

## *Draft Abstract*

INA-SSGM Discussion Paper

# The 2017 polls hijacked by despots in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea

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Electoral victory – a seat in the national parliament – is the most direct route to wealth and power in Papua New Guinea. Parliamentarians now have access to millions of kina under the Services Improvement Programs (SIP), with Open MPs controlling K10 million under the District Services Improvement Program (DSIP) and Provincial Governors controlling K5 million under the Provincial Services Improvement Program (PSIP) each year.<sup>1</sup> Constituency development funds, such as the DSIP and DSG, are regularly used in pork-barrel politics, disbursed along nepotistic patronage lines, and are used to feather retirement nests of MPs. Inevitably, electoral contests have become fierce encounters in recent times, accompanied by increasingly high cost of campaign expenditure, electoral fraud and election-related violence.

Winning at all cost is the objective here. Rules of the game do not seem to matter much in the overall scheme of things to do with PNG electoral politics. Strategies and ploys employed by candidates cover the full spectrum of possibilities, ranging from campaign hospitality and political gifting to electoral fraud and vote buying, where the line between legal and illegal conduct has become blurred. All key players – incumbent parliamentarians, candidates, supporters, voters, electoral officials and security personnel – have ignored the rules of the game, perhaps without realizing that there would be no game at all without rules. Democracy may well be at risk, if not irreparably damaged already, in Papua New Guinea.

Our electoral system has been corrupted by electoral fraud or malpractice, mismanagement, and by non-compliance. The kind of electoral misbehaviour and malfeasance that forced the Electoral Commissioner to fail the elections in the Southern Highlands in 2002 are now widespread throughout the Highlands region and have spread to other parts of the country.

The 2017 elections in Western Highlands Province were hijacked by despots, with the electoral process manipulated at all levels, from voter enrolment to polling to counting. Like Mafia goons, candidates and supporters have been working the system to gain unfair advantage over others. The lack of integrity at all levels of state-society relations, with loss of trust in government institutions, is a cause for concern. The intent to cheat the system – ignoring the rules of the game – to win at all cost (by using intimidation, violence, fraud, and dirty tactics) has put a big dent on our government system. We may be sliding towards the edge of a cliff on a slippery slope.

1. Apart from DSIP and PSIP funds, parliamentarians are also entitled to Constitutional grants of K500,000 under the District Services Grants (DSG) and Provincial Services Grants (PSG). Fifty percent of the DSG is the discretionary component, which means that the MP can disburse K250,00 as he or she sees fit, while the other 50% of the money is non-discretionary and is administered by the District Development Authority (previously Joint District Planning and Budget Priorities Committee). In addition, MPs have access to contestable Public Investment Program (PIP) funds from the National Planning Department and sectoral funds from other government departments (Works, Health, Education).