

# PNG's Parliament at 40: progress and challenges

by Werner Cohill

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PNG's National Parliament building, Port Moresby

On 26 August 2024, the National Parliament held a small but significant celebration to commemorate its 40th anniversary. The National Parliament building was opened on 7 August 1984 by King Charles, then the Prince of Wales, just nine years after independence. This year's celebrations revived fond memories of when the building was first opened, with traditional dances from the four regions of the country, as well as staff participation. The event marked a first for the National Parliament and hopefully becomes an annual event.

The National Parliament has remained the home of political representation since its opening. Governments, mostly coalition governments, have formed and changed within its walls. Various Heads of Government have addressed it, including the then President of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Grand Chief Sir John Momis, and more recently the Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. The building itself has weathered challenging circumstances, notably [the Sandline Crisis](#) in 1997 and [the storming](#) by PNG Defence Force soldiers and police over the non-payment of APEC-related allowances in 2018.

Papua New Guinea's contemporary political representation evolved from the Legislative Council in the 1950s to the House of Assembly in the 1960s. With independence in 1975 came the new Parliament building, signifying the dawn of a budding parliamentary democracy.

The Parliament constitutes one of three arms of a government, comprising elected (and in some jurisdictions appointed) representatives with three core functions – making and amending legislation, representation, and overseeing the executive government. The Constitution provides the National Parliament with specific powers: representing the interests of people from 22 provinces and 97 open electorates, changing the Constitution, and supervising the executive government.

While a robust parliamentary system was adopted at independence, significant changes have occurred. As Sean Dorney noted in his book, *Papua New Guinea – People, Politics and History since 1975*, “despite inheriting the Westminster style of

parliamentary democracy, PNG has incorporated into this parliamentary system its own mores and distinctive practices. These ... have overshadowed the principles of a democratic parliament.”

Several key challenges continue to influence the National Parliament’s functioning.

First, the role of Members of Parliament (MPs) remains problematic. While MPs should serve as representatives, lawmakers, and oversight providers, many focus primarily on administering district development funding and projects. As one Papua New Guinean political scientist observed, MPs tend to have dual roles – lawmakers during parliamentary sessions and service deliverers outside sessions, with the latter role often taking precedence due to re-election concerns.

Second, women’s representation in Parliament remains extremely low. Since independence only 10 women have been elected, with three currently serving. Despite various attempts at Temporary Special Measures, insufficient political support has hindered progress. The Special Parliamentary Committee on the 2022 National Elections recommended reforms to enhance electoral integrity and create better opportunities for women’s representation.

Third, executive government control over Parliament has become excessive, undermining the separation of powers. A former female MP described it as “a working legislature with National Executive Council dictatorship”. This control manifests through inadequate budgetary allocations and executive interference in parliamentary proceedings, diminishing the Speaker’s authority.

Fourth, parliamentary committees perform poorly despite their crucial oversight role. With 29 committees in the current Parliament, most lack effectiveness due to Parliament’s failure to refer matters for investigation. Only a few committees, such as the Public Accounts Committee and the Constitutional Laws, Acts & Subordinate Legislations Committee, receive regular referrals.

Finally, Parliament faces challenges in supporting the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Achievement of the SDGs requires engaged parliaments to enable government action, while maintaining accountability. The day-to-day concerns of Papua New Guineans – including poverty, health, peace, employment, climate change, and gender equality – all relate to the SDGs.

As PNG approaches its 50th anniversary of independence, these challenges should prompt reflection on pre-independence views on the role and functioning of the Parliament. Progress towards a well-functioning and truly democratic parliament requires political willingness and immediate review of practices and legislation that

drive parliamentary functions. The post-independence era demands renewed commitment to parliamentary reform and effectiveness.

### **Disclosures:**

The author is a parliamentary officer. The views shared in the article are those of the author alone and do not represent the views of the National Parliament.

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