

# Papua New Guinea's no-confidence season

by Henry Ivarature

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PNG PM James Marape greeted by Rainbo Paita during the opening of the Finschhafen Airport in 2022

Photo Credit: [Facebook/pngnatplan](https://www.facebook.com/pngnatplan)

It's "**game on**", as PNG's parliament prepares to entertain another no-confidence vote, the second attempt since the 2022 general election.

In February, just after the expiry of the "grace period" which bans no-confidence motions for 18 months after general elections, the Opposition attempted and failed to table a no-confidence motion against Marape. It filed two notices for the Private Business Committee (PBC), the parliamentary committee that considers no-confidence motions, but both were rejected.

On February 15, Parliament was adjourned to 28 May 2024 with the Opposition warning Marape he was "**not off the hook**." Keeping their word, the Opposition filed another no-confidence notice to the PBC on 29 May. As in February, this also failed to satisfy constitutional requirements, with the PBC **noting** that the signature of one MP was missing. There were only 11 signatures. The Opposition was told to fix the error and submitted an amended notice for the PBC's consideration on 5 June.

Meanwhile, Opposition numbers have grown thanks to the defection of Rainbo Paita, Marape's **former leader of government business and finance minister** and a Pangu Pati member. Emulating Marape's example in 2019, Paita brought 20 MPs, including five **government ministers**, to the Opposition.

Having boosted the Opposition's numbers, Paita was rewarded by being made **alternate prime minister** — that is, the Opposition's choice for prime minister, replacing Allan Bird, one of the February defectors.

There is a logic to the Opposition's decision to cast Bird aside for the newcomer Paita. It is normally ministers who unseat prime ministers. Marape himself was O'Neill's loyal finance minister until he turned on him. In fact, the only exception in PNG's no-confidence motion history is Rabbe Namaliu who was Opposition leader when he succeeded Pias Wingti on 8 June 1988. But whether the Opposition has in fact damaged its own cause by replacing the more credible Bird with Paita

remains to be seen.

Bird is widely admired. Many would say that he has the leadership qualities to be PM and challenge Marape. The same cannot be said of Paita. Someone more embedded in the grand game of PNG politics would be hard to find. Paita served as Student Representative Council President while at the University of PNG until 2011. The next year, 2012, he stood for parliament, lost, stood again in 2017 and won. He became a minister once Marape took over in 2019 and successfully recontested his seat in 2022.

Two policies Paita is well known for are the [controversial and unpopular gold bullion bill](#), now shelved, and the plan for PNG to [buy its own satellite](#).

Whereas Bird has spoken out on a range of important public issues, Paita has remained silent. Bird has ably and clearly articulated issues affecting ordinary people in parliament [such as inflation](#). Paita hasn't and has no history of empathising with the cries of the people. It is not clear what he offers to the Opposition's cause.

The numbers are on Marape's side for now. Three ministers are reported to have [returned to Marape's camp](#). At the moment the Opposition only has 37 MPs out of a total of 112 MPs (six seats are vacant).

But how long the numbers will favour Marape is unknown. Even if he survives this round, he will face many attempts to dislodge him over the next two years. It is only in July 2026 that he will once again be protected from a vote of no confidence until the mid-2027 general elections.

Every PM is vulnerable in PNG once the grace period is over. Election mandates mean very little. Many MPs want the top job; many more wonder if they would get a better job with a new PM. And money changes hands, or at least is promised or assumed.

But it is not just about money and power. PNG's MPs also have views on what ails their country, and there are always plenty of legitimate policy concerns and complaints. Whatever [Marape says in defence of his five-year tenure](#), the Black Wednesday Port Moresby riots of 10 January 2024 have stripped away his legitimacy and made him vulnerable.

The contrast between his hyperbolic rhetoric (wanting to make PNG the richest, black Christian nation) and the dismal reality of hardship for most Papua New Guineans has also come back to bite the PM and make him an easy target. From these perspectives, a Bird-led Opposition is more formidable than a Paita-led one.

Still, whoever he faces in the ring, being PM at a time like this is so precarious that it is no wonder that Marape is looking, as other PMs have before him, for **new constitutional defences**. He wants the 18-month grace period that protects PMs from no-confidence votes after elections to start again if and when they survive one. Whether Marape's loyal MPs are loyal enough to disempower themselves by voting through such a constitutional amendment remains to be seen. And whether the courts would uphold such an amendment is also unknown.

Meanwhile, Marape and his opponents will continue to slug it out. Votes of no confidence are an intrinsic part of PNG political culture, with plotting to overthrow the incumbent PM considered to be a legitimate part of any MP's activities. If anything, such manoeuvring has become more important over time. Since 2002, the incumbent PM going into an election has **always** been returned. **This incumbency bias** is baked into PNG's political system, meaning that a vote of no confidence has in fact become effectively the **only** way to replace a prime minister in PNG.

So, from the perspective of PNG's political class, there is a lot to play for. But, as the events of last week suggest, whether the no-confidence "game" will make a difference to the long-suffering PNG population – often advised by their MPs to watch on the sidelines rather than trying to influence outcomes themselves – is a much harder question to answer.

### **Disclosures:**

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