

Too little, too late? Securing PNG's 2022 national election

by Okole Midelit

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Voting in the last elections in 2017

Photo Credit: [Commonwealth Secretariat/Flickr](#)

Papua New Guinea's elections are often dangerous affairs. In the past, elections in the country have been accompanied by spikes in violence between rival groups, resulting in injury and death. In some areas of the country fraud is rife, and voters face significant intimidation. The upcoming 2022 national elections will again present significant **challenges** for the country's security forces. How are they likely to respond?

According to PNG Police Minister William Onglo, security operation plans for the election **have been finalised**. The PNG Defence Force, PNG Correctional Services, and the Royal PNG Constabulary (RPNGC) are, he suggests, ready for the July polls. Mr Onglo **indicated** that he is determined to ensure that the levels of **election-related violence** seen in 2017 do not re-occur.

However, in reality PNG's security forces are ill-prepared for the upcoming elections. This is particularly the case for the nation's police force. While the RPNGC will likely be at the forefront of responding to security challenges, time and time again they have been found to be ill-equipped to carry out their mandate to keep citizens and property safe.

Recent analysis has found that the police face a recurrent funding gap of K126 million per annum, and require an additional one-off injection of around K3.9 billion to ensure the RPNGC can deliver its service mandate. Such funding constraints and lack of personnel have been common problems for the country's security forces, and will likely affect their level of performance **during the election period**.

In addition, the PNG Correctional Services Commissioner Stephen Pokanis has indicated that his department's budget of K11.6 million is **not enough** to buy the required amount of firearms and body armour for officers engaged in the elections.

In the 2017 elections, observers noted that guns and bush knives were prevalent in many Highlands polling stations. Gun violence was directly observed in Hela and

Chimbu provinces. Indeed, an [election observation report](#) compiled by the Australian National University (ANU) Department of Pacific Affairs, found firearms were more prevalent in 2017 than the previous two national elections.

In response to concerns about gun violence, in the May parliamentary sitting the Prime Minister James Marape tabled the Firearms Amendment Bill 2022, which was unanimously supported by all MPs. Under the legislation, those found to be in [unlawful possession of or manufacturing firearms](#) face a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. Marape reminded candidates and their supporters to be mindful of the penalties of the tougher firearm laws and urged them not to repeat the gun-related violence that marred the 2017 elections. Marape has also directed police to monitor 18 [security 'hotspots'](#) that are at high risk of violence using illegal firearms.

Police Commissioner David Manning welcomed the amendments and said they are necessary to address the country's long-standing problems with gun violence.

While these are steps in the right direction, it is uncertain how much of a difference these developments will make to the threat guns will pose to this election.

Legislation passed in 2018 introducing penalties for the use of illegal or misuse of legal weapons arguably did little to curb gun violence. This is because of the sheer number of guns already in the country and the difficulties involved in reducing their number. It is believed that there are over 50,000 [illegal firearms](#) in PNG, either manufactured, smuggled, or traded by gangs or tribal groups. The recent [gun-related violence and killings](#) in parts of PNG suggests that, like the previous elections, firearms still pose a threat to free, fair and safe elections.

There are also growing concerns about the politicisation of the nation's security forces. For example, in 2021 lawyer Laken Lepatu Aigilo [accused](#) Governor Peter Ipatas of directing the police to assault, kidnap and threaten to kill him. Politicians in other areas of the country have [expressed concerns](#) about the impartiality of the police. Such accusations are likely to spike during this election. In 2017, more [than half of all ANU observer teams](#) reported that police harassed scrutineers, local observers, counting officials and the public.

With elections a few weeks away, Police Commissioner David Manning has again called on the security forces to remain neutral and not favour candidates or politicians. This will be difficult to achieve.

The 2022 elections will likely be tougher for security forces because of [new security problems](#) presented by COVID-19. PNG's vaccination rates are extremely low – [around 3%](#) of the population are fully vaccinated. During elections people will likely gather for political rallies; they will also congregate at polling stations with little

regard for COVID-19 protocols, which could **increase the local transmission** of COVID-19 across the country. Recent by-elections in Goroka and Moresby North-West have shown the difficulties involved in enforcing COVID-19 safety regulations. As frontline workers, security forces themselves are likely to catch the virus and have to take time off to recover. This would deplete PNG's security forces even more.

On top of all this, security forces will have to deal with the uncertainties involved with overseeing voting across **seven newly created electorates**.

In conclusion, PNG's security forces face significant challenges in trying to secure the 2022 election. While security failures are magnified during elections, we need ongoing efforts to improve security in PNG, not just for election security operations, but beyond the election cycle. This includes better equipping and funding of security forces, effectively enforcing new laws to reduce gun-related violence, and mitigating political interference in PNG's security forces. It might also mean the state's security forces partnering and better **engaging with private security companies**.

Many of PNG's brave and dedicated security men and women will do their best to secure the 2022 elections. And there have been some efforts to learn from past security failures. However, given the magnitude of the challenges, when it comes to the 2022 election, it might be a case of too little too late.

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