

Political developments in Papua New Guinea in a historical context

by Nayahamui Michelle Rooney

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Former PNG PM Michael Somare (left) with current PM Peter O'Neill (right) (Credit: PNG Blogs)

In early April 2019, two senior cabinet ministers of PNG's People's National Congress (PNC) party (led by Peter O'Neill) resigned. This was followed by the [resignation of James Marape](#), Minister for Finance, a senior PNC member, and Member of Parliament for the Tari-Pori electorate in the Hela province. He reportedly cited [trust issues between him and O'Neill](#). Over the weekend of 27-28 April, [another five](#) members of O'Neill's coalition departed. On Monday 29 April, [two more PNC members left](#). Today, Friday 3 May, another nine PNC members [resigned](#), including three ministers. The opposition leader Pruaitch, of the National Alliance (NA) party, has [reportedly stated that they will move a vote of confidence](#) when parliament sits on 7 May.

These are significant developments and it is worth looking at them from a historical perspective. [Alphonse Gelu notes](#) (also [here](#)), that since political parties first emerged in PNG's political arena in 1968, PNG politics has been characterised by a complex multiple political party system. As noted [here](#) and [here](#), this makes it difficult to understand PNG politics purely through the lens of the elections and political parties. Instead, politics seems to be defined by 'big man' politics, money, and loose coalitions which fuel persistent votes of no confidence (VONC), court challenges, or forced resignations.

PNG's PMs, installed both via elections and via votes of no confidence, are shown in Table 1. Amidst all the instability, two eras stand out from Table 1: those of Somare and O'Neill.

Table 1: A history of PNG's Prime Ministers

	Party forming government at elections (number of wins)	Elected PM	Political party with most winning candidates	Party forming through VONC	VONC Prime Minister	Region	No. of political parties in parliament	No. of independents MPS elected
1977	PANGU (39)	Michael Somare	PANGU (39)			MOMASE	8 (includes independents)	
1978	PANGU	Michael Somare				MOMASE		
1979	PANGU	Michael Somare				MOMASE		
1980				PPP	Julius Chan	NGI		
1981	PANGU	Michael Somare		PPP	Julius Chan	MOMASE		
1982	PANGU (51)	Michael Somare				MOMASE	8	4
1983	PANGU	Michael Somare				MOMASE		
1984	PANGU	Michael Somare				MOMASE		
1985				PDM	Pias Wingti	HIGHLANDS		
1986				PDM	Pias Wingti	HIGHLANDS		
1987	PDM (17)	Paias Wingti	PANGU (26)			HIGHLANDS	10	22
1988				PANGU	Rabbie Namaliu	NGI		
1989				PANGU	Rabbie Namaliu	NGI		
1990				PANGU	Rabbie Namaliu	NGI		
1991				PANGU	Rabbie Namaliu	NGI		
1992	PDM (15)	Paias Wingti	PANGU (20)			HIGHLANDS	12	30-39
1993	PDM	Paias Wingti				HIGHLANDS		
1994				PPP	Julius Chan	NGI		
1995				PPP	Julius Chan	NGI		
1996				PPP	Julius Chan	NGI		
1997	PNC (6)	Bill Skate	PPP (16); PANGU	PNC	Skate, from Giheno	PAPUA	13-20	38
1998	PNC	Bill Skate			Bill Skate	PAPUA		
1999				PDM	Mekere Morauta (V	PAPUA		
2000				PDM	Mekere Morauta	PAPUA		
2001				PDM	Mekere Morauta	PAPUA	OLIPPAC	
2002	NA (19)	Michael Somare	NA (19)		Mekere Morauta to	MOMASE	14-21	17
2003	NA	Michael Somare				MOMASE		
2004	NA	Michael Somare				MOMASE		
2005	NA	Michael Somare				MOMASE		
2006	NA	Michael Somare				MOMASE		
2007	NA (27)	Michael Somare	NA (27)			MOMASE	21	20
2008	NA	Michael Somare				MOMASE		
2009	NA	Michael Somare				MOMASE		
2010	NA				Sam Abal acting in	MOMASE		
2011	NA				Sam Abal acting in	MOMASE		
2012	PNC (27)	Peter O'Neill	PNC (27)	PNC	Peter O'Neill PM fro	HIGHLANDS	21	16
2013	PNC	Peter O'Neill				HIGHLANDS		
2014	PNC	Peter O'Neill				HIGHLANDS		
2015	PNC	Peter O'Neill				HIGHLANDS		
2016	PNC	Peter O'Neill				HIGHLANDS		
2017	PNC	Peter O'Neill				HIGHLANDS		
2018	PNC	Peter O'Neill				HIGHLANDS		
2019	PNC	Peter O'Neill				HIGHLANDS		

Note: Rows highlighted light orange are election years. The row in green is the year in which OLIPPAC was introduced. Sources below.

The Somare era

Table 1 shows that political leadership up to 2002 was characterised by a disruptive cycle of: elections, member trading, government formation, PM instalment, VONC, recalibrate the balance of power, form government, and repeat. To some extent, however, these were skirmishes in what was an era stewarded by Sir Michael Somare, the country's first Prime Minister. For example, Paias Wingti's instalment as PM involved him breaking from the Somare-led PANGU party, and Sir Rabbie Namaliu's term as PM involved ousting Somare as the political leader of PANGU. Although other PMs and parties succeeded in gaining the PM position, their terms

were relatively short-lived.

The Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) was introduced in 2001 to try to curb what was, and is, regarded as an unstable political situation. The OLIPPAC adds to the complexity in PNG politics, it has been debated by senior PNG political analysts and subjected to a legal challenge. For example, early on, Orovu Sepoe **highlighted** that the effectiveness of OLIPPAC would depend on the willingness of political actors to engage with it. In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled parts of it unconstitutional. As Henry Okole **discusses**, the Supreme Court ruling was fundamentally based on the fact that by regulating the behaviour of MPs the OLIPPAC violated citizens' rights to engage in public matters through their elected representatives. Since 2002, there has been more parliamentary stability. This was also related to the increase in the grace period for VONC from six months to 18 months after elections.

Somare led NA to win the 2002 elections and **his popularity in the 2007 elections** helped NA to remain in power until it began to splinter towards the end of the electoral cycle. Around 2010-2011, Somare fell seriously ill and during his absence Abal acted as PM. Growing public concerns about corruption led to political unrest that opened an opportunity for the realignment of parliamentary power. O'Neill took over the PM post amidst public unrest and Constitutional upheaval. Returning to parliament from his illness, Somare stepped aside as the political leader of NA, but not before consolidating the party's position in government by joining the O'Neill coalition in a move that Somare reportedly **explained** as being to stabilise government and avoid disruptions.

Somare exited the national political arena in 2017. Reflecting his Melanesian leadership style, he publicly endorsed candidates from the two parties he had long been associated with, NA and PANGU, in his ancestral and political home, East Sepik Province.

The O'Neill era

A new era began in 2012 when O'Neill, leading PNC, came into power. This current period can be juxtaposed against the Somare era. Big man politics, money politics, and the ability to convene and consolidate alliances, certainly continue to shape PNG politics.

There are many similarities between these two dominant leaders. Both O'Neill and Somare are the only two PMs to have been elected at the polls as heads of their parties, that have won the most seats, and then been elected as PM's on the floor of parliament. Both have subsequently gone on to serve their full terms and been re-

elected in the next election. They have both served a consecutive seven years as PM. Like Somare, O'Neill has demonstrated the ability to hold his leadership of the PNC-led coalition despite controversy and governance challenges.

Without Somare, it is not clear how strong NA and PANGU can be. Both looked set to be part of a strong opposition coalition in the aftermath of the 2017 formation of government. However, since the political head of PANGU, Basil, joined the O'Neill coalition, the party seems to be in turmoil.

There are some differences though. Unlike Somare, O'Neill's political base is set, and is bolstered by the political economy, including the presence of the large Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project in the Hela and Southern Highlands region. In a previous blog, I [discussed](#) how O'Neill's leadership to some extent depends on his ability to keep his Hela and Southern Highlands brothers happy, in the context of the LNG project and their own internal political dynamics shaped by culture and society. The failures of the Hela LNG to deliver the promised development, and the imminent Papua LNG project, seems to have recalibrated the power balance in O'Neill's political home ground. As Scott Waide [notes](#), the resignation of James Marape – both a PNC member and a Hela man – signals change and requires reading between the lines. Politician Garry Juffa [notes](#) that this move is significant for cultural reasons. Marape's move is also significant in that it destabilises the heart of O'Neill's power base: his leadership on home ground in the Hela and Southern Highlands arena, in the PNC party, and as the PM.

Other differences also mark the present situation, including O'Neill's leadership of PNG's position internationally. The Manus Regional Processing Centre is [said](#) to have undermined Australia's ability to call out corruption in PNG, possibly reinforcing O'Neill's ability to keep his power base happy. The APEC meeting, and the intensification of China's interests in PNG, have also emboldened O'Neill.

Although political stability is good in itself, PNG suffers from corruption that seriously undermines the delivery of services, and in this regard the seeming political volatility in earlier years may have been an important mechanism in preventing power from becoming entrenched in the hands of a few big men. Marape's resignation signals this concern about O'Neill's growing power. His recent [statement](#) is telling:

“Papua New Guinea is a nation of 800 different tribes, a nation not to be dominated by one person, a nation not to be dominated by one sectoral interest, one business interest, we have institutions of government that must propagate sound policies and good outcomes, whether it is [on] the floor of parliament or whether it's a decision that is reached in Cabinet.”

Only actions on the floor of parliament on or after 7 May 2019 will tell us how and if O'Neill will hold his leadership. The history of PNG politics suggests that understanding PMs both as big men and as political heads of political parties is important, as is understanding what constitutes and shapes their power base.

The table above draws from various reports which vary in their accounts of the election results, and should be interpreted as preliminary. A number of these election reports and political literature are available online and span elections from: 1977 (also [here](#)), 1982, 1987 (also [here](#)), 1992 (also [here](#)), 1997 (also [here](#)), 2002, 2007, 2012, and 2017.

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