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**Ethnic Structure, Inequality and Governance of the Public
Sector in Papua New Guinea**

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Executive Summary

Papua New Guinea is indeed a multipolar, ethnically fragmented society. This presents unique problems to governance and the management of inequality in public sector institutions – political parties, the parliament, cabinet and the civil service. The clash of values between traditions and Western democracy and capitalism has meant that elite consensus is thwarted in many issues and instances. This has resulted in the instability of the political parties, the parliament and executive (or cabinet), and political interference in the civil service. The performance of these institutions in the management of governance, inequality, and the ethnic diversity in the country has not been effective. Accordingly Papua New Guinea was ranked 133 out of 170 nations in the 2000 Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme. The living standards of the people have not been significantly improved over the past 28-29 years of nationhood.

Ironically, Papua New Guinea is surviving democracy. As a developing country, its democratic longevity has spanned some 40 years unlike other developing countries that have had their democratic systems disrupted in less than 20 to 25 years of statehood. What accounts for this longevity? This study shows that while Papua New Guinea does not have strong and effective public sector institutions, it nonetheless suggests that ethnic structure, specifically the small size of ethnic groups and the absence of ethnic domination in the public sector institutions, may indeed be the critical factors in ensuring the country's democratic longevity.

ETHNIC STRUCTURE, INEQUALITY AND GOVERNANCE OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Dr Ray Anere

INTRODUCTION

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a nation that is diverse in cultures and traditions. It comprises 817 plus language groups and is a multi-ethnic society. There are 19 provinces, including the National Capital District, with at least 40 languages found in each province. The land area is 463,000 square kilometers while the sea area is around 3,120,000 square kilometers. Based on the 2000 national census, the population is now 5.19 million. The projected growth rate is 3.2 percent per annum. There are more males than females: 51.9% and 48.9% of the total population respectively. There are approximately 108 males to every 100 females. Three official languages are used as medium of instruction. They are English, Pidgin and Motu.¹ The use of these languages is aimed at unifying the different ethnic groups (see Ethnologue). Christianity is the official religion. PNG gained independence from Australia on September 16, 1975.

Regionally, the Highlands region has the highest population of 1.9 million with a growth rate of 2.8 percent. New Guinea mainland (Momase) has 1.4 million with a growth rate of 2.6 percent; Papua has 1.04 million with 2.9 percent growth; and New Guinea Islands has 741,238 with a growth rate of 2.6 percent (Department of Planning and Monitoring, 1999: 9-10; Post Courier newspaper, May 2, 2002:1, 3).²

Of the 19 provinces that make up PNG, Southern Highlands province and Morobe (in the Highlands and Momase regions) both recorded populations which passed half a million: 546,265 and 539,404 respectively.³ Ethnic cleavages tend to become politicized in these provinces in relation to major activities such as parliamentary elections, mining, infrastructure development, and natural resource exploitation due to conflict between clans or landowners, the state and resource developers.⁴ Different groups claim ownership of the land in which mining and other resource developments take place, and demand compensation and other benefits.⁵ Indeed, ethnic conflict does occur in public sector activities such as elections as in socio-economic activities where questions of land ownership and entitlements arise, in certain parts of the country. Ethnic groups are politicized in elections with the view to mobilizing clan votes – this is to a larger degree the case in the Highlands electorates than in the coastal electorates.

In light of the ethnic diversity, it is necessary to explore the capacity for representation, stability, and governance of public sector institutions in PNG, in the discussions below. This is done first by stating the argument of the report at the outset. Various sections of the report will guide understanding of the argument throughout the discussions.

Argument

¹ Pidgin and Motu are vernaculars. Pidgin is now spoken across the country. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was spoken in the Highlands, New Guinea mainland (now called Momase) and islands regions. Motu is used mainly in the Papuan region.

² The Highlands region is in the interior of the country; Momase is in the mainland north coast; Papua is in the Southern part; while New Guinea islands are in the north and eastern part of the country. The four regions and the different groups that reside in them can be seen in the Ethnologue and insets 1-5.

³ Southern Highlands is the most populous province followed by Morobe. As a province the former has 10.5 percent of the national population, the latter has 10.4 percent.

⁴ In activities such as mining, the resource developers are usually foreign multinationals.

⁵ In the Southern Highlands province, for example, the PNG Electoral Commission decided to conduct polling for one day only in certain electorates in the 2002 parliamentary elections, for fear of election-related violence. The Highlands provinces are Enga, Southern Highlands, Western Highlands, Chimbu and Eastern Highlands (see PNG map).

PNG is a fragmented multipolar society. No one ethnic group is large enough to dominate its public sector. There is relative balance in the 'representation' of ethnic groups in parliament, political parties, the cabinet, and the civil service. However, the party system is weakly institutionalized, individuals are more important than parties in electoral politics, and there is some socio-economic inequality between regions and provinces, implying that some ethnic groups are better endowed than others. Even though there is no ethnic domination in the public sector, competition for representation in the public sector is highly ethnic as voters support clansmen and women rather than parties. There has been a high number of candidates (many of whom are independents), high turnover of governments, and local violence. The electoral system of first-past-the-post and the Westminster parliamentary system of government in which MPs can become ministers, coupled with the fragmented, unstable party system may account for this outcome. And although traditional PNG values clash with Western values, they have shown remarkable resilience that they do not easily give way to the imperatives of democracy. Traditional values have in fact penetrated the state such that there is a general lack of respect for the rule of law.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Over the years political scientists have referred to a society's confidence in its institutions as 'social capital'. The argument goes that social capital is determined by two central features of a society; first, the networks, relationships and organizations that bring people together to try and solve common problems, and, second, the norms, values and traditions which promote cooperation. In *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* Robert Putnam argues that social capital will strengthen state institutions and in turn, effective state institutions will create an environment in which social capital will strengthen society. Most importantly in his study, Putnam also found that it is not the degree of political participation that determines a region's stock of social capital, but rather its character (Putnam in Phillpot, 2003).

The nature of social capital in PNG, by virtue of its ethnic fragmentation, presents some unique problems. Studies reveal that ethnic groups can both generate benefits and costs on societies. Furthermore, ethnic fragmentation affects the performance of political and economic institutions. Most analyses of elections in PNG emphasize the link between tribal affiliation and election candidature. This link can be demonstrated by comparing Eastern Highlands Province (EHP) in the Highlands region, and East New Britain Province (ENB) in the New Guinea Islands region (see PNG map). In ENB there is clearly a larger stock of social capital than is the case in EHP thus politics in ENB is characterized by 'issues' rather than by 'patron-client' relationships which predominate in EHP. In ENB a broad consensus across ethnic lines favors effective government whereas in EHP the multiplicity of ethnic groups frustrates any attempts to maintain a consensus necessary for effective government (Rynkiewich 2000: 18-22).

The 2000 *Human Development Report* of the United Nations Development Programme ranked PNG 133 out of 177 countries. Certainly, past and present governments have not improved the living standards of the people since independence. This claim is reinforced by the 2000 report of the World Health Organization which ranked PNG as 148 out of 190 nations (Seib 2000: 11). These figures suggest that PNG has low levels of development; this in turn encourages the continuity of the predominantly rural, clan- and tribal-based society in the country. There is a link between low levels of development with low levels of social capital in many provinces, and the continuation of tribalism. Low social capital among the ethnic groups in turn limits efforts by any one of them from dominating the public sector institutions.

Ethnicity is deeply embedded in the cultures and traditions in all provinces. To some degree, this has encouraged patronage and thus has affected the performance of institutions and processes in the public sector (as alluded to in the argument above). The Westminster system of parliamentary democracy, for instance, has not been effectively adapted to PNG's traditional political system (sometimes known as the *institution of big man*). Consequently, different characteristics and outcomes have developed. For example, elected members of parliament are more concerned with delivering goods and services to the ethnic groups that voted them in than to the electorate as a whole. This practice goes against the notion of parliamentary representation which is to serve the interests of an electorate as a whole than any one particular group (Bettison et al. 1965).

Since independence, clan, and, to some extent, regional loyalties have remained strong in PNG. This has interfered with efforts to establish a national identity, as well as a stable parliamentary democracy. The idea of a nation is not widely shared in PNG, and sovereignty seems to be confined to the presence of politicians, police and other state agencies. PNG politics remains fragmented, parochial and insular. It produces diverse political behaviour which makes sense at the local level but often appears incomprehensible and contradictory to national interests (Muingnepe 1994: 105). As a result of the absence of widespread commitment to the Westminster political system, the state has not significantly secured dominance within the national society. It still has limited legitimacy at local levels (Dinnen 1998: 57).

With the localization of political and administrative positions, traditional rivalry between leadership contenders for prestige and power has been carried over into the modern political sphere (Saffu 1996b: 28). Meggitt and Gordon observed 15 years ago that far from being displaced by the downward thrust of central authority, local political traditions have proved remarkably resilient and, in many respects, have successfully penetrated the state. In their opinion, the government is not seen as a mechanism for development, instead it is “an instrument to establish and extend patronage ties” (1985: 84). As a result the political system remains highly fragile. Political discontinuity and institutionalized instability appear to be the main obstacles to political, economic and social development of the country.

The PNG *Independent* newspaper comments that;

There is no such thing as stability in PNG politics...it is instability that feeds the fluidity and sustains the nebulous nature of PNG politics. It is instability that makes and unmakes governments (Independent newspaper, 30 December, 1999: 4).

Politics in PNG is characterized by diverse and fluid coalitions of parties and independents. Under the simple majority system, the number of candidates has constantly increased. This means that office holders are winning by fewer and fewer votes. In many elections, 80% to 90% of the voters end up unrepresented. Nearly all of the current sitting members have a simple majority representing small groups, but not a democratic mandate which would represent the majority of the voters of their electorate. This means that national elections do not mandate current members of parliament to make decisions on behalf of the people. It certainly undermines the very foundations of the democracy which requires that the majority must rule (Somare 1999: 65).

The fact that a minority of voters elect members of parliament continues to undermine the authority and legitimacy of governments. Those elected depend on their ability to reward their voters with all kinds of so-called development services to guarantee re-election. The highly personalized relations between politicians and their small ethnic constituency serve to sustain and deepen political fragmentation. Standish summarizes the 1992 elections thus:

Reduced administrative capability, the use of public funds for individual benefit, the low moral authority of the state and limited state control of society, the intensification of local political competition into conflict, the large scale of electoral cheating and the use of force and intimidation by state and non-state actors in politics (1996b : 278; Electoral Commission 1997).

The high turnover of MPs and the growing number of election petitions add to the discontinuity and lack of experience. These impede the development and implementation of coherent long-term policies and strategies. The World Bank observes that ‘decisions are driven by personal contacts and patronage rather than by concerns of sustainable and long –term development goals’ (1999: xiii). Allegiances in parliament are fragile and members often jump from one party to another or create new parties. Parties in general continue to have weak ideological ties, negligible organizational structures and no mass membership. As Saffu noted, no linkage can be found between parties and voting and governance as related to policy outcomes (1996: 5). The highly unstable nature of PNG politics permits members a high degree of personal autonomy and power and reduces the demand for more responsiveness towards the needs of the public and their electorates. Indeed, the fragmented party system represents not only a challenge for democracy in

PNG, but also for effective governance in the country's public sector institutions (Reilly, 1999: 244; Diamond, et al, 1995: 34).

Other important features of the Westminster system are also missing, such as, a credible and effective opposition acting as a balancing force and a strong parliamentary committee system, with the exception of the Public Accounts Committee, at least since 2002 (National Parliamentary Reports for 1997 and 1998; Post Courier 28. 4. 2000: 1). Most members not in government reside on the middle benches waiting for the chance to improve their political position in the grab for more prestige and resources. Fluidity, formlessness and the lack of a dynamic opposition at the centre still characterize PNG's parliamentary system.

The fluidity has resulted in unstable and easily toppled coalition governments. Their formation, through horse-trading, is correlated to incidents such as kidnapping, bribery and violence. Party leaders restrict the movements of elected candidates from joining others in chosen locations where the horse trading takes place. Since independence, none of the elected governments have survived a full parliamentary term of office. Even the successful vote of no-confidence does not prevent the continuance of undercover manoeuvres in parliament. This kind of unstable and often unpredictable system has been blamed for the emergence of an opportunistic, costly style of politics, prone to non-transparent and inconsistent ad-hoc policy decisions, leading to corruption, cronyism, patronage and bad governance.

Good governance, as an important condition for the overall improvement of a society, requires a transparent, predictable, and accountable government; one which manages scarce resources for development in a way that will improve the life of the entire population (Root 1996; Larmour 1998; World Bank 1999). But through the last two decades political interference with state institutions in PNG has increased dramatically. There has been a high frequency of change in political appointments of leaders, heads of departments and state-owned companies. Good governance is a lesser consideration to political appointments to hold coalitions together or to appease greedy *wantoks* (individuals of the same ethnic group). Recruitment of personal or political allies as heads of departments and senior officials often occurs through individual ministers acting without clear procedures and proper advertisements.

Furthermore, there is no clear structure of responsibility for such ministerial actions. This has consequently led to a serious decline in the power, status, morale and productivity of the administration. There has been a brain drain of professional and intellectual servants into the private sector. The politicization of the bureaucracy through intervention by politicians has steadily undermined processes of policy development, planning and implementation. Problems of efficiency and effectiveness are evident. Performance monitoring and sanctions for poor performance are either absent or not related to outcomes. Most departments have suffered from inadequate financial and human resources and financial mismanagement. Gross misuse, fraud, thefts and suspicious payments of public funds are also occurring as a result of isolated political decisions and common lack of accountability (cf. World Bank 1999).

There has been a total disregard for laws and procedures. A presiding judge who dealt with a disputed opening of a supermarket in Port Moresby (the capital) stated: 'There has not been some minor administrative error but rather a subversion of the whole statutory process' (Post Courier 18.5.2000: 3). A former Chief Ombudsman, Simon Pentanu stated that: 'To the observer, bribery, nepotism and corruption appear to have spread through the entire tree of government and bureaucracy, from the roots, through the trunk and branches, even to new shoots' (Post Courier 15.10.1999: 2). Former Speaker of Parliament once commented on his role as MP thus: 'It's a shame to be a Member of Parliament. It's not a nice place to be in. It's like Bomana (Port Moresby prison), you go in for petty crimes and come back a hard core' (Post Courier 29.3.1999: 5).

The decline of the delivery of public services such as health, education and infrastructure, despite a real boost in budget terms, has increased social fragmentation. PNG has low levels of social capital as implied by the rankings of the United Nations Development Programme and the World Health Organization for 2000 (see paragraph one, page 3).

In 2000 a number of legislative reforms were put in place and were seen as the most important political legislation since independence (Post Courier 30.5.2000: 2). Continuity and stability are the most urgent

factors needed in PNG politics today. Some argue that a return to preferential voting system of pre-independence elections would help to reduce sectional voting and obtain a genuine mandate from the majority of voters.

However, it seems unlikely that the 'Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates and the Organic Law on the Electoral System will bring results that the proponents propose. The failure of the 1995 'Organic Law on Provincial and Local-Level Governments, originally seen as the most far reaching reform since 1975, is a good indication that isolated legislation to change the structure of institutions does not guarantee that there will be changes in the values and attitudes of the voters or the politicians. That is, institutions may come and go but the culture of politics remains. In PNG there are many good laws that are never implemented or enforced. Registration and regulation of parties may reduce party hopping, but they will not support the development of an effective nationwide party system based on programmatic and ideological platforms which could offer people a choice between different governments. The establishment of a stable political order where politicians represent the majority will of the people requires long-term and broad-based efforts in education and voter awareness campaigns that will change, among other things, the political culture. Even that may not be enough to change present political identities, values and behavior, and to overcome parochial, segmented and regional interests so that politicians focus on national issues. If personal conscience and cultural attitudes do not change, the goal of stability will be remain an illusion. Also urgently needed is a political culture that balances collective and individual responsibility as important principles of PNG's parliamentary democracy because these establish a clear line of accountability by the government. As long as politicians adopt the view that 'I am only accountable to the people who live and vote from my electorate' (Post Courier 29 May, 2000: 10), the integrity of representatives in the nation will be in doubt.

There is also a need to put an end to the permanent recycling of leaders to top jobs in government, the public service and state-owned institutions. This practice is still the norm, even when politicians have demonstrated incompetence or undemocratic behavior. It is obvious that if the political system and the bureaucracy do not combat institutional problems and improve capacities in regard to responsibility, transparency and accountability and the delivery of services in the near future, the legitimacy of the state and its institutions will further erode.

In regard to the electoral reform, the success of the limited preferential voting is also highly doubtful. In 1968, the report by the Chief Electoral Officer on the House of Assembly commented: 'The strongest argument against the preferential system is its complexity for the average voter and its complexity for the count' (Reilly 1996: 46). Standish also argues in relation to the 1992 elections in Chimbu province that the preferential voting system would be too complex for the electoral staff, the scrutineers and the candidates (1996: 320). Indeed, it is difficult to see how the Electoral Commission would execute such a complex system when it is at fault in most electorates in previous elections under FPTP (The National 17 May, 2000: 5).

In summary, it is no surprise that the transfer of the Westminster system onto a society based on a totally different cultural and value system has led to contradictions and conflicts, as the experience not only in PNG but in many developing countries demonstrates. PNG will continue to struggle to find the right formula and structures for democratic stability. It will have to find a societal consensus for democratic representation as well as an identity as one nation. In view of the slow economic growth, politics in PNG will have to prevent the further erosion of traditional societies, which still offer social identity and economic self-sufficiency for most of the rural people, and overcome the highly fractionalized and divided society in order to steer towards the stability and human development of the entire nation. The social, political and cultural environment in PNG does not appear to readily encourage the maximum growth of networks, relationships, organizations and appropriate norms, values and traditions (the two central features of a society, according to Putnam) upon which social capital will thrive.

ETHNIC CLEAVAGES: A BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Ethnic cleavages are basically village-based and operate mostly along clan and tribal lines. The extended family system exists although this is gradually being eroded by external influences and urbanization.

Individual groups are autonomous vis-à-vis other groups and the state on a day-to-day basis. PNG is a predominantly rural society where 84 percent of the 5.19 million people live in rural areas. This is due, among other things, to the geographic and ethnic fragmentation and to poor transport and communication infrastructure. Ethnic groups maintain their traditional ways of life; the highest concentration of rural dwellers being the Highlands (Crocombe, R., et al, May 2001:26).

Fragmented Multi-polarity

According to a UNRISD typology, PNG is a multi-polar fragmented society (UNRISD, 2002: 4). It is assumed that in fragmented multi-polar settings with relatively small ethnic groups, ethnic-based political behaviour is less likely to be prevalent. Since political parties have to appeal to a large cross section of ethnic groups to be electorally viable, they are bound to be inter-ethnic coalition parties. This ensures a rough balance in the representation of ethnic groups in the political parties. It may also be possible for single parties in fragmented ethnic settings to win a majority of votes in elections. Based on the typology below, PNG has 817 plus ethnic groups which are relatively small with the largest group having only 4 percent of the national population and the two and three largest groups having just 7 and 8 percent respectively (UNRISD, May 2002: 4). In fact, according to the 2000 PNG national census figures, the three largest rural ethnic cleavages are found in the Eastern Highlands (see PNG map) which has the third highest number of persons of the national population. These are Kainantu (rural local government) with 84,983 persons or 1.6 percent of the national population; Okapa with 62,041 persons or 1.1 percent; and Unggai Bena with 45,006 persons or 0.86 percent (NSO, March 2002: 22).⁶ These are rural local government populations which are mostly based on ethnic groups.

Other social groups do exist and affect ethnic cleavages one way or another. For example, there are matrilineal and patriarchal communities in PNG which do affect the transfer of rights, responsibilities and obligations within ethnic groups. In matrilineal communities, women's clans are the channels of decision making and resource allocation, including the allocation and use of land. In such instances, for example, land is inherited and owned/managed by the children of female members of an individual family. All decision making involving land must involve them and their maternal uncles. Their uncles' children don't have the same degree of authority that they do as they have greater authority over their mother's land. (The PNG map shows New Ireland while inset 4 shows Suau, Buhutu and Misima in the Milne Bay province – these are two provinces that have ethnic groups that are matrilineal.)

The ethnic structure is fragmented geographically as well as shown in the ethnologue and insets.

Table 1: A Typology of Ethnic Structures with Examples

Type	Number of Ethnic groups	Share of pop. By largest group	Share of pop. By two largest groups	Share of pop. By three largest groups
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