

# Four paths to a better governed state in PNG

by Terence Wood

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Papua New Guinea's civil society in action  
Photo Credit: [Johaness Terra/UN Women/Flickr](#)

Halfway through a course I was teaching on governance at the University of Papua New Guinea last year a student raised his hand and said something like, “this is getting depressing, you’ve shown us our country isn’t governed well, you’ve explained why it isn’t, but you haven’t said anything about how things can get better”.

He had a point. By that stage of the course, I’d scrupulously outlined the problems of poor governance in PNG. I’d dragged the students through protracted lessons in how **their country’s political economy kept it poorly governed**. But I hadn’t offered any explanations of how things might improve.

In my defence, there was a reason for this: I didn’t know. No one does. But it is possible to point to the most likely paths PNG might follow on the way to becoming a better governed state.

The first of these is simply muddling through. There will be no transformations along this path, rather there will be haphazard and piecemeal improvements, sometimes at a national level, sometimes at a provincial level. Some might even **blossom up from individual communities**. Many improvements will fail along the way, but others will slowly improve governance to a point where it is good enough to allow PNG onto a better development trajectory. Thereafter, as the country becomes wealthier, healthier and better educated, it will become even better governed, and so on. A virtuous cycle. The main appeal of muddling through is its modesty. One small improvement at a time. And it’s easy to find examples of small governance improvements in PNG. Modesty, however, is also the main problem with muddling through. Sometimes small improvements aren’t enough. Sometimes they go nowhere. Small positive changes have occurred in various places in PNG’s government over the last two decades, but it doesn’t seem like they’ve led anywhere yet.

Another modest approach is one which I described to my students this year as

“orthodox political engineering”, by which I meant changing electoral or political rules in fairly minor ways, in the hope they transform politics and with that governance. The exemplar of this approach in PNG’s recent past is the shift to Limited Preferential Voting (LPV).

Changing to LPV was modest – orthodox – because it didn’t require a drastic overhaul, or a leap into the political unknown; it just required a change from an electoral system similar to the United Kingdom’s to one similar to Australia’s. Yet it was hoped it would change electoral incentives and improve political governance, which would influence governance more generally. Whether it would succeed was debated at the time, but there was a logic behind the hope. Political governance is central to governance. And politicians are influenced by electoral incentives. Changing electoral rules could, in theory, change political incentives, and through that governance.

Unfortunately for LPV, it has now been used in four general elections and, while there are tantalising hints that it may have changed the way some voters vote sometimes, it has only brought **small gains at best**. LPV was feasible, it was enacted, and it wasn’t a disaster. But so far it has also been a good demonstration of a major potential limitation of orthodox political engineering: often it fails to change political fundamentals or improve governance.

What about less orthodox approaches? What about “unorthodox political engineering”? Could PNG become better governed if it made more radical changes to its political rules? So far PNG has never tried, but other countries have. A famous example is the **participatory budgeting process introduced in some Brazilian cities**. To simplify, participatory budgeting changed the rules governing new investment budgets to give communities a direct say in the provision of projects in their part of the city. This was done through a fair, transparent process. It wasn’t a panacea, but it short-circuited patronage politics in places and sometimes improved service provision. In theory, adopting a similar approach **might transform PNG’s District Service Improvement Program** from a political slush fund into something that genuinely improved services. It might bring development benefits and undermine the clientelist nature of PNG’s politics too.

And why stop there? In my time in Melanesia I’ve heard scholars and locals argue that politics needs to be transformed from a contest over resources to a conversation about shared rules; something more like customary community governance or what political theorists call **deliberative democracy**. There is a world of possible unorthodox political changes out there. Democracy in PNG doesn’t need to inhabit the straitjacket of laws it inherited from its former colonial powers. There are problems though: there’s no guarantee that changes, whether informed by

theory, or borrowed from other countries, will work in PNG's unique context; and radical rule changes would require today's politicians voting away many of the powers they currently hold. Not impossible, but unlikely.

The final path to better governance in PNG doesn't require rule changes at all. Instead, it involves political change from the bottom up. It involves national social movements forming, which ultimately become political movements, and eventually coherent blocs of politicians – parties – in parliament. Large, coherent political parties, unlike the fluid transactional parties currently in PNG's parliament, would be able to focus on national issues – such as improving governance – rather than patronage politics and political maneuvering. This would be a radical transformation, but not unprecedented – almost every well-governed country on earth owes its politics to the rise of national social movements in its past.

Could this happen in PNG? The latent potential is there, people throughout PNG face many shared problems, and nascent social movements exist. Yet, the successful examples of social movements transforming governance elsewhere almost all had their making in periods of rapid social and economic change – such as the Industrial Revolution – when old ties were broken and new ones formed, while new ideas flourished. This isn't happening in PNG at present. Still, new types of social movements may arise in the future. Perhaps not likely, but possible.

This is true of the other paths to better governance I have described too: perhaps not likely, but possible. I wish I could tell you exactly how governance will improve in PNG. But, in lieu of that, my guess is that when improvement does occur, it will follow one of the pathways I have just described.

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