

# A weak state and strong microsocieties in Papua New Guinea

Nematullah Bizhan and Emmanuel Gorea

## Abstract

The case of Papua New Guinea (PNG) shows the difficulty of forging a national identity and creating effective state institutions. State weakness and societal fragmentation are dominant. The archipelago nature of the country has had a dominant role in the latter. Politics in this context shows a stable-fragile characteristic. On the one hand, despite persistent political instability, democracy has survived in the past half-century mainly due to societal diversity and the consensual nature of decision-making embedded in communities. On the other, even though PNG is a resource-rich county, successive governments have not converted the economic benefits of the mineral boom into effective development outcomes, and high levels of poverty and inequality exist. We argue that many of these characteristics reinforce each other, trapping the country, for now, in a low-level equilibrium. In this paper, we aim to examine dimensions of state fragility and look at what might change, and how PNG might break out of the equilibrium currently trapping the country in poverty and state weakness.

## **A weak state and strong microsocieties in Papua New Guinea**

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## A weak state and strong microsocieties in Papua New Guinea

### 1. Introduction

The case of Papua New Guinea (PNG) shows the difficulty of forging a national identity and creating effective state institutions. State weakness and societal fragmentation are dominant. The archipelago nature of the country, which encompasses 600 small islands, has had a dominant role in the latter. Politics in this context shows a stable-fragile characteristic. On the one hand, despite persistent political instability, democracy has survived in the past half-century mainly due to societal diversity and the consensual nature of decision-making embedded in communities. On the other, even though PNG is a resource-rich county, successive governments have not converted the economic benefits of the mineral boom into effective development outcomes, and high levels of poverty and inequality exist.

The prevalence of low-level violence, mainly as a result of tribal warfare, crime and high political contestation, has imposed major human and economic costs on the country. This situation is further complicated by the fact that the legacy of the Bougainville conflict has not entirely disappeared. The transition of Bougainville to an independent state, which was overwhelmingly supported in a referendum in late 2019, or continuity as a province of PNG with greater autonomy, which will be decided by the parliament, will have significant ramifications. Other resource-rich provinces may follow suit. Yet PNG exhibits greater community resilience where communities offer an informal social safety-net through the *wantok* system. This system helps prevent starvation and encourages reciprocal cooperation. However, this practice has by and large been transposed to national politics, undermining bureaucratic effectiveness.

There are a number of interdependent political, socio-economic and historical features that define PNG today. We argue that many of the characteristics reinforce each other, trapping the country, for now, in a low-level equilibrium. In this paper, we aim to examine dimensions of state fragility and look at what might change, and how PNG might break out of the equilibrium currently trapping the country in poverty and state weakness.

## **2. Pre-colonial and colonial history**

Before PNG became a colony and modern institutions were created at the national level, it was an acephalous society and home to thousands of tribes. These tribes were very distinct, often speaking different languages. PNG is estimated to be home to 832 of the world's languages, as a result of its geography which encompasses an archipelago of 600 islands. The combination of islands and mountains made interaction difficult. Trade was not extensive. Traditional PNG society was characterised by 'big man' politics. Status in communities was derived from a person's ability to distribute resources to people in their village, a practice which has been transposed to national politics post-Independence.

PNG constitutes the eastern half of one of the largest islands in the world. The western half was colonised by the Dutch and after Indonesian independence was handed over to the country and remains to this day part of Indonesia. The Germans colonised the northeastern segment (New Guinea) in 1884 and the southeastern segment (Papua) was colonised by the British. Both colonies were combined and handed to Australia after the First World War in 1921. PNG was ruled from Canberra till Independence in 1975. PNG's colonial rule was a light touch. The densely populated Highlands region was initially thought to be uninhabited. Australia invested little in PNG, and migration was not allowed from PNG to Australia. Independence was won without any conflict. PNG in the process adopted Australian institutions, such as the Westminster system, first-past-the-post (though not compulsory) voting, an independent judiciary, and a free media. However, while PNG was an Australian colony, it was mainly influenced by the state of Queensland, the only Australian state that has a unicameral system of government, and PNG adopted the same.

## **3. Political legitimacy and traditions**

Political legitimacy in PNG is multilayered. Three types of legitimacy—traditional, charismatic and rational-legal—all play essential roles at the national and subnational levels.<sup>1</sup> But they often overlap and can be observed in Port Moresby, provinces and

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion on sources of legitimacy see Weber (1994).

communities. While the *de jure* arrangement for authority at the national level is supposed to be rational-legal, the *de facto* arrangement is largely informal. Some background is required to explain this situation.

PNG has a Westminster system of government, where parliament is a single chamber legislature. The constitution of PNG defines that the national government exercises power, authority and jurisdiction of the people. It consists of the National Parliament, the National Executive and National Judicial system. Elections take place every five years. While this system emphasises rational-legal legitimacy, in practice national politics revolves around key personalities and patronage, making clientelism a key feature of politics in PNG. Political parties in general and party ideologies and policies have limited significance. This situation makes control of government critical to dispense patronage.

Legislators tend to seek to distribute national resources to their *wantok* or descent group. This practice is in tension with the norms of a modern bureaucratic-rational arrangement, in which exchange is supposed to be impersonal, and public resources are directed towards public goods defined in a much broader sense. This practice is not unique to the case of PNG—many developing and fragile countries suffer from some form of state capture by interest groups, ethnicity or communities.

Corruption has weakened the trust of citizens in government, which remains a major problem in the public and private sectors. According to Transparency International, PNG is among the most corrupt places in the world, ranked 137 out of 180 in 2019, where 0 indicates the least corrupt and 180 the most corrupt (Transparency International, 2019). Politicians confirm that corruption remains a major national problem. Former Prime Minister Mekere Morauta described corruption in PNG as ‘endemic, systemic and systematic’ (Walton & Jones, 2017, p. 7). Government anti-corruption measures, however, have not been effective.

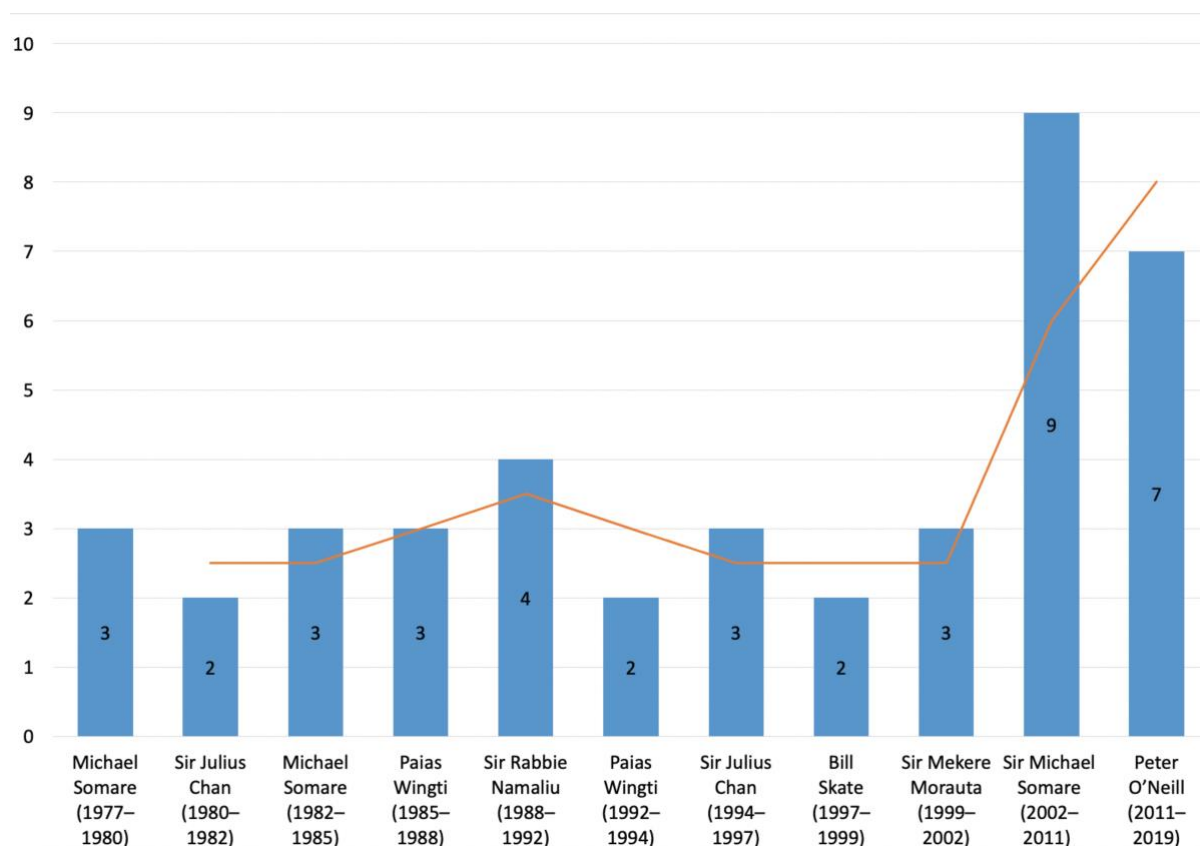
Political instability has been persistent. From the time of Independence until 2002, no prime minister was able to complete a full five-year term in office,<sup>2</sup> and between 2002

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<sup>2</sup> Sir Michael Somare became PNG’s first prime minister after Independence in 1975, and was elected prime minister in 1977 at the first general election held post-Independence.

and 2019, no prime minister was able to complete a second term (Figure 1). Control of government remains crucial to the dispensation of patronage. As a result, since Independence in 1975, PNG has seen high levels of instability in government, with members of parliament often swapping sides. However, despite such a level of political instability, no military rule has been established. This is mainly because security institutions have not been strong enough to dominate the state, and societal fragmentation makes national domination by a single group or tribe unlikely. This situation also encourages a consensus form of decision-making, which is deeply rooted in PNG’s societal culture. Thus, despite ongoing challenges and political shocks, democratic polity has survived in PNG and is unlikely to change in the coming decades.

**Figure 1: PNG prime ministers by time in office, 1977–2019**



Source: Department of the Prime Minister and National Executive Council; PNG Facts, <https://www.pngfacts.com/prime-ministers-of-papua-new-guinea.html>

The biggest threat to stability seems to be succession, or more generally regional challenges to central power. While an extreme case of this situation is Bougainville, there is little evidence to support that such a problem may arise in the foreseeable future. There has been discussion in PNG of more fundamental changes to the political system such as

a move from a parliamentary to a presidential system. It is, however, unlikely that there will be popular support for such a move. Even if it were to happen, it is unlikely to change the current fragile situation in PNG, which can be referred to as stable-fragile.

The electoral system in PNG has a high tendency towards the *wantok system*, resulting in the flexibility of politicians to change alliances in the parliament, igniting political instability. In 2002, the government introduced a *limited preference electoral system* to be fully implemented in 2007 to improve political stability. Prior to this reform, Papua New Guineans elected leaders to represent them in the National Parliament through a simple majority voting system, also known as 'first-past-the-post'. The reform applied only to national elections, while the local-level government elections continue to use the simple majority or first-past-the-post voting system.<sup>3</sup>

The reform also aimed to allow voters to vote for a most preferred candidate to represent them in Parliament. Under the simple majority voting system, whichever candidate received the highest number of votes was declared the winner, while under the limited preferential voting system, a candidate needs to secure an absolute majority (50+1) to win. There have also been attempts to return to the old electoral system. In 2018, then Prime Minister Peter O'Neill stated that the government intended to return to simple majority voting (Kenneth, 2018). Limited preference voting, in theory, should lead to a broader coalition. However, the likelihood of establishing a broader coalition in PNG will continue to remain low because of the primacy of *wantok* loyalties.

While the new voting system helped to improve political stability, it is less likely to be the sole driver of stability. Post-2002, PNG also experienced an economic boom as a result of increases in the flow of natural resource revenue (Fukuyama, 2006).<sup>4</sup> Institutional restructuring, however, may have little effect on improving the prevailing conditions. An imperative part of any reform that needs to be implemented is addressing the issues that are at the root of how politics is organised, and how power is exercised in the country.

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<sup>3</sup> Electoral Commission Papua New Guinea, Limited Preferential Voting, [http://www.pngec.gov.pg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/limited\\_preferential\\_voting\\_.pdf?sfvrsn=0](http://www.pngec.gov.pg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/limited_preferential_voting_.pdf?sfvrsn=0).

<sup>4</sup> See Electoral Commission Papua New Guinea, Limited Preferential Voting, [http://www.pngec.gov.pg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/limited\\_preferential\\_voting\\_.pdf?sfvrsn=0](http://www.pngec.gov.pg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/limited_preferential_voting_.pdf?sfvrsn=0).

This process is featured by clientelism, fragility of politics and partial stability of the democratic institutions.

PNG has the highest number of candidates competing for elected seats in the national parliament. In comparison to neighbours, such as Solomon Islands, politics is extremely important in PNG as becoming an MP is regarded as a career pinnacle for many. Elections are approached as a festival, with a high degree of turn out. An increasing number of senior public servants run for office. However, elections are accompanied by high levels of spending, by violence, and by post-election disputes that can run for years. During the election period in 2017, 204 deaths were recorded, making the 2017 national election the most violent with the death toll twice as high as that of the 2002 election (Chandler, 2018; Hayley & Zubrinich, 2018, p. xi). The elections are also highly contested and can turn violent. For instance, supporters of a losing candidate for the Southern Highlands provincial seat rioted when they learned about the court decision, burning a plane that belonged to Air Niugini (Tlozek, 2018).

Decentralisation and granting of autonomy to Bougainville aimed to empower local administration and subside the conflict in Bougainville, which resulted because of poor resource governance and distribution, and increasing social tensions due to an influx of migrants from other communities and foreigners who worked in the mines. After a decade of armed conflict (1988–1998), the PNG government and Bougainville leaders reached a political settlement and later signed an agreement in 2001. The agreement envisioned autonomy for Bougainville.<sup>5</sup> However, in both cases, the reform did not produce optimal outcomes. Decentralisation rather than empowering local administration further strengthened the position of members of the national parliament (MPs). The MPs were then able to have greater leverage over resource allocation for their communities. This somehow created tension between the provincial administration and the MPs. Autonomy did not resolve the problem of Bougainville permanently either. A non-binding referendum was held in November 2019 to decide the political future of

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<sup>5</sup> See Autonomous Bougainville Government, Bougainville Peace Agreement, <http://www.abg.gov.pg/peace-agreement>.



Bougainville—greater autonomy or full independence. The voters overwhelmingly voted for independence, an outcome which is pending approval of the parliament.

The Bougainville transition may take years and will have ramifications. Other resource-rich provinces may follow suit. Thus the demand for greater autonomy has not remained limited to Bougainville. In response to pressures, Prime Minister Peter O’Neill promised in 2018 to grant autonomy to Enga, East New Britain and New Ireland—three resource-rich provinces. This process may encourage other regions to demand autonomy which may undermine national unity (Bryce, 2018).

Women are vulnerable to different forms of violence and are also politically marginalised. Except for a brief period, they have not been represented in national politics. In 2012, three women were elected to the parliament, while in 2017 none were. Following the debate on women’s political representation in 2009, the process of drafting the Equality and Participation Bill, also known as the Women’s Bill, was progressing with promising pace (Rooney, 2018). However, later a proposed bill to legislate that 10% of candidates endorsed by political parties be women, was not endorsed by the parliament. Even the three women of parliament reportedly withdrew their support (‘PNG women MPs defer support’, 2012). A quota system in other developing countries has helped to improve political participation of women.<sup>6</sup>

PNG has strong microsocieties and a weak state. The level of societal fragmentation that exists in the country means it is less likely to establish a military dictatorship. No single group can impose its will on others, which has contributed to the survival of democratic polity. However, societal and geographical fragmentation constrains the reach of the state. The key question, in this case, is what is the best fit between formal institutions and society. Our observations show that there is a growing tension between rational-legal institutions created in the capital and loyalty to *wantok* networks. This situation makes the government departments increasingly susceptible to capture by *wantok* networks, weakening institutional and political capacity and legitimacy.

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<sup>6</sup> See McCann (2013) and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2004).

In the decade from 1985, a succession of events led to an acute crisis in the public sector. In 1983 the World Bank highlighted that the public sector in PNG was too big, over centralised, suffered from excessive proceduralism and lacked incentives for staff. Subsequently, the Public Services Commission, which dealt with personnel matters and had autonomy, was abolished. Instead, Cabinet took responsibility for broad directions of human resource management and appointment of department heads. This change led to the growing politicisation of public administration (Turner & Kavanamur, 2009, pp. 12–13). *Wantokism* and political interference in public administration resulted in the recruitment of unmerited officers and domination of departments and agencies by persons from a particular tribe, province, or region (Payani, 2000, p. 141). An assessment of the bureaucracy in PNG by Payani (1997) shows that certain regions and ethnic groups dominated departments of foreign affairs, land, mining and petroleum, and commerce and industry.

The state lags in maintaining law and order and is severely weak in providing public services. But despite such challenges, the government has been reluctant to acknowledge that PNG is a fragile state. In 2008, in response to a question from Shadow Minister for Treasury and Finance Ian Ling-Stuckey that PNG was a fragile state, Prime Minister Peter O'Neill told parliament that PNG was not a fragile state ('PNG not a fragile state', 2018). Stuckey stated:

Can we give some respect to outside commentators that PNG is suffering under the policies of this government? When can you concede that your government has cost more than 100,000 jobs and declined of average income of K1000 per person[?] Will you now apologise to the people of PNG for the failing economic policies of this government which has driven PNG to an embarrassing ... fragile state? ('PNG not a fragile state', 2018)

The statement by the opposition shadow minister and response by the prime minister show how important economic performance could be for political legitimacy, and how sensitive the term 'state fragility' is in PNG politics. Several assessments suggest that PNG is a fragile state. The Asian Development Bank and World Bank categorise PNG as fragile on the basis of the state's failure to effectively perform its core functions and provide

basic public services, such as health, education, and security (Asian Development Bank, 2016).

#### **4. State capacity**

The state in PNG has a limited capacity. While variations can be observed across different sectors, overall, the state remains weak and fragmented and is falling short in delivering public goods. The archipelago nature and societal structure of the country have exacerbated the challenges posed to state reach and consolidation. In 1973, the total number of public servants was 44,981, involving 25,951 in the central government, 4,034 government-funded teachers and 6,137 health workers. This number increased to over 70,000 by 2005, mostly because of an increase in the number of teachers to over 30,000 (Curtin, 2009). However, concerning the number of employees in comparison to the proportion of the total population, the public sector in PNG has had a small size, something that the World Bank and International Monetary Fund may not agree with.

The main health problems in PNG are communicable diseases, with malaria, tuberculosis, diarrhoeal diseases, and acute respiratory disease major causes of morbidity and mortality. A report in 2012 by the World Health Organization and PNG's National Department of Health indicates that health services are falling short in PNG, stating:

Life expectancy is shorter and infant mortality is higher than most neighbouring Pacific countries. Both infant and under-5 mortality have decreased steadily since 1990, but not sufficiently for PNG to meet its MDG 4 which calls for reductions by 2015 in under-5 mortality from 90 (in 2000) to 32 per 1000 live births, and in infant mortality from 64 (in 2000) to 24 per 1000 live births. Maternal mortality is a serious problem in PNG, 53% of births are attended by skilled health personnel. (WHO & PNG National Department of Health, 2012, p. 2)

Since Independence, despite increases in the flow of resource revenue, state capacity has remained either static or eroded. In post-Independence, localisation of bureaucracy was a top priority in the country to replace expatriate public servants with local staff. A major constraint in this process was a low literacy rate at the time of Independence and lack of skills to substitute the withdrawal of expatriate civil servants. The education sector was

neglected, which had a lasting impact. In 1921, Australia spent only £12 (A\$24) on native education in PNG (Dorney, 2016, p. 16). Today, the adult literacy rate in PNG remains one of the lowest in Asia and the Pacific.<sup>7</sup>

State building in post-Independence faced multidimensional challenges. An assessment by Fukuyama (2006) shows four constraints. The first one is the problem of fit between the institutions that state builders are trying to construct, and the nature of the underlying society. Second, the tension between objectives of services delivery and capacity-building because public sector services are often weak, and donors tend to provide such services directly. This process weakens the ability of the country's reforming government to deliver services in the long run. Third, state-building is political and involves access to resources and power and is highly contested. Fourth, state-building in situations of post-conflict concentrates on capacity-building, neglecting the need for building national identity, which is time-consuming and does not fit within the timetable of donors (Fukuyama, 2006). These constraints continue to undermine state capacity and effectiveness in PNG.

The transformation of bureaucracy in PNG post-Independence thus has involved a series of challenges. Tensions did arise between civil servants in administration, who were well educated and trained, and a new generation of politicians, mostly young and relatively less educated. While localisation policy had been instituted even before Independence, in post-Independence it extended the process upwards and looked to the total elimination of lower-ranking foreigners in a short space of time. One report estimates that the total number of expatriate public servants declined from 4,135 at Independence to 2,480 in 1985. Another report shows that the number of expatriate public servants was greater: 6,730 expatriates in 1976, which reduced to 3,000 in 1985 (Turner & Kavanamur, 2009, p. 10).

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<sup>7</sup> See National Literacy and Awareness Secretariat, Literacy in Papua New Guinea, Department of Education, [https://www.education.gov.pg/NLAS/Literacy\\_in\\_PNG-NLAS.html](https://www.education.gov.pg/NLAS/Literacy_in_PNG-NLAS.html). The World Development Indicators show that the adult literacy rate for people aged 15 and above in 2000 and 2010 was 57% and 62%, respectively (World Bank, 2019a).

**Table 1: Key features of public administration in PNG**

<b>At Independence</b>	<b>Post-Independence</b>
Consensus on a common agenda	Move away from traditional bureaucratic procedures
Robust and frequent debate	Lack of debate on the direction of public administration
Strong, centralised control of monetary and fiscal policy	Decentralisation — the 1995 Organic Law, involved fiscal decentralisation
Senior public servants were generally better educated than politicians	A cadre of political advisers put in place to provide alternative advice to that being given by old guards
Teamwork was a common practice	Politicisation led to fractionalisation in public administration
The public service was independent and professional	The lines between politics and administration began to blur; politicians took control of senior public service positions
Public servants were well trained, dedicated and closely in touch with basic service needs in provinces	
There was a team of young expatriates	Localisation aimed to replace all expatriate public servants by local staff

Source: Pieper (2004, pp. 1–5)

The quality and performance of public administration have declined since Independence. A major impeding factor was the politicisation of administration. However, the fact that public administration was better in terms of quality and performance pre-Independence needs to be appreciated through the prism of a number of issues. First, in pre-Independence, because of limited political participation, there was a lack of popular

demand for the expansion of public services such as health and education. Second, the expansion of public services required increasing investment in public administration, which the government has overlooked. For instance, lack of and poor housing conditions and lack of training for public servants are problems that continue to undermine bureaucratic effectiveness. These challenges have captured little attention as the politicisation of administration reoriented priorities to short-term initiatives. As Scott (2006, p. vii) noted:

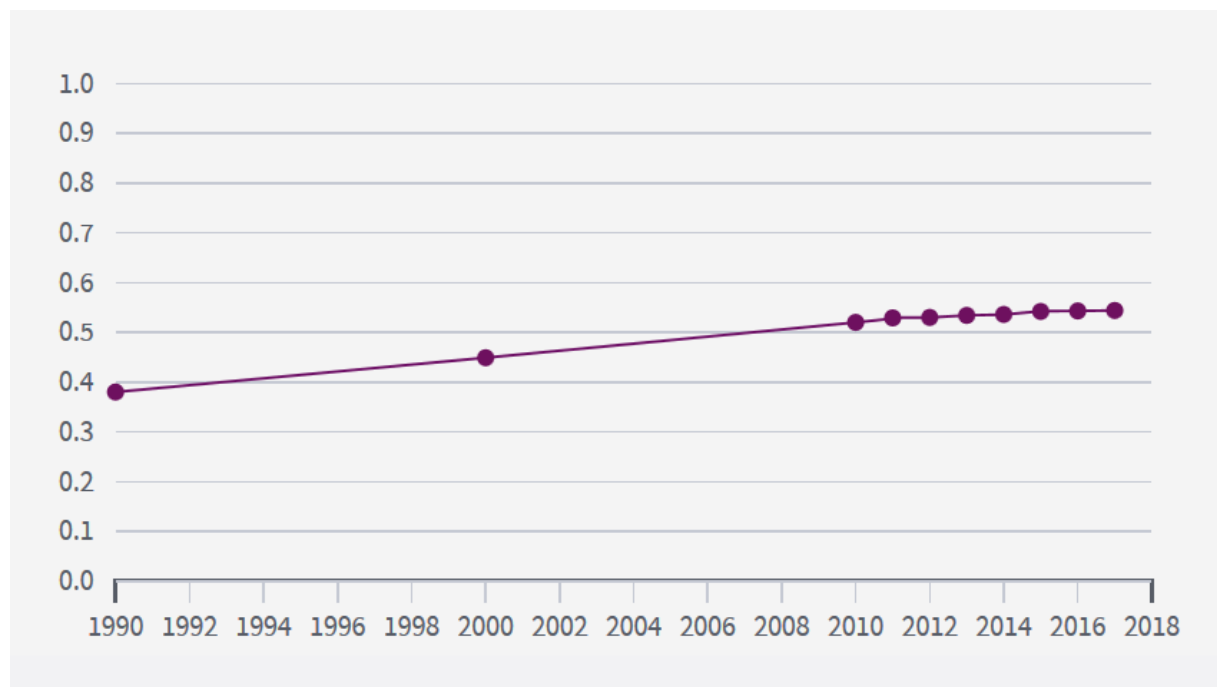
Thirty years after independence, PNG is looking increasingly fragile. After a good start, the state's authority and capacity [have] gone into decline. Average health and education levels are improving only incrementally, if at all. HIV has begun to spread at an exponential rate — with disastrous economic and human implications.

An area that capacity of the state has eroded continuously is the provision of law and order, especially as public funding has not kept up with demands. Expenditure on the military as a percentage of GDP has declined since Independence (see Figure 5). A decline in the state coercive capacity along with the exclusion of youth from the spoils of the economic boom, among others, resulted in the rise of crime in major urban centres. However, in response, companies and businesses established parallel security companies to protect businesses and mining activities. This approach, as will be discussed later, seemed weakly plausible, undermining the prospects for building an effective police force.

The changes in the standard of living in PNG have been insignificant. The Human Development Index shows that since 1990, PNG has been among the least developed countries in the world, a status that has not improved much over the last three decades. The slow pace of human development continued even through the economic boom when the flow of resource revenue significantly increased (Figure 2). The major problem in PNG is not lack of resources, as is the case in a number of low-income developing countries. The country is reasonably rich in timber, minerals, energy and agriculture. The first decade of the twenty-first century, in particular, saw the economy as a whole grow at a moderate rate. However, the major problem is that the country's resources are

inefficiently exploited, badly distributed and poorly implemented, mainly as a result of a dysfunctional political system and weak state capacity.

**Figure 2: State of human development in PNG, 1990–2018**



Source: Human Development Index, 2018

## 5. Economy

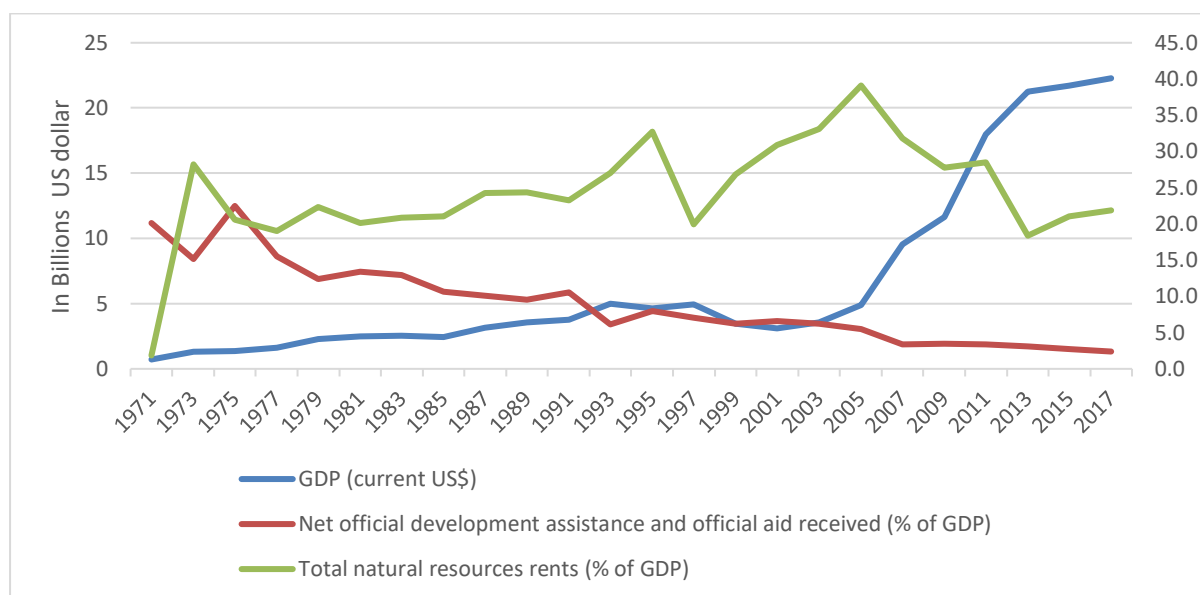
The PNG economy has four dominant features. These are the existence of a large informal sector, high natural resource dependency, high inequality, and poverty. This state of the economy offers a combination of both challenges and opportunities for development. PNG has two types of economic arrangements: a subsistence-based economy and a market economy. In the former, over 70% of people live at a subsistence level and produce their own food, clothing and shelter. The latter includes plantations that supply copra (dried coconut meat), coffee, cocoa, rubber, tea, palm oil and cattle for exports, as well as mining. According to the World Bank, PNG is the tenth most resource-intensive economy in the world (Howes et al., 2019). Using its measure of natural resource rents (profits from oil, gas, coal and minerals) as a percentage of GDP, PNG comes in tenth out of 205 countries at 19.3%, just below Saudi Arabia at 20%.<sup>8</sup> By comparison, the global

<sup>8</sup> World Development Indicators, <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/>.

average is only 1.5%. This situation shows that the economy and government in PNG are highly dependent on natural resources.

The informal sector is outside of the state tax net. Instead, the government relies heavily on resource revenue and to a lesser degree on foreign aid, mainly from Australia, for funding its operating and development budgets. As Figure 3 shows, revenue from natural resource rents as a percentage of GDP has increased since the 1970s, while the share of aid has decreased. In 1971, foreign aid and natural resource rents comprised 20.1% and 1.8% of GDP, respectively. In 2017, the country remained as dependent on unearned income as before Independence, where aid as percentage of GDP stood at 2.4% and natural resource rents at 21.8%, respectively.<sup>9</sup> This shows that the structure of the economy has not changed significantly, given the fact that the economy has relied heavily on revenue from both natural resource rents and aid.

**Figure 1: GDP, net official development assistance and official aid, and natural resource rents, 1971–2017**



Source: World Development Indicators, 2019

Reliance on natural resource rents and aid has had implications for the economy and governance as some of the perils of aid dependency and natural resource rentierism both can be observed in PNG. These include lack of accountability and transparency as well as

<sup>9</sup> World Development Indicators, <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/>.



an upward shift of government accountability from citizens to donors.<sup>10</sup> This type of fiscal arrangement in the absence of effective institutions has also reinforced the politics of patronage. While the severity of the problems arising from the perils of dependency on unearned income somehow has been reduced by the existence of democratic institutions even before PNG's independence, it has not fully safeguarded the country. Signs of conflict over resource distribution did exist post-Independence. Rebellion in Bougainville erupted because people perceived resource distribution and management to be unjust and harmful to the environment.

While hunger has not been reported as a major national problem, especially as the *wantok* system offers a guarantee against hunger, poverty has remained high. There are indications that poverty levels have increased sharply in recent years, and are unlikely to climb down in the immediate future. The proportion of the population in poverty rose to about 54% in 2003 from 37.5% in 1996. This is evident with the recent data on poverty in PNG, which shows that despite the economic boom post-2003, the level of poverty did not change at all in 2017 (Asian Development Bank, 2019). While a key factor underlying increases in poverty has been the contraction of the economy between 1996 and 2003, this has not been the case in the boom period post-2003. Other factors, such lack of inclusive development, could be seen as an impeding factor for poverty reduction, which is observed through the existence of high income and wealth inequality in the county. While there is a lack of data to show the trend over time, the available data for 1996 and 2009 show that the GINI coefficient in PNG stood at 55.4% and 41.9%, respectively, where a GINI coefficient of zero shows perfect equality while 1 maximum inequality.<sup>11</sup>

Economic growth and the increase in the flow of resource revenue since 2002 have contributed to political stability. Such a trend along with the decentralisation program and granting of autonomy to Bougainville, which was initiated in the 1990s, started to pay off by reducing the likelihood of further regional conflict, at least in the short term.

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<sup>10</sup> For more discussion on the perils of aid dependency and resource revenue dependency, see Bizhan (2017, 2018a, 2018b).

<sup>11</sup> World Development Indicators, <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/>.

In PNG, however, one can see with hindsight that, while the government concerned itself with development in social sectors to some extent, little attention was paid to managing economic growth. At the time Australian budget support ceased, despite the fact that it was phased out over several years, PNG was not adequately prepared to be able to finance the gap, and lost the flexibility to fund priority programs. Budget support had allowed PNG to adopt a sense of complacency about the affordability of public sector salaries and programs and, by the time it ceased, the problem was already too large (Pieper, 2004, p. 6).

Also, a recent report by the World Bank indicates that PNG's growth outlook remains fragile. It highlights economic uncertainties ranging from the domestic political economy to the recent escalation of trade tensions between the United States and China, which will continue to affect economic growth adversely.

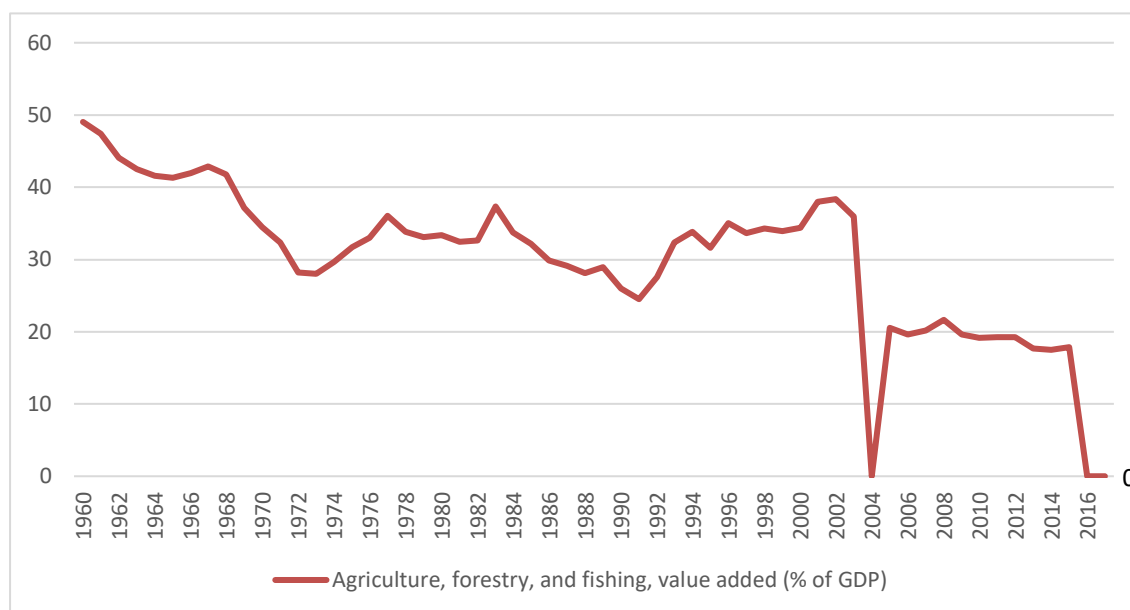
PNG's economy has started recovering from a series of external shocks, but its growth outlook remains fragile due to rising uncertainties. The recovery is being observed in the resource sector, mainly in its extractive segment dominated by liquefied natural gas (LNG), while growth in the non-resource economy remains subdued due to sluggish domestic demand. (World Bank, 2019b, p. viii)

The challenge for the PNG economy is thus multifaceted. It is imperative to mitigate external shocks through macroeconomic policy adjustment and structural transformation of the economy, with an emphasis on agriculture to promote a more diversified and inclusive development as well as create employment. Agriculture is, in particular, an area that has been neglected. Since 1960, the share of agriculture, forestry and fishing in PNG has been consistently declining, reducing from 50% in 1960 to less than 1% in 2016 (Figure 4).<sup>12</sup> In the long run, there is a need to diversify the economy and reduce the heavy reliance of the economy on aid and natural resource rents.

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<sup>12</sup> World Development Indicators, <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/>.

**Figure 2: Agriculture, forestry and fishing, value added (% of GDP)**



Source: World Development Indicators, 2019

## 6. Conflict and violence

Large-scale violence at the national or even regional level in PNG is rare. While fragmentation means no group is large enough to mount a credible challenge, low-level violence is prevalent. The prevalence of crime and violence in PNG is reported to be among the highest in the world, especially in major cities such as Port Moresby and Lae. It can involve family and sexual violence, interpersonal violence, conflict between different clans, and armed burglary of domestic premises and kidnapping (Lakhani & Willman, 2014). This situation presents a major obstacle to long-term development.

Drivers of crime and violence are complex. They stem from colonial legacies, ongoing challenges of state consolidation and the uneven effects of economic globalisation. While PNG is a highly diverse society with thousands of tribes living there, many analysts argue that land, women and pigs are three common drivers of conflict within and across tribes.

Conflict can also occur as a dispute resolution mechanism. The likelihood of conflict among the younger generation is higher than the older one. The former operates outside of the traditional cultural codes of conflict and lacks traditional skills, such as oratory, in negotiating conflict, and thus increasingly resorts to conflict and use of firearms (Goldman, 2007).

Conflict also exists between state and society and society and private companies investing in resource projects. Overall this trend shows the limits and weakness of modern institutions in reaching local communities, companies in relating and offering hope to communities, and communities in effectively negotiating and appreciating the complexities of the private sector. In practice, a major issue that contributes to conflict and violence is lack of clarity in roles between the state, private companies and community leaders in negotiating land-leasing or of benefits on behalf of communities (Lakhani & Willman, 2014, p. 4).

PNG is not facing an external threat, and the main security threats are not traditional. PNG's Security Policy (2013) recognises the most immediate challenges as following:

... law and order; graft, corruption and good governance; human rights abuses and gender-based violence; lack of border control; natural disasters and climate change; arms trafficking and proliferation; illegal poaching of resources; drugs, alcohol and substance abuse; microbial attacks on plants, animals and human lives; and medical emergencies including HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. (Dinnen, 2017, p. 45)

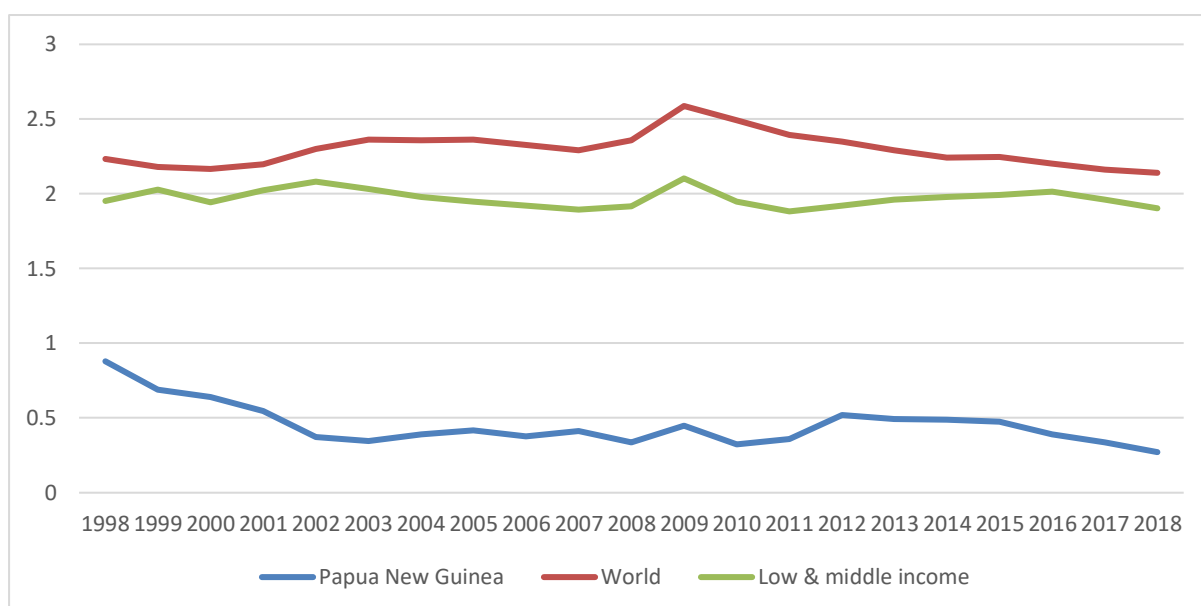
While lack of external threats has relieved the state of fiscal pressure, it has also resulted in an underdeveloped security sector and legal institutions. Both the PNG security forces and justice sector are poorly funded. The existing ratio of police to citizens in PNG is low. The Royal PNG Constabulary (RPNGC) has insufficient manpower to deliver effective police services. Despite population growth, the number of police has not grown proportionately in the last five decades. While the ratio of police to the population at Independence was 1:380, it is now around 1:1404, which is well below the United Nation's recommended ratio of 1:450 (Walton & Peiffer, 2015, p. 9). This situation is further exacerbated by geographical fragmentation and institutional weakness in the police. To overcome the shortage of manpower, police numbers have been supplemented by the use of Reserves and Auxiliaries.

The use of Reserve and Auxiliary police has not been successful, however. Reports suggest that they have committed lawless acts, created fear and confusion among the community and resulted in considerable cost to government through compensation claims (Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary Administrative Review Committee &

Institute of National Affairs, 2004, p. 9). The reliance on Reserves and Auxiliaries posed long-term institutional and political cost, undermining the rule of law and public perception of police. The vulnerability of government to votes of no confidence, in particular, has affected and has been affected by the state of the law and order situation (May, 2004, p. 8).

The security sector in PNG is underfunded. The percentage of military expenditure as a share of GDP is low in comparison to low- and middle-income countries as well as the world average. It has also followed a downward trend in the last two decades, falling from 0.87% of GDP in 1998 to 0.27% in 2018 (Figure 5).

**Figure 3: Military expenditure as percentage of GDP, 1998–2018**



Source: World Development Indicators, 2019

This situation has created a gap which was filled by private security companies. The number of registered security companies grew rapidly from 173 in 2006 to 462 in 2014, with a total workforce of around 30,000 security guards (Isari, 2017). This figure shows the existence of a parallel security sector, which is not only about three times bigger than the total number of police but has also increased the cost of doing business. The corporate and business sector has remained a major consumer and supplier of private security services.

The number of firms identifying crime as a major constraint to their businesses in PNG is more than four times the regional average in East Asia and the Pacific, and comparable with countries such as El Salvador, Venezuela, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Business investment in security personnel and infrastructure is significantly higher in PNG than the average for the East Asia and Pacific, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin American regions. (Dinnen, 2017, p. 49)

In the 1970s because of growing tribal infighting in the Highlands and lawlessness associated with gang-based petty criminality, or the so-called *raskolism*, there were calls for the deployment of the PNG Defence Force to support police operations (May, 2004, p. 8). In September 2019, a local newspaper, *Sunday Chronicle*, called Port Moresby one of the most dangerous cities in the world. This statement was published after refugees, who were transferred from Manus Island detention centre to Port Moresby, were repeatedly attacked and threatened with guns ('Pom is most dangerous world city', 2019).

Despite a rapid growth of private security companies, police remain under-resourced and weak. This situation has also led to the critiques of politicians. In 1997, Prime Minister Sir William Skate was accused of arranging bribes and boasting of connections with criminal elements in Port Moresby. The accusation followed a video leak aired on Australian television, which led to increasing political pressure on the prime minister to resign (Matane & Ahuja, 2005, p. 63).

The Bougainville crisis, as noted above, has remained as a major national concern. In the late 1960s and 1970s, people in the Loloho-Kieta-Arawa-Panguna area resisted the surveying and acquisition of land as well as developments associated with gold, copper and silver mines. The situation became further tense following a road accident and an incident where two prominent Bougainvilleans were murdered at Goroka in the Eastern Highlands on Christmas Eve in 1972. These developments and the failure of the government to effectively address people's grievances led to what became the Bougainville crisis. When the provision for the establishment of provincial government throughout PNG was dropped from the draft Constitution which was prepared for Independence, Bougainville leaders declared secession two weeks before PNG became independent in 1975. However, they failed to get international recognition. Bougainville

was cut off from the rest of the country until the government and secessionist leaders agreed on the establishment of a provincial government in 1976.

The status of Bougainville became a national challenge, with the redistribution of revenue from mining projects an issue of ongoing concern. In the 1980s, the situation turned into national unrest and long-term crises, which had negative implications on major mining projects. The claim by landowners on the islands of Bougainville for compensation amounting to K10,000 million for land mined by the Australian-owned Bougainville Copper Ltd since 1972, was not honoured in 1988. Subsequently, militias, which later formed the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) under the leadership of Francis Ona, a former mine surveyor and landowner, intervened and the mine was obliged to suspend operations for an initial period of six days (May, 2004, p. 75).

The Bougainville armed conflict erupted in 1988 and continued until a political settlement was reached in 1998, recognising Bougainville as an autonomous province. The Bougainville conflict was one of the largest in Oceania since the end of the Second World War, with an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Bougainvilleans dead. A referendum was organised in November 2019. About 98% of the voters (176,928 people), voted for independence and less than 2% (3,043 people) voted to remain as part of PNG but with 'greater autonomy' (Lyons, 2019). However, the outcome of the referendum is not binding as it is pending the approval of the PNG Parliament. The future of Bougainville, either as a province with greater autonomy or an independent country, will have major ramifications. There may be a danger of recurrence of conflict, and early secession—perhaps again supported by violence. In addition, Bougainville syndrome may reinforce the demands for more autonomy and an increase in the share of resource rents by other resource-rich provinces.

## **7. Community Resilience**

Since Independence PNG has shown resilience to shocks in some areas and vulnerability in some others. Communities, in particular, have shown greater resilience in offering informal social safety nets through *wantok* networks. This traditional mechanism of community self-help prevents starvation and encourages reciprocal cooperation among the members of the same community either inside or outside concerned communities.

The downside of this practice, however, is that it puts increasing pressure on a small number of people who are employed. This practice fills a gap as a result of the state weakness to provide support to the unemployed and those in need. While such programs are financed by tax revenue in developed countries, in PNG community members contribute to community safety nets.

Political institutions have also shown resilience in PNG. Since Independence despite persistent political instability, no military dictatorship has been established. This also relates to the nature of society, as it is unlikely that any community would be able to impose its will on others or accept military authoritarianism.

One of the areas where PNG is highly vulnerable is from ongoing crime by gangs in major cities, which imposes high economic and social costs on the country. The state, however, has remained weak and less responsive to demands for improved law and order.

Climate change is also another major shock that affects the livelihood of communities. The population grew at 3% per annum between 2000 and 2011, which challenges sustainable livelihoods (National Statistical Office of Papua New Guinea, 2011, p. 17). It is more likely that the population will grow at a higher rate in the upcoming decades. The exploitation of natural resources has also raised considerable concern over the sustainability of these resources. In 1994, reports on activities in the forestry sector indicated that the rate of logging was three times the sustainable yield of the country's forest (Matane & Ahuja, 2005, p. 48).

Dimensions of fragility in PNG remain interdependent. Security affects political legitimacy; legitimacy affects state capacity and *vice versa*. The tension between formal and informal institutions often exacerbates and prolongs institutional weakness. While PNG is a complex case, it offers unique lessons on a stable and fragile situation in highly divided societies.

## **8. Conclusion**

This paper discussed political legitimacy, state capacity, economy, conflict and violence, and community resilience in PNG. It found that PNG has a number of dominant features that have shaped a particular form of fragility that could be classified as a stable-fragile.



State fragility in PNG has distinguished characteristics. The country has not experienced large-scale protracted conflict as other case studies, such as Afghanistan, Lebanon, Rwanda and Pakistan, but it has also not remained immune from conflict. The decade-long armed conflict in Bougainville was the most intense conflict in the Pacific since the Second World War. While the conflict subsided through a political settlement, the prospects are uncertain.

PNG exhibits the difficulty of forging a national identity and creating effective state institutions, where state weakness and societal fragmentation are dominant. The archipelago nature of PNG's geography has had a dominant role. Despite persistent political instability, democracy has survived in a half-century mainly due to societal diversity and the consensual nature of decision-making embedded in communities. PNG, however, has not benefited from the mineral boom, unable to convert the economic gains into effective development outcomes, where high levels of poverty and inequality exist. In addition, the prevalence of low-level violence is common. The legacy of the Bougainville conflict has also not entirely disappeared. The transition of Bougainville to an independent state or continuity with greater autonomy will have major ramifications, as other resource-rich provinces may follow suit. There may be a risk of recurrence of conflict, and early secession. Still, community exhibits greater resilience, offering informal social safety nets through the *wantok* system, helping to prevent starvation and encouraging reciprocal cooperation.

There are a number of priority areas that need intervention to remove constraints to effective state-building and development. These include the tension between formal institutions and societal values, the overall direction of public administration and state capacity, resource management and structure of the economy, and nation-building.

Pre-colonial history is important in understanding PNG's society today. It helps explain dominant socio-economic and political features we have highlighted: not only the social fragmentation and the community self-help, but also the high level of political contestation (the 'big man' tradition) and the high degree of low-level violence, which reflects the dependence on violence as a conflict-resolution mechanism in tribal society.

In turn, we see the social fragmentation, high level of contestation and reliance on community self-help as contributing factors to clientelism in PNG. Clientelism can also

arise in countries without these features, but they seem to be important in PNG in contributing to politics being local rather than national. This political approach tends to have a high return as those politicians who support their community will, in turn, be supported by that community.

Clientelism can be seen as a fundamental driver of state fragility in PNG. The latter also reinforces the former. But there is also a mutually reinforcing relationship between fragility and violence: violence makes it more difficult for the state to operate, while fragility makes it harder to counter violence.

PNG's historical resource wealth makes resource dependency possible, and state fragility makes it inevitable. There are also several other reinforcing relationships. High levels of violence leads to resource dependency, and that dependency encourages violence. Likewise, resource dependency leads to politicisation (by making the state a more attractive prize). The fact that so many leaders drift to the state rather than business undermines the economy and perpetuates resource dependency. Resource dependency also leads to high inequality. And the combination of resource dependency and fragility leads to poverty. Poverty causes and is perpetuated by ongoing violence.

Why despite ongoing political instability, has the political regime been stable? Most fundamentally, because no single group is large enough to challenge or dominate it. In addition, resource dependency provides an important (albeit volatile) source of revenue for the state. The high level of politicisation/contestation means that everyone has a vested interest in the state. Clientelism is a stable system, threatened only by the emergence of a middle-class able to take a national view. In PNG's case, persistent poverty means that the growth of the middle-class is slow, and in any case (due to the tradition of self-reliance) it is preoccupied with supporting friends and relatives.

We have argued that PNG is a stable-fragile state. By looking at the prospects, a key question would be what might change? Below we explore two negative scenarios, one positive and one uncertain scenario.

One negative scenario is that violence increases in both intensity and scale. Another negative scenario sees more regional fragmentation. Bougainville opts for independence and other provinces follow suit.

There are also two positive scenarios. One is incremental reform. PNG cracks down on corruption. Infrastructure improves. Resource dependency declines. With increased economic activity, there is less violence. This leads to a more competitive economy and more diversification.

The other positive scenario concerns the end of PNG's resource wealth. PNG's mineral wealth is non-renewable. As it declines, the economy will be less resource-dependent. One can interpret this in both a positive and a negative way. The positive one is that the state will become less of a prize. More entrepreneurs will emerge. There will be less of a Dutch disease. Less of a resource curse. However, the loss of revenue will also mean less stability. This could have both positive and negative implications.

PNG is a young country. It's modern history has only just started to be written. While the country can now be characterised as stable-fragile, from a longer perspective, it is undoubtedly still in transition.

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