

PNG's fight against corruption must draw on its culture

by Yuambari Haihuie

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Crowds at the 50th Anniversary of Independence celebrations in Lae, Papua New Guinea

Photo Credit: *Defence Imagery/Rodney Braithwaite*

Papua New Guinea celebrated **50 years of independence** in September 2025, but corruption remains an existential threat to the state. Despite major efforts to strengthen governance, PNG's experience demonstrates that lasting progress will require drawing on the country's own cultural foundations.

Since assuming office in 2019, Prime Minister James Marape has channelled **political will** into advancing anti-corruption reforms. In 2020, his government enacted legislation that led to the establishment of a long-anticipated national integrity agency, the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), in 2023. This was a signature policy achievement for Marape's administration.

But after a few months of limited operation, the ICAC spectacularly imploded from within, leaving hard lessons for practitioners and supporters of anti-corruption efforts in PNG.

Corruption has deep roots in PNG, driven by individual greed, fractious politics, abundant natural resources and weak regulations. Early inquiries exposed corruption in the country's **logging sector** in the 1980s, with similar patterns of corruption later emerging across **mining, public procurement, public infrastructure, diplomacy** and **the conduct of elections**.

As one former prime minister observed, corruption in PNG is "**systemic and systematic**". Scholars have pointed to Melanesian **cultural practices** of reciprocity, known as the *wantok* system (from "one talk", meaning kin or speaking the same language), and "big man" leadership styles as having exacerbated the spread of public sector corruption.

Due to the perceived risk posed by these cultural norms, Marape insisted that the ICAC be independent in both recruitment and leadership. A headhunting firm and external panel handled recruitment and vetting. They provided a shortlist of candidates to the ICAC Appointments Committee, a group chaired by the prime minister and comprising the opposition leader, chief justice, chair of the Public

Service Commission and chair of the PNG Council of Churches.

Marape also called for the ICAC leadership to be composed solely of expatriates, for fear that local officials might be compromised by their cultural obligations, a view [shared by the opposition](#). In July 2023, Australian Andrew Forbes was appointed ICAC Commissioner, joined by fellow Australian Daniel Baulch and New Zealander Graham Gill as deputy commissioners.

It soon became evident that the greatest threats to the ICAC would come from within. On 20 June 2025, less than two years into their roles, the three inaugural commissioners [were suspended](#) by the Appointments Committee. This move followed internal allegations of corrupt conduct, with Forbes accusing the two deputies, both of whom had already made similar claims against him. Among the allegations were the unilateral usurping of decision-making power and unauthorised expenses.

The Appointments Committee installed a new acting commissioner, Thomas Eluh — previous chair of the interim ICAC — and two new deputy commissioners in July 2025. All three new acting appointees are Papua New Guinean. The two suspended deputy commissioners sought legal action against the Appointments Committee, but later [withdrew their court case](#), conceding it lacked a legal basis. Investigations into the allegations are ongoing.

The ICAC's turmoil has frustrated taxpayers, with [51.4 million kina](#) (US\$12.2 million) allocated to its operations in the 2025 National Budget. [Previous anti-corruption measures](#), such as Taskforce Sweep and the police's National Fraud and Anti-Corruption Directorate, lacked the political support that the ICAC has enjoyed. Yet in public perception, they were considered far more effective.

Fallout from the ICAC's strife threatens not just political will for anti-corruption reforms, but also PNG's access to international finance. The ICAC was crucial to the IMF's economic reform program and PNG's anti-money-laundering efforts. Failure to reform could result in PNG being grey-listed by the Financial Action Task Force, increasing borrowing costs, reducing foreign investment and impacting banking. PNG's becoming an economic pariah would weaken development and further [destabilise politics](#), with potential geostrategic implications for [Australia's regional engagement](#).

To allay these fears, [Marape announced](#) plans to use artificial intelligence to drive good governance in PNG, including in public appointments, procurement, policymaking and law enforcement. But technology alone cannot solve problems rooted in political and cultural context. This was the key lesson from the ICAC

implosion: that even expatriates independently appointed can be susceptible to “big man” leadership clashes and the trappings of public office.

Meaningful change to PNG’s governance may **require utilising**, rather than isolating, culture. This will firstly require the ICAC to identify and collaborate with their *wantok* agencies — those aligned with their anti-corruption goals. This includes domestic agencies with existing **anti-corruption strategies** and international counterpart ICACs. Once this network is established through MoUs or taskforces, the ICAC must implement mechanisms for reciprocation — such as shared intelligence, personnel or even budgets — to achieve common goals.

With this network in place, the ICAC will need to be tactical in challenging the “big men” perpetrating corruption. A pragmatic approach could target lower-level actors first, establishing legal precedents before pursuing those at the top. Given the significant public investment in the ICAC, Papua New Guineans will expect more action and less rhetoric to restore confidence in the beleaguered agency.

PNG’s deep history and cultural traditions, rooted long before independence, remain among its greatest assets. Harnessing values of reciprocity and obligation offers the most credible path to restoring trust and addressing the modern challenge of corruption.

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