

# Political will and anti-corruption reform in PNG: between hope and reality

by Grant Walton and Michael Kabuni

22 August 2025



The swearing-in of Acting Commissioner Thomas Eluh and Deputy Commissioners Justice Ellenas Batari and Don Sawong, to the PNG Independent Commission Against Corruption, by PNG Governor General Sir Bob Dadae, 8 July 2025

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

Over the past few years, Papua New Guinea has witnessed some of the most significant anti-corruption reforms in its history. From **establishing** a new **Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC)** to passing **whistleblower legislation** and holding inquiries into high-profile scandals, the Marape government has made bold moves. For a country long plagued by governance challenges, these developments have sparked cautious optimism in some quarters.

Yet, as our recent report *Anti-corruption reform and political will in Papua New Guinea* shows, translating reforms into real change is far from straightforward. Drawing on key stakeholder interviews as well as policy and budgetary analysis, it is a reminder that political will — that elusive but essential ingredient for meaningful anti-corruption reform — remains uneven, contested and fragile.

PNG's efforts to address corruption stretch back to independence, when the Constitutional Planning Committee embedded the **Ombudsman Commission** and a **Leadership Code** into the new nation's constitution. But history is littered with examples of reform gains being undermined. The now-defunct Investigation Task Force Sweep (2011–2014) achieved early successes before being dismantled after it pursued the then prime minister Peter O'Neill.

The newly established ICAC offers a fresh opportunity. Its creation in 2020 was partly driven by International Monetary Fund program conditions, and its first arrest earlier this year was symbolically important. But progress has been slow, and recent allegations of internal dysfunction have already tested its credibility. Like other integrity agencies, ICAC faces a familiar challenge: government budget funding that looks promising on paper but arrives late, reduced or with political strings attached.

Despite the innumerable challenges, interviews with 27 stakeholders revealed a

cautious optimism about PNG's current anti-corruption direction. Some donors and integrity officials pointed to ICAC's establishment and the development of the [National Anti-Corruption Plan of Action](#) as signs of genuine high-level intent. A few noted that PNG had been fortunate to have senior politicians willing to back anti-corruption initiatives, which helped move legislation and administrative changes forward.

Symbolically, ICAC has become the clearest expression of political will. The decision to appoint foreign commissioners was widely seen as a deliberate move to shield the body from domestic political pressures. As one civil society leader put it, bringing in outsiders was meant to counteract the "politicisation" that had compromised local leaders. Others argued that, given PNG's deep tribal and clan connections, impartiality might only be possible with external leadership. However, the [recent suspension](#) of the three foreign appointed commissioners and subsequent allegations of corruption may well have dampened this enthusiasm.

Respondents suggested that sustaining political will require a deliberate and multi-pronged approach, which we outline in detail in the report. Here we'll focus one key issue, namely the importance of working with politicians — both government and opposition — while understanding their incentives, constraints and personal priorities. Engagement needs to be strategic and long-term, identifying and supporting politicians who are genuinely committed to reform. Several respondents noted that key legislative gains often depended on the commitment of a single minister; conversely, the loss of prominent reformers can halt momentum.

Effective engagement, they said, requires patience, political awareness and the ability to navigate personalities and rivalries.

Such a strategy reflects a pragmatic understanding of PNG's political economy: reforms survive when they align with the interests — or at least don't threaten the survival — of those in power. Identifying those who can navigate these challenges, build bridges and understand these ever-changing political dynamics is a critical task and one that will require Papua New Guineans — supported by government, donors and civil society — to take the lead.

Based on the research, the report makes nine recommendations:

1. **Prioritise sustained support for ICAC** – ensure dependable long-term funding, broad civil society backing, inter-agency cooperation, strong internal governance and robust oversight.
2. **Amend the Whistleblower Act (2020)** and introduce a **freedom of information law**.
3. **Improve accountability at the subnational level**, with a focus on strengthening district administration.
4. **Support civil society**, especially churches, in anti-corruption advocacy and education.
5. **Enhance donor engagement** to tackle transnational corruption and navigate the risks of growing

geopolitical competition. In particular, there is a need to recognise that corruption in PNG is tied to other jurisdictions (such as Australia).

6. **Identify and back political champions** and support **long-term electoral reforms**.
7. **Explore PNG-specific anti-corruption approaches**, tailored to political, cultural and economic realities.
8. **Raise public awareness** by showing how corruption directly impacts communities and education.
9. **Invest in training** that promotes sustained learning and builds institutional capacity.

Underpinning these recommendations is the idea that anti-corruption reform in PNG is a long game. Moments of momentum are often fleeting, undone by political turnover, weak implementation or targeted resistance from those whose interests are threatened. The current wave of reforms — anchored by ICAC and supported by record funding for integrity agencies — offers an opportunity that should not be squandered.

To make the most of it, reformers will need to move beyond symbolism and ensure that laws are enforced, budgets are delivered and agencies are protected from interference. This means cultivating alliances across political lines, reforming electoral processes and embedding reforms in ways that make them harder to reverse.

It also means accepting that building political will in PNG is not about a single leader or moment, but about creating a resilient network of actors — in politics, civil society, the public service and communities — who see value in keeping corruption in check.

If PNG can do this (and there is sufficient evidence to show that Papua New Guineans have resisted and continue to resist corruption in its different forms), the cautious optimism noted by our interviewees might yet become something more durable: a political culture where strong responses to corruption are not just possible but expected.

*The report, [Anti-corruption reform and political will in Papua New Guinea](#), will be launched on 22 August at the 2025 PNG Update. View the livestream on the [University of Papua New Guinea's Facebook page](#).*

## Disclosures:

*Funding for this research was provided by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; however, the views expressed are those of the authors only.*

## Author/s:

**Grant Walton**

Grant Walton is an associate professor at the Development Policy Centre and the author of *Anti-Corruption and its Discontents: Local, National and International Perspectives on Corruption in Papua New Guinea*.

**Michael Kabuni**

Michael Kabuni is a PhD candidate at the Australian National University.

Link:

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