

More administrative efficiency, not more ministers, for better services in PNG



PM James Marape in Esa'ala
Photo Credit: [PNG Office of the Prime Minister/Facebook](#)

by Andrew Anton Mako

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The Papua New Guinea (PNG) parliament passed several important bills in its October 2023 sitting.

One such bill was a [supplementary budget](#) of K771 million. The government plans to spend its windfall revenue from increased tax revenue and high commodity prices on [five priority areas](#): health and education; law and order; funding rent and utilities for government offices; government arrears to small and medium-sized enterprises and contractors; and government debt. Further details, especially on the breakdown of the expenditure, have not been released. 65% of the supplementary budget has been apportioned to the Department of Treasury, which is highly discretionary. The remainder has gone to pay higher than expected interest charges. The excess revenue could have been set aside for the 2024 national budget, which is just a month away. Even better, some of the funds could have been saved in the country's [sovereign wealth fund](#).

Another important but controversial amendment to legislation which the parliament passed was to create [six new government ministries](#). The amendment was first tabled and passed in June, then endorsed for a second time in October because any change to PNG's constitution, in this case section 144, requires two votes. In PNG's original constitution, the number of ministers was capped at one-quarter of the number of members of parliament (MPs). Until the 2019 increase in the number of MPs, this meant no more than 27 ministers. Under Prime Minister Michael Somare, [the cap was lifted](#) and 32 ministries formed in 2010. Now it is being increased again to 38, that is, one third of parliament.

According to the Prime Minister James Marape, the factors behind the increase are: the rise in the country's population to [almost 12 million](#); the increased size of the economy which requires "[more hands on deck](#)" to manage it; and the increased

number of MPs in parliament.

In fact, it is obvious that the reason for the increase in the number of ministers is to increase the prime minister's chance of surviving a vote of no confidence. The grace period, in which such challenges to the prime minister are forbidden following a general election, expires in February next year. A vote of no confidence, or at least an attempt to bring one on, is almost certain to follow.

Having more ministries available makes it easier for the prime minister to reward loyalty and discourage defection. It is as simple as that. This is also why there are eight vice-ministers and 18 committee chairs. (See the [Devpolicy PNG MP Database](#) for details.) Four new committee chairs were appointed to head [four new special parliamentary committees](#) in October.

The additional ministries have [not yet been identified](#). It seems there is no clear plan on what to do with them. Rather, they might be kept in reserve for when they are needed – after February 2024.

What about the argument that a larger population or parliament requires more ministers? I have collected data on a variety of countries as per Table 1. PNG already has a larger cabinet relative to the size of its parliament than all the countries analysed other than Solomon Islands, a country which also suffers from frequent votes of no confidence. PNG already has more ministers than any of the other countries except Uganda which also has 32. There is no suggestion from the data that a higher population requires more ministers. Rather, larger countries tend to have a higher ratio of population to ministers.

Table 1: Population, parliament and cabinet size comparison for selected countries

Country	Population (million) - A	Parliament Size (MPs) - B	Cabinet Size (principal ministers only) - C	Ratio of Population to Parliament size (A/B)	Ratio of Parliament Size to Cabinet (B/C)
PNG	11.8	118	32	100,000	3.7
Uganda	47.2	529	32	89,225	16.5
Zambia	20.0	167	25	119,760	6.7
Australia	26.0	151	23	172,185	6.6
Nepal	30.5	275	22	110,909	12.5
Kenya	54.0	350	22	154,285	15.9
Solomon Islands	0.7	50	21	13,333	2.4
Sri Lanka	22.2	225	21	96,667	10.7
New Zealand	5.1	123	18	41,463	6.7
Vanuatu	0.3	52	13	5,769	4.0
Uruguay	3.4	99	13	34,344	7.6

Table: Andrew Anton Mako • Source: World Bank population data, various national parliament websites and Wikipedia • Created with Datawrapper

No one would argue in PNG that more ministers would mean better government. Given the current harsh economic conditions including the **deterioration of basic public services** in rural areas, any additional resources should be used to ensure basic services are delivered, such as addressing the **chronic shortages** of basic medicines and vaccines in public hospitals.

Could it be argued that the additional stability the extra ministers might create would be worth it? There is no doubt PNG faces problems with votes of no confidence,

which are destabilising and distracting. This is especially the case because, due to the way PNG politics operates and the unanticipated effect of constitutional change in the late 1990s, **the incumbent prime minister is now almost certain to be returned** at a general election, as has happened every time since 2007. This in turn means that the only way to remove a prime minister is to have a vote of no confidence.

This is clearly not a satisfactory state of affairs. Some radical reforms have been mooted, including by the current prime minister, such as a move to a presidential system. But such reforms would have many consequences, including some that are hard to predict, and in any case probably would not be acceptable to MPs, who would be worried that they would be the losers in a move to a presidential system.

That said, simply buying political support by offering up more ministries cannot be the way to govern. Why not make everyone a minister in such a scenario?

Rather than creating more ministers and ministries, the government needs to revisit and revive the reforms which the late Sir Mekere Morauta embarked on when he was prime minister. His goal was a public service machinery that is lean, agile and highly productive.

The focus needs to be on basic administrative mechanisms including procurement processes that need to be streamlined, especially for the provinces, so that basic services can flow to the people faster. For example, the governor of East Sepik recently shared **a worrying experience** on Facebook regarding prolonged delays to road maintenance in Wewak. It had taken more than eight months (including time needed to create a provincial procurement committee) just to get the paperwork ready for the central government to award a contract.

During the second vote on the amendments to create the six 'blank' ministries in October, only five MPs opposed the bill to amend the constitution, presumably reflecting on where such bills would take this country. They decided that enough is enough and voted against yet another extension of patronage politics. Going forward, the country needs more such principled leaders.

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