

The Need to Move on from Disputes over Political Turf and Interests to Focussing on Addressing Public Concerns

PNG has experienced a political roller coaster in recent weeks, more than comparable to any worldwide, with the rules sometimes being interpreted or even written on the run. The recent change of government (70:24) seemed to reflect the public view that change was needed and, despite Abal's efforts to impose belated discipline, the old team was widely seen as having become too entrenched and complacent, with extensive malpractice reported and loss of touch with needs and concerns of ordinary citizens.

Public emotions were tested last week as a frail old man was wheeled into Parliament to safeguard his seat. Even many who felt change overdue, viewed this dash to the Chamber and then revocation of his seat undignified and unnecessarily cruel, regardless of legality (or otherwise), to a man who'd served in politics for 50 years, including as Chief Minister before Independence and Prime Minister for nearly half the period since 1975. Widely known as Father of the Nation, Sir Michael Somare, was one of an ardent team of politicians driving Papua New Guinea's Independence, then elected to take the helm. A charismatic figure, perhaps Sir Michael's greatest capacity was to unify the nation and its often disparate and squabbling regions, factions and leaders, particularly in those early years of Independence. The complexities of public finance and administration were not his forté, but he brought together some able politicians and capable team of young public service managers, including the so-called 'gang of four' department heads, Morauta, Namaliu, Siaguru and Lepani, to provide such appreciation and professional input. Where political or factional disputes developed, Sir Michael was invariably able to draw on his considerable political capital and reach ordinary Papua New Guineans to restore cohesion.

Political loyalties became strained in the 1980s, with younger aspirants unwilling to bide their time, and after a controversy, ironically related to an earlier executive jet, the first of the newer generation of leaders, Paias Wingti secured the top executive post in 1985, followed by a succession of other younger leaders, Namaliu, Wingti again, Skate and Morauta, plus Sir Michael's generational colleague Sir Julius (who'd also served in 1981-2). From Independence no government had served a full five year term after an Election until 2002, when the Organic Law on Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC), introduced by the Morauta government to provide greater political stability (if not necessarily integrity), enabled the largest winning party and its leader to secure and retain office more readily for the full term, if they could initially secure the majority, with little prospect of any challenge. National Alliance was formed in 1997 by a team of experienced politicians drawn from several existing and folding parties, and Sir Michael was invited by the party founders to take up its leadership, providing a strong political draw card particularly with the grassroots, which by 2002 had become disillusioned with the PDM-Government's programme of policy reform, including privatisation, and a perception that some non-Parliamentary leaders were becoming inordinately wealthy.

The new government entered office in 2002 with a strong team, and, whilst stepping back from any strong reform agenda, pushed through several valuable measures, over public

service management, financial responsibility, mineral investment conditions (probably too generous with one project - and for the logging industry), as well as introducing a series of useful medium term development, debt and fiscal strategies. The 2002-2007 government would perhaps be best remembered for its prudent fiscal management, which, together with the Morauta government reforms and the rising commodity prices, encouraged stronger investment, debt reduction and economic and employment growth in various sectors, and negated the need for imprudent financing schemes, like the Bond deal arranged, but then withdrawn, with various US players. On the negative side, it was a period where forestry reforms were set aside and logging interests seemed to gain undue income and influence, with a widely-held view that forest-related finance facilitated government formation.

Nevertheless, after 2007 the adhesive binding government together seemed more tenuous. As commodity prices burgeoned in 2007, and with it so-called 'windfall revenue', and as the economy and prospects for LNG development grew, expenditure control weakened, together with party discipline. Public frustrations were growing at government's apparent failure to convert economic and revenue growth into meaningful public goods, services and broad-based opportunities; the revolution in telecommunications, which finally reached PNG through major private investment, proceeded apparently despite, rather than thanks to, government. Funding for poorer provinces was increased modestly, but core recurrent budgets (which provide essentials) remained squeezed, while relatively unaccountable development allocations swelled. Roads, including in Oro following cyclone Guba, remained un-repaired, but government launched or explored various unpopular and seemingly exorbitant expenditure favouring the elite, such as the executive jet, exclusive publicly-funded hospital, major grants to private businessmen from the burgeoning development budget, including from the notorious NADP, and dishing out vast areas of community land without consultation to unknown entities (under SABLs).

The coalition tore itself apart, both from within scrambling for top posts and with frustration causing extensive defections. The successful challenge to OLIPPAC and the weakening powers, health and perhaps connection of the Prime Minister with ordinary people and their needs, reinforced pressure on the NA-led government, with Sir Michael's extended hospitalisation tipping the cart.

Although the new government clearly includes opportunists and late ship-jumpers, nevertheless the change undoubtedly reflects not just political ambition, but also to some extent prevailing popular will and frustration. There were simply too many political and financial scandals and it appeared the ailing days of a discordant administration, despite Abal's best efforts and integrity. It might perhaps have survived until the Election, but would have struggled and the break perhaps gives former government Members an opportunity for constructive reflection. Recent suggestions of regional conspiracy hold little water, with frustration with government and over poor services prevalent everywhere, including discontent expressed in East Sepik over lack of development, and, for example, contrasts made between the collapsing public hospital and a new luxurious house built by overseas players, and over the K3 million expenses above the medical costs in Singapore. Some have observed that in his younger days Sir Michael would have

heard the people's cry and addressed these problems, but that latterly others maybe pulling the strings. In any case, despite strong economic growth, PNG faces serious challenges which must be addressed now. The country cannot allow ongoing political rancour or protecting power and vested interests to distract from tackling these challenges. PNG should advance reforms to political and administrative structures to reduce duplication and other overheads, reinforce checks and balances and mechanisms for direct public participation and accountability, including between elections, and perhaps apply, as in US and elsewhere, consider limiting terms for top public office holders. This might result in some leaders (as with Clinton) abandoning top office whilst relatively young, but it would also safeguard against the problems exposed lately in so many countries. Mandela stepped aside gracefully, retaining great influence and prestige.

PNG remains a vibrant democracy, and improved communications are enhancing awareness and participation. Legal interpretations aside, recent changes are a demonstration of democratic will and process, by contrast with uprisings required in some countries to shift intransigent regimes. With the 2012 Election imminent, it's crucial that democratic processes are reinforced and that excuses for dangerously-armed (notably Highlands) communities to vent frustrations are minimised, whilst police capacity, discipline and community leadership are strengthened to support peoples' right to express their choice freely. The new team has few months to prove that they're attuned to the people's needs and will deliver, or as some might say, 'the end justifies the means'.

Paul Barker

11 September 2011