

Too many parliamentary committees in PNG Parliament

by Werner Cohill

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PNG House of Parliament (Marc Tarlock/Flickr/CC BY-SA 2.0)

On 29 September this year, during its first meeting, the government appointed 17 parliamentary committees. These permanent committees will remain for the whole 5-year term and are part of the 31 permanent committees that were supposed to be appointed in parliament on that date. What happened to the other 14 permanent committees? Word got around in the wings of parliament that the government does not have enough MPs to muster chairmen for the remaining 14 committees.

The failure to appoint all 31 permanent committees in the first formal meeting of parliament has never happened before in PNG's short parliamentary history and is solely the result of this year's national elections.

The real test for the government came when parliament needed to appoint MPs to the 31 parliamentary committees that form a vital part of the work of parliament. When considering the number of MPs remaining after the ministers and their deputies were appointed, there were simply not enough chairs to go around. Only 17 of the 31 committees have been provided membership, with 14 committees yet to be appointed.

On the one hand, a smaller number of parliamentary committees would mean that the government would not be faced with too many committee places and too few MPs. On the other hand, why it is so difficult to appoint Opposition MPs as chairmen of parliamentary committees when there are insufficient government members? The by-laws of the committees provide for the former option but PNG politics does not, an unwritten understanding of the political culture.

The PNG Parliament probably has the largest number of parliamentary committees among Pacific island countries. In a parliamentary term there can be 34 or 36 committees appointed; the 31 permanent or standing committees, and as many as 5 special committee. These special committees are appointed during a term of parliament to inquire into a particular issue, and remain for the whole term.

Why are parliamentary committees important? Parliamentary committees are small groups of MPs appointed by Parliament to consider, investigate and report to Parliament on a particular matter, they keep the government accountable. This results in greater participation of MPs in the work of Parliament. Law making and representation are also very important features of the work of parliamentary committees. This makes active committees virtually 'mini-parliaments'.

Parliamentary oversight is an essential tool of democracy. According to the *IPU/UNDP Global Parliamentary Report on parliamentary oversight; Parliament's power to hold government to account (2017)*, parliamentary oversight is one of parliament's three core functions. It is the means by which parliaments hold government to account on behalf of the people. It is a vital part of the system of checks and balances that ensures that no one institution is able to wield absolute power in a democracy. The report further stresses that parliamentary oversight improves the quality of government by helping to keep in check the power of the executive, and contributes to strengthening a democracy.

Parliamentary oversight committees in PNG have never performed to their full potential. They have failed to hold the executive government accountable by scrutinizing the bills before Parliament, investigating government policies, and conducting appropriate reviews and screening of appropriation bills before Parliament.

Only a few committees have been effective, notably, the Public Accounts Committee and the Constitutional Laws, Acts and Subordinate Legislations Committee. Nevertheless, even their effectiveness has been overshadowed by the fact that the majority of their recommendations, particularly the Public Accounts Committee reports, are dropped into the 'too hard basket'. On the other hand, committees like the Constitutional Laws and Plans and Estimates have become 'rubber stamps', for the government to bulldoze through proposed laws and the budget appropriations.

What are some of the immediate reasons hindering these oversight committees from fully performing their functions in parliament? They range from the administration of the committees, to the procedural provisions, to the nature of support committees require from parliament itself.

First and foremost, the system needs streamlining. Of the 31 committees appointed as permanent, there are 7 sessional committees and 24 standing committees. The standing committees are oversight committees which frequently have overlapping functions that complicate and frustrate the committee system as a whole.

The second important reason is that there are relatively few resources available to committees. Resources involve two factors – staffing and funding. With such a large number of committees one would expect adequate secretariat staff, staff with relevant qualifications and experience to handle committee responsibilities on all fronts. Furthermore, there must be adequate funding for the committees to function and discharge their responsibilities well. The system needs more resources.

The overarching reason is the need to operationalise the role and function of committees as provided for in the legislation. The Constitution, as well as other relevant Acts of Parliament, including the Standing Orders of Parliament, has provisions for the establishment and work of committees but there is a failure to give effect to this legislation in the work of committees in current practice.

These are three key reasons that must be addressed for the parliamentary committee system to be effective and worthwhile. However, it is perhaps the size of the committee system that matters the most. The PNG Parliament is a small legislature compared to others, for example Australia's Federal Parliament or the Parliament of the United Kingdom, and the size of its committee system appears to be disproportionately large.

That the government has failed to appoint all 31 permanent committees at once speaks to the urgent requirement to reduce the number of parliamentary committees. What is needed is the political will to make that change, and while such change may not happen overnight, the inadequacies of the current committee system may gradually drive this much needed change.

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