Party Politics in Papua New Guinea: A Deviant Case?

Ben Reilly

Are effective, broad-based political parties an essential element of "established" democracies? Can states exhibit both an atomized party system and a strong record of competitive democracy? Or is it more accurate to argue, as do three leading scholars of democratization, that parties are "indispensable...not only for forming governments but also for constituting an effective opposition," and that without "effective parties that command at least somewhat stable bases of support, democracies cannot have effective governance"?¹ In sum, are strong party systems, as many contend, both reflections of and indispensable prerequisites for "good democratic performance"?² Or is it possible that democracy can co-exist with a weak or even nonexistent party system?

This paper attempts to shed some light on these questions by examining the party system in the state of Papua New Guinea (PNG) which, I will argue, represents a successful example of an "established" democracy coexisting with a weak and declining party system. In fact, on many indicators of democratic performance, PNG is one of the most successful democracies in the developing world. Despite (or perhaps because of) this and other distinctive characteristics, PNG remains for most political scientists an obscure and poorly understood example of an "established" multiparty democracy in the developing world.³ Often this obscurity appears to be because of sheer lack of information on subjects such as the party system, voting patterns, government formation and so on. There has been an invaluable series of

³Diamond, Linz and Lipset, in their study of democracy in developing countries, define democracy as a system of government that meets three essential conditions: meaningful competition for political power amongst individuals and organized groups; inclusive participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through free and fair elections; and a level of civil and political liberties sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation (Diamond, Linz and Lipset, "Introduction," pp. 6-7). This is itself a refinement of Dahl’s much-cited definition of democracy (which he called “polyarchy”) as a process of participation and contestation which approximates rather than fully satisfies democratic ideals, and will be the working definition of democracy used throughout this article.
election studies published after every PNG election to date, but these have concentrated overwhelmingly on a seat-by-seat description of election campaigns. It is hoped that this paper, which sets out the history of competitive multiparty democracy in PNG, will help redress this situation.

Democracy in Papua New Guinea

PNG was formed by the merger at independence in 1975 of the Territory of Papua, which had been under Australian rule from 1906, with the Trust Territory of New Guinea, which had been a German colonial territory from 1884 to 1914, and had thenceforth been administered by Australia. Papua New Guinea has a unicameral national parliament composed of 109 members elected from 89 “open” electorates of approximately equal population size, and 20 “regional” electorates based on the boundaries of the 19 provinces and the National Capital District. Parliamentary terms last for five years, and parliaments have so far run their full term, despite several changes of government on the floor of parliament. Until independence, an “alternative vote” electoral system, inherited from Australia, was used, before being replaced by first-past-the-post in 1975. National elections have been held in 1964, 1968, 1972, 1977, 1982, 1987, 1992 and 1997.

Traditional forms of social organization play an important role in PNG society, and continue to be significant influences upon the conduct of modern representative politics. The country is home to approximately four million people, predominantly of Melanesian race. Over eight hundred languages are spoken by several thousand clan- or tribally-based ethno-linguistic groups, making PNG one of the world’s most fragmented societies. In keeping, perhaps, with its extreme level of heterogeneity, representative democracy in PNG has been characterized by a diffuse and fragmented party system, high candidacy rates, very low support levels for some successful candidates, vote-splitting, low party identification on the part of the electorate, high turnover of politicians from one election to the next, and frequent “party-hopping” on the part of MPs. Political parties tend to coalesce around

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personalities rather than issues or ideologies, although they do play a limited role in mobilizing and campaigning at election time and in the formation of governments following elections.

In stark contrast to the rest of the developing world, peaceful changes of government in PNG have been common. In the post-independence period alone, to 1997 there had been eight changes of government: once at independence, three times at general elections and four times on the floor of parliament. This record alone makes PNG one of the most successful democracies in the developing world, according to some analyses. Myron Weiner, for example, found that PNG was one of a select group of six developing countries with populations over one million that had remained more or less continuously democratic since independence (the others were India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago). A similar but more recent formulation found PNG one of a group of ten developing countries with populations above one million that had maintained democracy, or at least a constitutional "near-democracy," continuously from 1965 (the others were India, Sri Lanka, Costa Rica, Colombia, Venezuela, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Botswana and Mauritius). Reviewing the findings of their monumental four-volume, twenty-six-nation study of democracy in developing countries, Larry Diamond, Juan Linz and Seymour Martin Lipset found that PNG was one of a select group of five developing countries that could be classified as "stable democracies" (the others were Venezuela, Costa Rica, India and Botswana). And in the forthcoming second edition of Arend Lijphart's classic work Democracies, which utilizes some of the previously unpublished data on the PNG party system presented in this paper, PNG is one of only four plural societies in the developing world that are also classified as "established" democracies — defined as countries with a population of over 250,000 which are democratic now and have been continuously democratic for at least twenty years (India, Mauritius and Trinidad and Tobago being the others).

Other studies of democratic consolidation have further emphasized PNG's unique status amongst developing-world democracies. Timothy Power and Mark Gasiorowski's examination of the outcomes of fifty-six transitions to democracy in the Third World between 1930 and 1995, for example, found that Papua New Guinea was, along with India, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, one of the developing world's only "consolidated" parliamentary democracies. Democratic consolidation was measured by the presence of

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7 Diamond, Linz and Lipset, "Introduction," p. 35.

three criteria: the holding of a second election subsequent to the democratic transition (which, in many cases, coincided with the granting of independence); at least one alternation in executive power; and twelve years of democratic experience. Another more demanding test of consolidation is provided by Huntington’s “two-turnover test,” which occurs when the party or group that takes power in an initial election loses a subsequent election and turns over power to those election winners, and if those election winners then peacefully turn over power to the winners of a later election. This criterion would result in the exclusion of a number of the above-mentioned countries, such as Botswana and Malaysia (neither of which has experienced a change of government party yet), but would be easily met by PNG. The paucity of cases outside the developed West which could meet either of these relatively undemanding tests of democratic consolidation emphasizes just how far Papua New Guinea — with its five post-independence elections, eight transitions of government and over thirty years of continuous democratic experience — deviates from the comparative norm.

While PNG’s thirty-five-year democratic history is indeed impressive, it has not been free of challenges. A number of potentially destabilizing incidents have, however, demonstrated what Yaw Saffu typifies as the strong hold of constitutionalism on PNG’s political actors. A series of potential crises has now been handled within the boundaries of the constitutional “rules of the game.” In 1991, the governor-general, Sir Serei Eri, refused to follow constitutionally binding advice to dismiss the deputy prime minister, Ted Diro, after the release of adverse findings against Diro by a leadership tribunal inquiry into corruption. Instead, Eri defused this potential crisis by resigning from office, to be replaced by a new governor-general who had no hesitation in sacking Diro. More recently, in September 1993, the then prime minister, Paias Wingti, organized a constitutionally questionable parliamentary manoeuvre: a surprise resignation and immediate parliamentary re-election after fourteen months in office in order to circumvent a constitutional provision permitting votes of no-confidence after eighteen months, thus gaining another eighteen months of valuable governing time. In August 1994, Wingti’s own appointment as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court led a full bench of seven judges who all ruled that the resignation was valid, but that the constitutional requirements of the re-election had not been met, thus forcing a new election by the parliament which enabled Wingti’s former deputy, Sir Julius Chan, to return to the prime

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ministership. Again, these transfers of power were conducted in an orderly fashion, and Wingti accepted the court’s decision. The acceptance of these and other rulings by political actors is itself a persuasive example of the resilience of PNG's constitutional structures.

The most serious threat to the existence of constitutional government to date has been the military insurrection in March 1997 against the Chan government’s decision to hire foreign mercenaries to assist the government in its ongoing secessionist war on Bougainville. This revolt was led by the commander of the Defence Force, Brigadier-General Jerry Singirok, who stopped well short of a full-scale attempted coup, but who nonetheless was able to mobilize sufficient numbers of the armed forces to make his call for the resignation of Prime Minister Chan a serious threat to parliamentary democracy. While the army’s push for Chan’s resignation and pressure on the government to drop the contract with the mercenaries was clearly contrary to the spirit of the Constitution, they were equally concerned that their actions were seen as having a constitutional basis. Army leaders consistently advanced the rhetoric of constitutionalism to justify their extraordinary actions. Singirok, for example, claimed that “we’ve allowed the democratic process to take place ... I was exercising my constitutional rights as a Papua New Guinea citizen.” His ally, Major Walter Enuma, asserted that the army was actually exercising its constitutional obligation to intervene in the crisis: “[W]e fought against corruption, but the Constitution of the country must be upheld.” Moreover, and more importantly, the crisis was settled by constitutional means, with Chan stepping aside from the prime ministership pending an inquiry into the hiring of the mercenaries, and an acting prime minister, John Giheno, taking his place until Chan’s return just prior to the 1997 national elections. At the 1997 election, Chan and another former prime minister, Paias Wingti, both lost their seats, along with most of Chan’s cabinet.

The PNG Party System

PNG’s continuation as a successful developing world democracy has occurred at the same time as its party system has gradually atrophied. The PNG party system is unstable (no government since independence has survived as elected for a full parliamentary term), fragmented (there were twenty registered parties prior to the 1997 election), highly personalized (parties tend to operate as parliamentary factions, based on one or two dominant personalities, rather than as coherent, broad-based vehicles for translating public preferences into government policy) and increasingly irrelevant (the largest “party” at each of the last two elections has been comprised of

independents, who have won over 50 percent of the vote on each occasion. The scholarly literature argues that this combination of factors should present significant problems for democracy in PNG. Bingham Powell, for example, notes that "virtually no party theorists favour fractionalized parties not linked to social groups. Multiple parties that represent only élite factions and personal followings receive few favourable reviews."13 Samuel Huntington similarly argues that a key function of political parties is to present clear choices to voters and to link them closely to the political process; fractionalized and personalized systems which fail to do this are extremely damaging for democratic prospects and are, consequently, found widely in the failed democracies of the Third World.14

The empirical evidence appears to confirm these theoretical expectations. Reviewing the findings of their twenty-six-nation study of democracy in developing countries, Diamond, Linz and Lipset found that their cases generally supported the proposition that "a system of two or a few parties, with broad social and ideological bases, may be conducive to stable democracy."15 Papua New Guinea, however, proved to be an exception to this generalization. Of the five developing-world cases classified as "stable democracies," two (Venezuela and Costa Rica) featured two-party systems, two (India and Botswana) exhibited one-party-dominant systems, and only one (PNG) had a multiparty system. Increasing party system fragmentation in recent years in two of these cases, India and Venezuela, has been associated with increasing political instability.16 Similarly, Power and Gasiorowski's comparative examination of democratic consolidation found that Papua New Guinea was the developing world's only consolidated parliamentary democracy which featured a "multiparty" system (defined as three or more parliamentary parties).17

The evidence from PNG thus appears to be a deviant case for comparative politics specialists, and a challenge to the prevailing wisdom. As well as being a relatively unusual example of an "established" democracy in the developing world, it features a fragmented and atomized party system. In fact, the comparative literature appears to be largely silent on how to interpret instances where continuous democracy seems to coincide with the disappearance of a meaningful party system, such as appears to be the case in PNG. How do we explain this apparent conundrum?

13 Powell, Contemporary Democracies, pp. 76-77.
16 Ibid.
17 Power and Gasiorowski, "Institutional Design," p. 144. Power and Gasiorowski also identified Israel as being a consolidated Third World multiparty democracy, but most comparative analyses place Israel squarely in the "developed world" locus.
The History of Political Parties in PNG

Like most other modern institutions in PNG, political parties are a very recent phenomenon. The oldest party, the Pangu Pati, was formed in 1967 and headed by the country's first prime minister, Michael Somare. It attracted a group of young indigenous candidates and supporters and pushed the Australian government to increase the speed of decolonization. A rival grouping formed as a counterbalance to Pangu and to their pressure for immediate self-government, the United Party, was supported mainly by highlanders and European plantation owners. Since independence, parties have come and gone with increasing regularity, with three major parties participating in most coalition governments: the People's Progress Party, led by Julius Chan, which draws most of its support from the Islands region; the People's Democratic Movement, led by Paiaas Wingti, which is often seen as a highlanders' party; and Pangu, which continues to be identified with the Sepik region. Other parties of influence in the post-independence period include the People's Action Party, led by Ted Diro, the dominant "Papuan" Party; the Melanesian Alliance led by John Momis from Bougainville; the League for National Advancement headed at various times by Tony Siaguru and Barry Holloway; and, in the lead-up to the 1997 elections, the National Alliance headed by former prime minister Somare and the People's National Congress headed by Bill Skate, the prime minister elected following the 1997 elections.

Any attempt at analyzing the nature of the PNG party system needs to begin with the difference in terms of political recruitment between parties in PNG and those in most other countries. Unlike their counterparts in other "established" democracies, political parties in PNG have virtually no mass base and very limited input into the policy-making process. They function almost solely as parliamentary factions. Their extra-parliamentary functions range from the limited (intermittent roles as electoral machines) to the nonexistent. The importance of parties lies in their role as aggregative groupings from which parliamentary coalitions can be built, and party leaders thus have an incentive to tie those candidates with a chance of electoral success to their party prior to an election. The combination of these factors has created a tendency for strong candidates to choose parties, rather than parties choosing the candidates, and for some parties in recent elections to "endorse" multiple candidates in each seat, in the hope that the winner will thus vote with them once in parliament. This practice — which represents an attempt by party leaders, in the absence of other mobilizing factors such as a party vote, to increase the prospects of a winner being aligned to "their" party — itself contributes to the weakness of party loyalty and party discipline.

Although their importance has declined at each election, parties remain one of the few potential "nationalizing" institutions of PNG's political system; political parties can operate as a conduit for local candidates' identification
with major personalities on the national stage. A party label enables a
candidate to claim some form of relationship to a Somare, a Wingti or
whomever, even if the two have never met and have no formal relationship
whateversoever. Parties can thus provide a useful method of aligning candidates
with broader national politics within their own constituency, and to use the
reflected prestige of major figures to help define their allegiances. In 1977,
for example, Pangu campaigned under the slogan “A vote for Pangu is a
vote for Somare” and by 1982 a number of other parties had adopted this
approach.18 This tendency was reinforced by the Electoral Commission’s
decision in 1987 to show photographs of the relevant party leader next to
the names (and photographs) of all endorsed candidates on the ballot paper.
Parties thus serve a functional purpose which actually reinforces the
dominance of personality — a curious paradox, as the dominance of
personality politics is one of the most frequently cited factors undermining
the development of political parties as meaningful entities in PNG politics.19

The other major rationale for aspiring candidates to claim a party
endorsement is to take advantage of the utility of parties as resource providers
— particularly for badges, t-shirts and other campaign material. Often, this
appears to be the predominant reason for candidates claiming an association
with a party in the first place. Parties also play a useful legitimating role,
especially in cases of very high candidature, which enables some (endorsed)
candidates to distinguish themselves from their (nonendorsed) competitors.
Perhaps most importantly, parties may pay nomination fees, contribute to
campaign expenses, and provide the paraphernalia of electoral campaign
material. Stephen Pokawin has claimed that “the fact of financial support
determined the affiliation of most candidates who claimed membership of
political parties.”20 Candidates who receive financial assistance from a party
are presumed more likely to remain faithful to that party in the post-election
environment. This is necessitated by the post-election “horse-trading” to build
parliamentary majorities in PNG, where parties routinely extend financial
support by offering to pay the election expenses of those party swappers
who will gravitate to their camp after an election. Following the 1987 election,
one newly elected member claimed that he was offered K10,000 to change
his support from the Wingti government to the opposition.21

Reasons for a Weak Party System

Explanations for the lack of institutionalization of a meaningful party system
in PNG can be divided into two broad categories: historical explanations,
which emphasize those factors that ensured that PNG political parties were

never an important part of the political landscape prior to independence, and contemporary explanations, which emphasize the reasons for the decline of the nascent party system present at the beginning of self-government in 1973. Historical explanations are largely based on the absence of nationalism as a political force in pre-independence PNG. Contemporary explanations focus more on the absence of defining cleavages in post-independence PNG society around which parties can coalesce and develop. Both schools of thought are, of course, interrelated. Explanations for the lack of a meaningful party system replicate, in many ways, those advanced for the lack of any substantial nationalist movement: the dominance of traditional cultural and social cleavages, and the extremely localized and fragmented expression of these cleavages in a predominantly rural polity, which makes the development of any form of organized social movement, including political parties, extremely difficult.

In terms of historical explanations, David Hegarty has argued that the development of nationalist movements in PNG, and hence the development of political parties, was inhibited by three main factors. First, PNG’s extreme ethnic fragmentation and topographical diversity hindered the development of a national consciousness, and the ongoing mutual antipathy between ethnic groups prevented cooperation or association between social elements. Second, Australian colonial rule was often paternalistic and tended to be authoritarian, nonparticipatory, and restrictive of political activity — to the extent of assigning special branch police to meetings of the first indigenous political party, the New Guinea United National Party, in 1965. The third, and perhaps most important, factor in inhibiting the development of a nationalist movement was the absence of a sufficiently large and independent élite or middle class capable of sustaining such a movement. The class-based party structure of many other Westminster systems has never appeared likely in PNG. PNG’s indigenous élite was, at least initially, far too small to sustain any organized political movement; later, as the élite was co-opted into the process of colonial political and economic development, mobilization of mass sentiment become unnecessary to the continuation of élite power.

Contemporary explanations for PNG’s weak party system continue this theme. Relatively strong parties of the pre-independence period, such as

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25 Hegarty, “The Political Parties,” p. 188.
Pangu and the United Party, were formed primarily to contest the issue of PNG’s independence, and quickly lost their essential raison d’être with the announcement of the Australian departure and the handing over of self-government. The main division between the parties — the question of the timing of self-government and independence — provided a sufficiently meaningful issue around which parties could coalesce. No similar issue has appeared in the post-independence period. Increasingly, party policies have converged toward a broad espousal of development-based politics within the framework of an (implicitly) capitalist state, with personalities becoming increasingly important, and patronage a more influential factor in electoral success than party backing. Even in Pangu’s early period of mass support, the personal following of major figures like Michael Somare, Pita Lus and Tony Voutas was considerably more potent than that of the party itself. With the removal of the clear issue of the nature and timing of self-government and independence, personality has become the dominant formative influence upon political parties in PNG.

Because PNG had been given universal suffrage and national elections before it gained self-government (in contrast to the evolutionary progression of suffrage and democracy in the West), its first three national elections were a contest for prestige and village-level power, but not (with the partial exception of the 1972 election) a contest for government. Real political power remained in the hands of the colonial administration, and ultimately with the Australian government, which retained a power of veto over House of Assembly legislation. This led to an imbalance between the executive and legislative roles of the House of Assembly: a parliament that facilitated representation, but had little or no executive power was, as Paul Hasluck noted, more a glorified debating chamber, “a place for the expression of opinion,” than a functioning legislature.65 Elected members predominantly saw themselves as “apprentice politicians rather than as parliamentarians elected to govern the country.”66 Hence the Australian government’s decision to attach some (indigenous) elected members as under-secretaries to (nonindigenous) official members to learn about the process of executive government and ministerial responsibilities. Thus one explanation for PNG’s failure to develop a meaningful party system in the 1960s and 1970s was that parties were unnecessary: as there was no contest for real political power, there was no incentive for parties to form — they could not change government. The fact that the lack of disciplined parties is still apparent after more than twenty years of independence has forced a re-evaluation of this line of argument. Nonetheless, it remains clear that the early development of an effective party system in PNG was hampered by the way

in which the lead-up to self-government and decolonization was handled by
the Australian colonial administration.

Indicators of a Weak Party System

Most broad indicators of party numbers and cohesion suggest a steady decline
in the strength and importance of political parties in PNG since the
introduction of self-government in 1975. The usual measure of party strength
in most countries is to look at the relative success of parties in terms of their
contestation of general elections, and their influence upon the formation
of governments. Both of these are difficult, but not impossible, to assess in
PNG. In terms of the results of general elections, the major problem for
traditional academic analysis is one of reliable data. Only since the 1987
election have the official election statistics included information on party
support levels. Prior to 1987, candidates were not identified by any party
affiliation on the ballot paper (although since 1972, photographs have been
used on the ballot paper wherever possible to identify the particular candidate
for illiterate voters). Once elected, successful members would simply align
themselves with their chosen party in parliament. This makes the traditional
calculation of the relationship between a party’s vote share and its seat share
— a mainstay of most discussions of a party’s electoral support in other
jurisdictions — extremely difficult in practice and largely meaningless as a
measure of electoral support. Such a calculation makes sense in most Western
democracies, where politics is conducted on a national level by mass parties,
and media coverage concentrates on key players, like the prime minister,
who “represent” their party to a national audience. To adopt a similar
approach in the case of PNG, where election campaigns are really a series of
109 individual battles in each seat, would be to assign aggregate data a
significance it does not deserve. National factors, while not irrelevant, are
often of extremely limited importance.

Nonetheless, it is possible to look at the relationship between a party’s
seat and vote shares for all PNG elections since independence. Prior to
independence, the best source for such comparative information is Loveday
and Wolfers’ sophisticated analysis of voting patterns in the first three houses,
which provides the best indicators of which elected members were associated
with which parties once in parliament.26 As no party labels appeared on ballot
papers until 1987, information on party affiliations from the 1977 and 1982
elections comes mostly from knowledgeable academics and observers making
their own estimates of which candidates were “associated” with particular
parties, and using this figure to calculate a crude estimate of a party’s overall
vote share.

26See P. Loveday and E. P. Wolfers, Parties and Parliament in Papua New Guinea 1964–1975 (Boroko:

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At the 1977 elections the best information available on the relationship between a party’s overall vote share and its share of parliamentary seats comes from Hegarty’s overview of the 1977 elections, where “a core of party stalwarts were returned but many incumbents were dumped heavily ... [O]n the 109 winners, 76 had been endorsed by parties or movements.”

Hegarty viewed party endorsement as often more “a question of convenience than of commitment to a philosophy, platform or leader,” noting that most studies from 1977 “show that parties had very little impact at all on the voter.”

A later study by Ralph Premdas revised Hegarty’s party endorsement figure upwards, claiming that “the 1977 elections could be accurately described as a contest between the major parties ... nearly half of all candidates were either endorsed by a party or were openly or covertly affiliated to a party. Of the 108 elected parliamentarians, all but 10 had party connexions.”

Unfortunately, no statistics of a national party vote for the 1977 elections have been published, but it is possible to make some informed estimates for comparative purposes. Using the sample of fifteen studies from Hegarty’s edited volume, I have attempted to estimate the overall support levels for the major parties. Considering the distribution and representativeness of these results, a rough estimate of overall support levels at the 1977 election would be something like Pangu 35 percent, People’s Progress Party (PPP) 15 percent, United Party 10 percent, Papua Besena 5 percent, Country Party 3 percent, National Party 2 percent, with independents gaining the remaining 30 percent.

By 1982 the situation had changed somewhat, with emerging signs of possible strengthening of the party system. The Pangu Pati maintained its dominance, but two new parties campaigned strongly for regional support: the National Party, which had been formed as a highlands equivalent of Pangu prior to the 1972 election, but came to much greater prominence under the high-profile leadership of Iambakey Okuk; and the Melanesian Alliance, launched in 1980 by Father John Momis and John Kaputin, and which (unlike nearly all its rivals) had an ideological component to its platform in the shape of economic nationalist and “Christian-social” policies. Jackson and Hegarty estimated the total vote share for each party in 1982 as

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30 Ibid., p. 12.
31 Ralph Premdas, "Papua New Guinea: The First General Elections After Independence," The Journal of Pacific History, vol. 13, no. 1 (1978), p. 87. In the four urban seats around Port Moresby: the Papuan nationalist party, Papua Besena, won three seats with an average of 41 percent of the vote; the Pangu Pati won one seat with an average of 28 percent; and the United Party won no seats but gained approximately 16 percent of the vote. Pangu won six of seven seats in the East Sepik region with an average vote share of 40 percent; one seat went to the United Party candidate with 31 percent. Pangu also won six of the nine Eastern Highlands seats, at a vote average of around 35 percent. The PPP gained around 30 percent of the vote in the Southern Highlands and in New Ireland, while the United Party maintained a strong support base in Enga and some other Highlands regions.
follows: Pangu 34 percent, PPP 10 percent, National Party 10 percent, Melanesian Alliance 9 percent, United Party 7 percent, Ted Diro's PNG Independent Group 7 percent, others 2 percent, independents 21 percent.\(^3\)

In the 1987 election the electoral commissioner for the first time attempted to identify candidates by their party affiliation whenever possible—a difficult task where some parties endorsed multiple candidates in a single seat or where candidates claimed a party allegiance which was not necessarily shared by the powers-that-be of the party itself. Nonetheless, for the 1987, 1992 and 1997 elections the Electoral Commission has published data on both party allegiance and overall levels of party support. When combined with the estimates of total vote share from the 1977 and 1982 elections, this enables us to compare the percentage of votes gained by each party and by independent candidates, and in most cases their raw vote totals as well, for all PNG elections since independence. It must be emphasized, however, that this type of information can be quite deceptive when attempting to analyze PNG electoral politics, as it can give the impression that some kind of meaningful party system exists, when in reality the data is simply the combined total of each party-endorsed candidate's vote in each seat tallied up and presented, as far as possible, as some sort of national party vote figure. National factors and candidates' party allegiance, while not necessarily irrelevant, are often of extremely limited importance. Mindful of this caveat, the following table presents an indication of party seat and vote shares for each election since independence in 1975.

The most striking conclusion from these figures is how dramatically PNG deviates from the precepts of "Duverger's law" that "the plurality method tends to lead to a two-party system,"\(^5\) or more generalized formulations that "the plurality rule corresponds to a low number of parties."\(^4\) Even at the height of "party strength" in PNG in 1982, PNG had over six "effective" electoral parties, and their number has risen at the same time as the salience of party has decreased.\(^5\) Not only has PNG never had anything approaching a two-party system, but since its adoption of first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral laws it seems to be heading in the other direction, toward increasing party system fragmentation and ultimately, perhaps, dissolution.

Since 1986, six parties—Pangu, People's Democratic Movement (PDM), PPP, Melanesian Alliance (MA), People's Action Party (PAP) and National


Table 1
Party Vote Totals and Percentages 1977-1997

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Note: some totals add to over 100 percent due to rounding.
Key: Pangu = Pangu Pati; PPP = People’s Progress Party; NP = National Party; MA = Melanesian Alliance; NatA = National Alliance; UP = United Party; PP = Papua Party; IG = PNG Independent Group; CP = Country Party; PB = Papua Besena; PDM = People’s Democratic Movement; PAP = People’s Action Party; MIG = Morobe Independent Group; LNA = League for National Advancement; Others = Others; Indep. = Independents.
— have formed the core of two opposing coalitions in parliament. But their importance and influence have been steadily decreasing. In 1987 their combined vote share was 46 percent, winning 73 seats in parliament. By 1992 their share of the vote was down to only 30 percent, while still managing to win 64 parliamentary seats. By 1997, however, these “core” parties of the political system had become almost irrelevant, winning just 22 percent of the votes and less than half the seats (fifty-one) between them. At the same time, other parties have disappeared altogether and new parties arisen: between 1992 and 1997, the League for National Advancement, Papua Party, Papua Besena and others virtually disappeared, while two new parties — the National Alliance and the People’s National Congress — emerged as potential forces. The ephemeralism of political organizations in PNG is, according to Saffu, “a reminder of a strong tendency to political fragmentation in PNG, as if in imitation of the marked segmentation of PNG social structures.”

**Executive Instability**

The combination of PNG’s fluid multiparty system and its majoritarian political institutions provides a dramatic illustration of a parliament which actually behaves in accordance with the oft-cited but rarely observed doctrine of “parliamentary supremacy.” This doctrine holds that, in a system of parliamentary government, the executive is responsible to the legislature, and is dependent upon the legislature’s support for its continuation in office. The rise of disciplined political parties in the first half of this century (and the widespread acceptance that functioning parties are an essential element of a functioning democracy) has seen this doctrine replaced by a more accurate “decline of parliaments” thesis in most countries, as disciplined party voting has effectively transferred real control of the executive from the legislature to the party organization.

In PNG, by contrast, the weakness of political parties and the willingness of elected members to switch from one party to another means that the executive really is beholden to the backbench. The National Parliament is elected for a five-year term, but the government may be removed by a “constructive” vote of no-confidence and replaced without the need for an election. While in theory early elections can be called by a majority vote of the parliament (or automatically following a successful no-confidence vote in the final year before a scheduled election), in practice PNG parliamentary terms are rigidly fixed. The high level of incumbent rejection noted earlier is also important here: the most recent elections in 1997 saw 52 percent of PNG’s parliamentarians failing to be re-elected, including most of the previous cabinet. This pattern means that the National Parliament is most unlikely to ever voluntarily dissolve itself.

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36 Saffu, “Continuity and Change,” p. 29.
37 Ibid. p. 31.
In 1974 the Constitutional Planning Commission recommended that “constructive” votes of no-confidence (i.e., where an alternative prime minister is nominated) should be constitutionally guaranteed. 59 No-confidence motions have since become a feature of PNG parliamentary politics. To date, every elected government since independence has been deposed on the floor of parliament without reference to an election. The Constitution provides that a no-confidence vote cannot, however, be used to depose a government in the final year of a parliamentary term, and a further constitutional amendment in 1991 extended from six to eighteen months the “grace” period a new government has from no-confidence votes — effectively leaving the middle two-and-a-half years of any parliamentary term as a potential danger time. Parliamentary sittings thus tend to be minimized in frequency and duration, and much of the legislative program paralyzed, during this two-and-a-half-year danger period.

Table 2 details the changes of executive in PNG since independence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Previous Prime Minister</th>
<th>New Prime Minister</th>
<th>Reason for change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Michael Somare</td>
<td>Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Somare retains Prime Ministership after General Election</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Michael Somare</td>
<td>Julius Chan</td>
<td>No-confidence vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Julius Chan</td>
<td>Michael Somare</td>
<td>General election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Michael Somare</td>
<td>Paias Wingti</td>
<td>No-confidence vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Wing retains Prime Ministership after General Election</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Paias Wingti</td>
<td>Rabbie Namaliu</td>
<td>No-confidence vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Rabbie Namaliu</td>
<td>Paias Wingti</td>
<td>General Election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Paias Wingti</td>
<td>Julius Chan</td>
<td>Judicial decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Julius Chan</td>
<td>Bill Skate</td>
<td>General Election</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part of this executive instability relates to the way in which parliamentary coalitions are put together by the leading political actors after each general election. The weakness of PNG’s party system and the common ideology of almost all participants results in potential leaders engaging in frantic post-election tussles for commitments of loyalty from newly elected members, in the hope of being able to piece together a parliamentary majority. All members, not just the small parties and independents, are targeted as potential allies. Inducements are offered in return for support, and in some

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cases members are "locked" in remote resorts or hotel rooms until they have given guarantees of loyalty (hence the usual reference to post-election meetings of potential coalition partners as "lock-ups"). A 1991 reduction in the period between the return of election writs and the first meeting of parliament from twenty-one to seven days, intended to reduce tension and instability in the post-election period, has had little apparent impact. The requirement that parliament meet within one week of the return of writs did not appear to alter the frantic bargaining for support that has always been a feature of the post-election scene in PNG. Bill Standish reported that following the 1992 election, a period of "intense politicking followed the poll, in which helicopters plucked winners to 'lockups' in isolated resorts before Parliament convened."  

**Party-Hopping**

The extent of post-election "party-hopping" is another example of the inherent weakness of the PNG party system. A distinctive feature of PNG's parliamentary politics is the willingness of members who stand for office under the endorsement of one party to join another party once elected to parliament — usually in return for a ministry or some other financial inducement. The phenomenon of party-hopping, as it is known in PNG, is not unknown elsewhere (there have been several recent examples in Australia, the United Kingdom and other established Westminster systems), but has reached unusually high levels in PNG, where the incidence of MPs changing their party endorsement is so widespread as to seriously undermine executive government. Every post-independence government has been formed and reshaped by "the numbers game" of MPs changing allegiances:

A great part of the time of the prime minister is spent on managing the coalition, which is constantly threatened by competition for ministerial office among parliamentarians and given wide rein by the rules whereby a vote of no confidence leads to a change of government and not to the dissolution of parliament. Collective responsibility is difficult to maintain in these circumstances, especially when coalitions are based not on common policies but on an interest in the perks of power. Political stability is constantly threatened, for at the first whisper of a conspiracy towards a vote of no confidence, normal executive and legislative functions are immobilized, as the prime ministers and their rivals go about mustering parliamentary support. Corruption and patronage are the natural results, while the political system becomes discredited.  

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Party-hopping is also strongly connected to wider questions of PNG's political culture. There is little opprobrium attached to party-hopping in PNG. Part of the reason for the unusually high level of interparty mobility is that most constituents expect their member to put local interests before national ones. Michael Oliver has noted that if an MP can improve his chance of becoming a minister, or simply enhance his access to patronage and influence, by joining the government benches, then whatever the element of personal advantage there may be in his action, he is widely seen as acting in the interests of his electoral supporters.\footnote{Michael Oliver, "Introduction," in Oliver, Eleksin, p. 3.} Whether such a member's supporters would always agree with this assessment is another matter.

While party-hopping is by no means restricted to the immediate post-election period, it is usually in this period, when the most intense "horse-trading" for support takes place, that changes of party allegiance are at their most frantic. This allows us to compare official records of pre-election party allegiance from the Electoral Commission with post-election voting patterns in parliament in order to measure the extent of movement from one party to another with more accuracy during the period from the return of election writs to the first sitting of parliament, when a new prime minister is chosen. Table 3 gives an indication of the extent of party hopping in this period for each election since 1977.

The phenomenon of party-hopping is, like many other aspects of PNG politics, primarily an indication of the weakness of PNG's political institutions, particularly the party system. Party discipline cannot be imposed solely from above. It needs to be representative of an authentic differentiation between opposing political forces if it is to act as a motivating force for party members and political representatives alike. A political sphere in which party-identification factors are largely irrelevant to voting choice is one in which the coherence and stability of parties will be difficult to sustain. Parties have a very specific purpose in most political systems. Like other types of social movements, they are agents for common interests to meet and provide a forum for organized social activity. But unlike social movements, political parties typically have one overriding defining objective: to have their endorsed members elected to parliament. The prevalence of party-hopping is thus primarily a consequence of the very weakness of PNG parties; and, in one of the frequent catch-22 situations of PNG politics, each individual act of party-hopping works to further undermine both the influence of existing political parties, and the concept of a party system itself.

**Conclusion**

The increasing weakness of the PNG party system, and particularly the failure of PNG parties to penetrate to any meaningful level in PNG society or to
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<th>PP</th>
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</table>

* The elections for one seat in 1977 and 1982 and three seats in 1987 were postponed due to the death of candidates during the campaign period.


Key: as for table 1.
develop the necessary coherence to act as disciplined parliamentary machines, represents a challenge to democracy in PNG. But parties are in decline not just in PNG, but in most Western democracies as well. The reason for the "dealignment" of voters from parties in Western democracies is complex, but one common cause appears to be the fact that those cleavages that enabled parties to penetrate deeply into societies — particularly class and religion, but to some extent "ideology" as well — are themselves on the decline as factors affecting electoral behaviour.44 Other common cleavages around which parties can form — such as regional or linguistic divisions — are also being mitigated by advances in communication technology and moves toward globalization. It is important, therefore, not to evaluate developing countries such as PNG against some spurious "Western model" of party structure, even if one existed. In PNG, class and ideology appear to be largely irrelevant as factors affecting voting behaviour. Religion is a factor in some areas where candidates attempt to use their membership in a church group to further their candidacy, but there is little evidence that it is a strong factor. Language and territorial divisions remain strong, but cleavages tend to exist at a micro-level, and are thus so fragmented as to hamper wider political association within an open electorate, much less a regional one. This leaves little beyond the personal capacity of the candidate concerned as a major factor in assessing voting patterns.

If the experience of other countries is any guide, parties are unlikely to gain any real penetration into the hearts and minds of PNG voters until they are formed along cleavages which have some meaning to electors, both in terms of a distinctive policy platform and as a method of distinguishing their candidates from others. The most likely cleavage around which modern parties are likely to form remains one of region, but history suggests that the precursor for this is the emergence of a dominant personality figure around which other members of the budding political elite can coalesce, rather than the mobilization of a distinctive grass-roots political sentiment. Nevertheless, Saffu’s analysis of political behaviour in PNG found that, alone amongst the major social variables (class, gender, age, religion, region of origin and residence) which affect voter choice, "only the region of residence appears to lead to significant political differences."45 Other experienced observers of PNG elections have reinforced this conclusion: May’s assessment of over twenty years of analyzing elections in East Sepik, for example, concluded that "there has been little progress towards an integrative, ideologically-based party system" and that even in the East Sepik, where party loyalty has been maintained over several elections, the value of party endorsement lies in the identification of some parties with the Sepik itself.46 However, any devel-

velopment of parties based predominantly on regional considerations is likely to encourage local autonomy movements and separatism rather than become a focus for national politics.47

The continuing weakness of PNG's party system has been a surprise to some academic observers who clearly expected the development of some type of meaningful party system after independence.48 The salience of political parties in PNG has not developed and, indeed, has declined considerably since the early 1980s. In 1979, Hegarty argued that the important role played by parties in PNG was not as entities to mobilize popular sentiment, but rather as mechanisms through which the political elite gain access to, manipulate and retain political power.49 Even this limited definition of function is now questionable, as increasingly it has become clear that independent status is no hindrance to a successful candidature — over half of all candidates and approximately one-third of elected members at the 1992 and 1997 elections were actually independents. With the erosion of this mechanistic function has gone much of the raison d'être for parties' extraparliamentary existence. In the absence of any cleavage powerful enough to encourage the development of parties which have strong mass appeal, it is likely that the PNG party system will continue to fragment and dissipate in the foreseeable future.50

Rabushka and Shepsle have argued that this type of weak party system is typical of ethnically fragmented societies, which are characterized both by the presence of many groups and the inability of any of them to dominate the political process. In postcolonial situations like PNG, where the rewards of political success become a valuable prize, parties proliferate, but multiparty coalitions become difficult to form and hold together: "effective party politics ... does not usually emerge in the fragmented setting; no party is large enough to rule and the multiplicity of culture groups frustrates any attempts to form long-run multiethnic coalitions." While this represents a succinct description of the ways PNG's parties behave, the PNG case does not support their conclusion that the absence of effective brokerage institutions such as political parties leads, in such cases, to the breakdown of democracy.51

Rather, democratic procedures have not just survived in PNG but, according to many indicators, appear to have flourished. Freely contested and highly competitive elections have occurred regularly since 1964.

48 See, for example, A. Clunies Ross, "Who Shall Prepare Himself to the Battle?" in O. Spate et al., The Politics of Melanesia (Canberra and Port Moresby: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University and University of Papua New Guinea, 1970), pp. 517-27.
49 Hegarty, "The Political Parties," p. 188.
50 For a discussion and similar conclusion about the role of parties in PNG, see Constitutional Review Commission, Interim Report, pp. 20-26.
Participation has been inclusive. Crucially, there is a genuine contest for power in virtually every seat in every election. It is this factor of exceptionally high competitiveness which stands behind PNG’s impressive record of democracy — indeed, as Safiu notes, in terms of uncertainty of electoral outcomes and the extent of contestation and participation for office, “PNG must be counted as one of the most democratic states in the world.”^32 The ongoing continuity of both democracy and a declining party system is thus at least partly explicable by reference to Adam Przeworski’s description of democracy as “organized uncertainty,”^55 whereby winners in one election become losers in the next, and where all outcomes are necessarily temporary and uncertain. In PNG, no statement could be more true.

*International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, February 1999*

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