At independence, the PNG Public Services Commission (PSC) was a mighty body, with control over the entire public service. So powerful was it that the commissioners were referred to as “gods”. But the public service was seen as unresponsive and performing poorly and in the mid-1980s the PSC was stripped of its constitutional powers.

However, things went from bad to worse; the public service came to be seen as highly politicised. The reformist Prime Minister Mekere Morauta restored the powers of the PSC in the early 2000s, not over the entire public service as before but in relation to senior appointments. In fact, the powers given to the PSC by Morauta in relation to departmental, provincial administration and statutory authority heads far exceeded those the body had at independence.

A decade on, there were once again complaints about the public service, and a third attempt at constitutional reform was made in 2013 under Prime Minister Peter O’Neill, this time to strip the PSC of its new powers in relation to senior appointments. However, the PSC challenged the constitutionality of O’Neill’s move, and in 2019 the Supreme Court upheld its challenge. Thus, today, the Morauta reforms prevail, and the PSC plays a critical role in relation to senior hirings and firings.

It’s a fascinating but complicated and convoluted story, one that we document and try to explain in our new Development Policy Centre discussion paper.

We explain the contradictory tendencies in the trajectory of PSC reform by reference to the conflicting imperatives of reform: at times, for more flexibility and responsiveness; at times, for more probity and discipline. The 1986 and 2013 reforms were both driven by a desire to make the public service more flexible and responsive and to increase the power of politicians relative to bureaucrats. The 2003 reforms were driven by a loss of faith in PNG politicians’ commitment to act in the national interest, and the resulting desire to make the public service less corrupt by reducing the power of politicians relative to bureaucrats.

Both motivations are compelling. And both sets of reforms “made sense”. Interestingly, the World Bank supported the initial reforms of the 1980s, and the Asian Development Bank the
opposing reforms of the 2000s. However, the two motivations conflict, and it is hard to find a compromise that sticks. It is quite possible that there will be future challenges to the PSC’s powers along the lines of the 2013 O’Neill reforms. After all, those reforms were rejected by the courts on procedural rather than substantive grounds.

This issue is of interest, we hope, to those who work in or on Papua New Guinea. We actually wrote this paper to find an answer to the simple question of whether the PSC was more or less powerful now than at independence, on which we had heard various opinions. Accounts of public service reform in PNG had mainly been written in the 1980s and 1990s, and needed to be updated.

In many countries, such as Australia, central bodies such as the PSC have become less powerful: indeed, this has been a central component of the now not-so-new “new public sector management” reforms that were popular in the 1990s. In PNG, however, the story is not so simple. Since independence, the PSC has been both sidelined and strengthened. Overall, we conclude, the PSC is not as powerful as at independence, but in the key area of senior appointments it is even more powerful today than it was at independence.

As well as being of interest to PNG scholars and policy makers, the paper also, we hope, speaks to the conflicting currents experienced in many developing nations, in particular the ongoing tensions between politicians and bureaucrats, and the difficulty of finding an appropriate balance between civil service responsiveness and probity.

Ultimately, we take our PSC history as an illustration of the point made by Ron May in the introduction to his classic 2001 collection of essays on PNG. There he wrote (in the penultimate sentence of that introduction) that what PNG – and by implication many other countries – needed was “less institutional reform than a fundamental shift in patterns of political behaviour.”

PNG is a clientelist democracy. MPs are elected on the basis of local, not national, issues. There are therefore weak incentives for MPs to act in the national interest. However, there is no guarantee that an autonomous public service will act in the national interest either. As long as PNG’s bureaucrats view politicians as corrupt, and the politicians view the bureaucrats as complacent, cooperation between the two groups is unlikely. Of course, reforms matter, but the PSC saga points to their limits: no amount of PSC or other institutional reform can make up for the deeply clientelistic nature of PNG politics.

*Download the discussion paper, Papua New Guinea’s Public Services Commission since independence: sidelined or strengthened?*
Disclosure

This research was undertaken with the support of the ANU-UPNG Partnership, an initiative of the PNG-Australia Partnership, funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views are those of the authors only.

About the author/s

Nematullah Bizhan
Nematullah Bizhan is a senior lecturer at the Development Policy Centre. He lectures in public policy at the University of Papua New Guinea as part of the Centre’s partnership with UPNG.

Stephen Howes
Stephen Howes is Director of the Development Policy Centre and Professor of Economics at the Crawford School of Public Policy at The Australian National University.

Link: https://devpolicy.org/pngs-public-service-reform-rollercoaster-20240426/
Date downloaded: 8 May 2024