

Will the Marape and Pangu Party coalition stand the test of PNG politics?



Marape attends celebrations for the 52nd anniversary of the Pangu Party, Lae (Credit: PNG Post Courier)

by Nayahamui Michelle Rooney

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One feature of PNG politics is a tension between political leaders and political parties. Another feature is the tension between western style democratically ordered conventions of electing prime ministers (PM) after the elections and the more colourful PNG style – perhaps also a convention now – of reorganising and rebalancing leadership and power during votes of no confidence (VONC). Michael Kabuni [discusses here](#) and I [discussed here](#) some of the complexities of these dynamics in PNG.

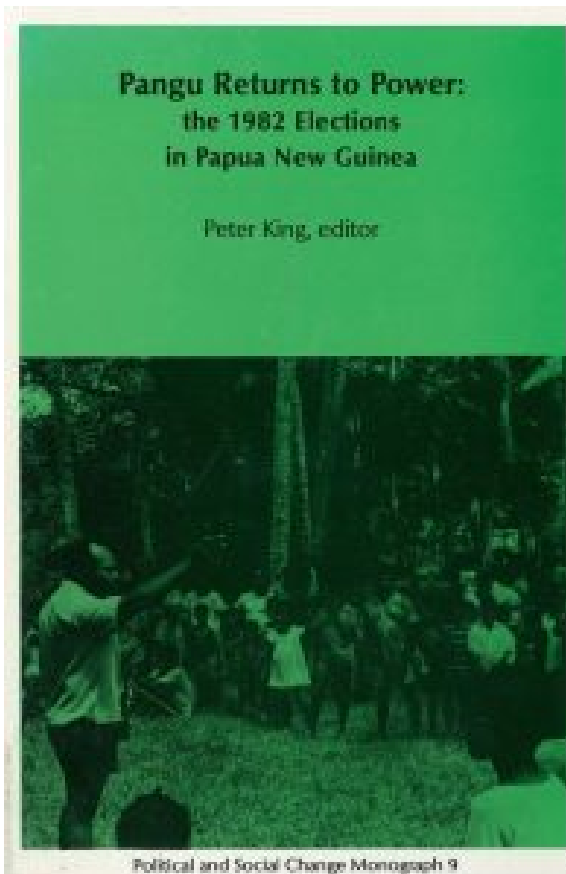
We saw these dynamics play out in the most recent episode. Marape broke away from People's National Congress (PNC) and, after some manoeuvring, the dust settled on a coalition between the group of members of parliament led by Marape and the Pangu party with a number of others. During this process, we saw that party policies or ideology are not strong influences in shaping the outcomes but rather are used as rhetorical tools in the games of out-manoevring the incumbent PM.

Nevertheless, it is worth thinking about the relationship between political leaders and political parties especially given the performance of the two PMs who preceded Marape. Somare and his successor, O'Neill, both sustained leadership of the National Alliance (NA) and PNC, respectively. Both NA and PNC enjoyed strong performances at the elections.

Recently, we [have seen](#) Marape reshuffle his cabinet in what seems to be a move to distance himself further from his former PNC colleagues. In a surprising move, Marape appointed the shadow treasurer, Ian Ling Stuckey, as the new treasurer. A number of senior opposition members crossed the floor to join the Marape government. Sam Basil, formerly with Pangu and an O'Neill ally, was shunted sideways from Treasury to Planning.

These moves point to troubled waters for Marape and raise the question of whether he has a sufficient political base to sustain his leadership. It also raises the question

of whether he is, or is willing to be, aligned more firmly with a party brand. This is important because, although having strong party support determines Marape's immediate leadership, it also shapes his prospects of sustaining his position as PM leading into, during, and beyond the national general elections in 2022. Without a strong party to lead and win the 2022 elections, Marape's chances of being invited back to form government are reduced and he will be left to rely on his personal political brand, charisma, and prowess as he did during the VONC.



Report detailing Pangu election performance in 1982 (Image credit: Michelle N Rooney)

Marape's first months as PM have been founded on a strong coalition with Pangu party. If Marape is no longer a member of PNC, and is instead a coalition member with Pangu, then what is the character of his purported membership and leadership position within Pangu? Pangu is the oldest political party in PNG with its political base and origins in the Morobe Province, and a strong support base in the northern coastal region of mainland PNG (Momase). It has withstood the test of time in PNG politics to remain a key political institution. See [here](#) for a report on their election performance in the 1982 national elections. Pangu made a comeback in the 2017 elections running on a platform of opposition to the PNC. After the elections, Basil, then Pangu's leader, joined O'Neill's government. The party split, and an ongoing dispute emerged about who the leader is. Most recently in May 2019, and coinciding with Marape's move away from the O'Neill led PNC that set in motion the VONC, Morobe Governor Ginso Saonu was reportedly appointed as [interim party leader](#).

Saonu extended the [invitation to Marape to join the party](#) providing the numbers required to bolster Marape's position. However, media reports still point to [internal turmoil](#) within the party.

Marape's hold on the prized PM position is not a *fait accompli*. It is against this tumultuous and confusing background that Marape finds himself PM – no longer a member of a strong political party like PNC, and in a coalition dependent on the support of Pangu to hold his position. Reflecting the uncertainty of this coalition, PNG's media reports about Marape's statements are ambivalent. For example, in this [report](#) he is reported as referring to Pangu as 'My Pangu'. In June, Marape [visited Lae, the political base and origins of the Pangu party, accompanied by the party's pioneering leaders](#) to attend the fifty second commemoration of the party. Although the senior leaders of the party expressed their support and solidarity, they fell short of stating that he was the leader. It is unlikely the leadership of this party will go to a newcomer. In announcing Ling Stuckey as the new Treasurer, the PM reportedly referred to Pangu as the party that he ['co-leads'](#).

From the outside, it is not possible to know whether these ambivalent statements reflect the confusion among the public, as reflected in some comments on social media and in the mainstream media about this, or they are carefully crafted to portray a coalition that is not set in stone. Only those on the inside could tell us.

Whatever the case, Marape will need to overcome immediate challenges to his leadership. The recent changes in the cabinet, including the sidelining of O'Neill and the move by senior opposition members to the government side, are signs that there are major moves underway to challenge or consolidate Marape's leadership. The latest indications reported in the PNG media this week are that Patrick Pruaitch, leader of the NA party, joined by members of his party, [crossed the floor to join the Marape government](#).

The real test, however, is in the longer term. Even if he is able to overcome immediate challenges, the PM will still need to move into the 2022 national general elections with a solid and wide political base. He does not enjoy the kind of political party base that his predecessors had nor is his 'co-leadership' of Pangu guaranteed. The coalitions forming around him seem too fluid and lack the clarity required to guarantee him the support he will need. Heading even a small political party will be necessary if he is to continue to play the game of politics on the floor of parliament. One thing is clear: Marape has his work cut out.

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