions are made with the expectation the appointee would support the government. This factor featured prominently with the dismissal of then Police Commissioner Toami Kulunga in 2014 when he approved the warrant of arrest of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill in relation to alleged illegal payments made to Paul Paraka lawyers. Geoffrey Vaki was appointed as the Head of Police. When Vaki became embroiled in a contempt of court case for conspiring to prevent the arrest warrant being served on the Prime Minister, Gary Baki was appointed as the Police Commissioner. Gary Baki prevented the arrest of the Prime Minister by vetting high profile cases.

### **Conclusion**

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The three cases discussed above show that political stability in an environment prone to corruption makes the government less accountable. Political stability is preferable, but not a sufficient pre-condition for development. Strengthening the judiciary and related institutions such as the Ombudsman Commission should be the focus. Political instability is a **symptom**, not a cause, of the lack of development in PNG.

*This post is based on a presentation at the 2018 Pacific Update (Panel 5A). Watch the [livestream replay](#) or view the [presentation slides](#).*

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Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/does-political-stability-consolidate-irresponsible-government-png-2012-2018-20180716/>