

Ethnicity, democracy and development in Papua New Guinea

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This article examines the relationship between ethnicity, democracy and development in Papua New Guinea. Drawing on an earlier co-authored study, it shows that a key cause of disparities in provincial development in Papua New Guinea is variation in the levels of ethnic diversity between provinces. Even when alternative explanations such as size, government performance and resource endowments are factored in, more diverse provinces have significantly lower development levels than more homogeneous ones. Increasing levels of ethnic diversity are associated with lower overall levels of development, in part because ethnic divisions encourage rent-seeking behaviour, leading to sub-optimal outcomes for the country as a whole.

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Around the world, a range of comparative studies by economists and political scientists in recent years have found a consistent negative relationship between ethno-linguistic fragmentation and development. In one case, a World Bank study of economic growth in Africa found ethnic diversity to be negatively correlated with economic growth, schooling attainment, availability of infrastructure and sound government policies, prompting the authors to identify ethnic fragmentation as the key to Africa's 'growth tragedy' (Easterly and Levine 1997).

Another study looking at all regions of the world found ethnic fragmentation to be

independently associated with a range of negative outcomes, including lower economic growth and higher levels of income inequality (Rodrik 1999). Looking at social indicators as well as economic ones, Fedderke and Klitgaard (1998) reported a similar relationship. Likewise, Mauro (1995) concluded that fragmented societies had a strong tendency towards corruption, because of the tendency of members of ethnic groups to favour their own kin.

Other studies which use purely linguistic fragmentation as their dependent variable have reported similar results. In one of the earliest studies of the impact of



linguistic fragmentation, Fishman (1968) found that linguistically more heterogeneous countries had, on average, higher rates of mortality, lower gross national product, lower government revenues, fewer students in high education, lower literacy, and fewer radios, televisions and newspapers than more homogenous countries. More recent analyses have confirmed these results and found similar trends in other indicators of development (Nettle 2000). For example, in a comparative study looking specifically at language fragmentation, Easterly (2001) found that more linguistically diverse societies had half the schooling years, one-thirteenth the telephones per worker, twice as many electric power losses, and less than half as many paved roads as more homogenous ones.

Why is ethno-linguistic diversity associated with so many poor outcomes? While a number of competing theories have been put forward, most explanations boil down to the deleterious effects of fragmentation on economic growth. Linguistic explanations focus on the coordination problems created by many different languages, thereby limiting trade, handicapping efficient markets and undermining prospects for cooperation in general. Ethnic explanations add to these problems the specific effects of economic and political competition between groups for power and resources. There are several reasons for this. First, in more heterogeneous states, sound macroeconomic policy is made subservient to the rent-seeking ambitions of ethnic cliques, who focus their energies on wealth redistribution rather than wealth creation. Second, growth-promoting public infrastructure like health and education will be under-supplied in more heterogeneous states because of the difficulties of reaching agreement on the provision of such public goods across ethnic lines. Finally, both ethnic and linguistic fragmentation is negatively related to the development of 'social capital',

the network of civic bonds and associations that are increasingly posited as underpinning good economic and political performance (see Putnam 1993, 2000).

Ethnic diversity and provincial development in Papua New Guinea

Because of its exceptionally high level of social diversity, Papua New Guinea functions as a key test case for examining the relationship between ethno-linguistic heterogeneity and developmental outcomes. On the measure of language diversity, for example, Papua New Guinea is probably the most heterogeneous country in the world, with 852 separate languages (about one quarter of the world total) in existence (see May 2003). This linguistic diversity translates into exceptional cultural fragmentation. Deklin writes that 'Papua New Guinea is a land of many cultures and, if we take the number of languages in the country as a rough criterion, there are some 1,000 cultures' (Deklin 1992:35). As in most of Melanesia, Papua New Guinea's basic cultural unit comprises ascriptive extended family networks or 'clans' which are the primary unit of political and social loyalty (see Hogbin 1973). Combined with the effects of the country's dramatic terrain—with a vast range of mountains and valleys running through the middle of the mainland ('the Highlands'), and an extensive arc of populated volcanic islands off the coast—this has created a multiplicity of micro-ethnic identities. However, the level of societal heterogeneity within Papua New Guinea varies widely, with some regions being relatively homogenous and others, especially in the Highlands areas, being exceptionally fragmented.

In a recent study of this phenomenon in Papua New Guinea, Reilly and Phillipot (2002) examined the relationship between ethnic fragmentation and provincial



development.¹ The main challenge was to find a meaningful way to measure 'ethnicity'. Papua New Guinea's exceptional level of clan, linguistic and regional diversity creates real challenges in attempting to come up with any aggregate measure of ethnic heterogeneity. In addition, ethnicity itself is a notoriously slippery concept, and ethnic identity in Papua New Guinea—as elsewhere—is a combination of both 'primordial' and 'instrumental' factors. In other words, it is both an ascriptive phenomenon, based on traditional ties of clan, tribe, and language—a position often characterised in the scholarly literature as 'primordialism'²—as well as an adaptive one of more malleable or constructed identities formed as a reaction to external pressures and incentives—or 'instrumentalism'.³ Many analyses of ethnicity in Papua New Guinea therefore emphasise the extent to which ethnic identities are both a salient feature of traditional society and also a reaction to the more recent experience of colonial rule, modernisation and independence (see Premdas 1989:246).

One indicator of the primordial component of ethnicity is the extent of linguistic diversity in each province. However, this only applies to non-Highlands provinces. In the Highlands, the major language groups are themselves fragmented along clan and tribal lines, and thus do not provide a meaningful measure of diversity. Outside the Highlands, however, the number of separate language groups provides a rough approximation of the number of self-conscious 'ethnic' groups in many cases. Looking at these non-Highlands provinces, where linguistic divisions have often been prominent, we found that the more languages there were in a province, the lower the overall level of provincial development: regression analysis suggested that almost 70 per cent in the variation in provincial development levels could be explained by variations in

the number of languages. The most plausible interpretation of this result is that language multiplicity somehow impedes development, rather than development affecting linguistic structure. This suggests, on the face of it, a negative relationship between ethnolinguistic fragmentation and provincial development.

However, Highlands provinces also needed to be included in the equation. One way of doing this was to look at the number of candidates standing for election in Highlands seats, as in many areas clans will nominate and then block vote for a particular candidate to represent their interests against other rival groups. In such cases, candidates concentrate on mobilising the vote of their own clan group, and clans spend much time and energy on deciding which candidate they will put forward for election (see Standish 1994:60). As a result, the electoral contest provides a substitute arena in which traditional clan rivalries and tribal conflicts can be fought out (Strathern 1993). Many analyses of elections in Papua New Guinea have emphasised the enduring link between tribal affiliation and election candidature (see, for example, Saffu 1996). Indeed, one of the strongest reasons for using candidate numbers as an indicator of ethnic pluralism is that it helps capture the fluid, politically constructed nature of ethnic identity as well as its more primordial, ascriptive aspects.

To test the validity of this approach, we compared data on clan affiliation from the five open electorates in Enga, collected by the Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission, with the total number of candidates standing in each seat there at recent elections. Enga is the only province for which such clan data is available, and because of the small sample of five electorates it can only give us a partial indication as to whether any relationship between clan and candidate numbers exist. That said, there was an extremely strong positive correlation between the number of



clans and the number of candidates standing for election in each seat of $r = 0.881$, $p < 0.05$, using 1997 electoral data. If Enga is indicative of the other four Highlands provinces, then the number of candidates standing for election in each province may also serve as a rough indicator of the number of politicised clan or tribal groups.

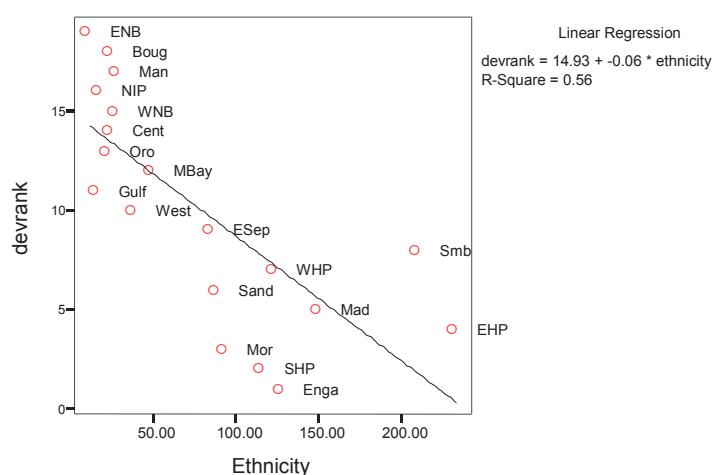
Applying this technique to the Highlands as a whole via a comparison between provincial development and the number of candidates standing at the 1997 election, we again found a strong negative correlation between ethnic diversity and provincial development. Analysis of the 1992 national results was similar, suggesting that—across all provinces—lower levels of provincial development are associated with more candidates standing for election.

Finally, we combined the language and candidate indicators into one index in order to create a crude but useful measure of the relative extent of ethnic fragmentation across the whole country (see Figure 1). Correlation

analysis between provincial development and this combined measure of 'ethnicity' produced a strong and statistically significant correlation between these variables of $r = -0.748$, $p < 0.01$ across all provinces (Reilly and Philpott 2002).

This suggests a strong negative impact of diversity on development. But perhaps the correlation between the two is spurious, and both are being driven by another underlying factor, such as resource endowment, population pressure, or land area. To test whether this is the case, we used a multiple regression model to evaluate the extent to which other 'environmental' factors besides 'ethnicity'—such as population, area and land pressure—impact on provincial development. Three specific indicators were examined: provincial population, the area of each province in square kilometres, and an index of rural disadvantage which measures arable land potential, agricultural pressure, access to services, income from agriculture and child malnutrition in each district, aggregated to the

Figure 1 Provincial development and 'ethnicity'



Source: Reilly, B. and Philpott, R., 2002. "Making democracy work" in Papua New Guinea: social capital and provincial development in an ethnically fragmented society', *Asian Survey*, XLII(6):921.



Table 1 Regression analysis: impacts on provincial development

	Standardised coefficients		
	Beta	t	Sig.
Population	-0.421	-3.454	0.004**
Land area	-0.033	-0.250	0.806
Ethnicity	-0.496	-3.871	0.002**
Rural	0.399	3.064	0.008**

** p<0.01

Source: Reilly, B. and Phillpot, R., 2002. "Making democracy work" in Papua New Guinea: social capital and provincial development in an ethnically fragmented society', *Asian Survey*, XLII(6):922.

provincial level.⁴ These variables have the advantage of measuring basic restraints on development that were not included in the provincial development indicator.

The overall results indicate once again that the degree of ethnic diversity in a province is a better predictor of the level of provincial development than any of these other causal variables (Table 1). Overall, 85 per cent of the variation in provincial development was explained by this model, with population, the rural disadvantage index, and the 'ethnicity' variable each having a statistically significant impact. But of these, 'ethnicity' had the largest Beta score of -0.496. According to the model, a 10 per cent decline in the level of ethnic fragmentation in a province should, other things being equal, result in almost a 5 per cent rise in provincial development.

The robustness of the ethnicity variable in explaining differences in provincial development represents a challenge to many existing explanations of government performance in Papua New Guinea, which tend to concentrate on factors like resource endowment, geography and history (particularly in regards to the smaller island provinces, which have also had a much longer history

of interaction with the outside world than the more recently contacted Highlands) to explain differentials in provincial performance. As Table 1 shows, variance in 'ethnicity' is a more significant and robust explanator of development levels than any of these more conventional explanations: the more ethnically fragmented a province, the more likely it is to be underdeveloped, and each one-unit drop in the level of ethnic heterogeneity sees a rise of almost half a unit in the provincial development rankings.

Explaining the result

The starting point in explaining this result is to understand how ethnicity in societies like Papua New Guinea is used to mobilise population groups. Take, for example, the way ethnicity affects the electoral process. In Papua New Guinea, as in many other developing countries, electoral politics is primarily a competition for access to the state. In the Highlands province of Simbu, for example

...people have come to regard government as the major, or only, source of opportunity and finance. Having a



friend in national government is seen as necessary for economic success, and election to office in the provincial assembly and parliament is keenly contested (Brown 1989:245).

As a result, 'popular participation in politics has strengthened the connection between politics and material benefits' (Woolner 1995:7). Aspiring candidates make (often optimistic) calculations of their electoral prospects based on the number of voters in their own clan and tribal groups. Once elected, the expectation is that successful candidates will use their position to extract resources from the government and deliver them back to their own clan, but not necessarily to the electorate as a whole. Reviewing the situation in the early 1990s, Strathern found that

... it was understood that politicians are in power to benefit themselves and their factions, and they concentrate on consolidating their existing power bases. As a result of armed conflict between groups these bases had become more, rather than less, rigidly defined and a process of neotribalisation was well underway (Strathern 1993:48).

Both traditional social relations and modern political entrepreneurship in Papua New Guinea involve the mobilisation and manipulation of such ethnic identities—a process which, as Claxton notes, is itself conflict-creating in the absence of structures able to regulate competition for power, wealth and status (Claxton 2000:267). For example in the Highlands, where almost half the Papua New Guinea population lives, modernisation, land pressure and competition for resources has encouraged a 'retribalisation' of society in recent years as group affiliation is increasingly used to determine the distribution of public goods. As such, tribal groups are increasingly being mobilised, refashioned, or at times invented

from scratch, in response to the demands of state building (see Ferguson and Whitehead 1992). Filer, for example, found that land-holding disputes in areas as varied as Central Province and the Lihir Islands have seen some claimants invent clan identities in order to facilitate collective demands for compensation (Filer 2000).

In contemporary Papua New Guinea, clans thus increasingly play the role of interest groups. By seeking to maximise outcomes for their own members, they inevitably and inexorably create a collective action dilemma for the country as a whole. The combined effect of many small ethnic groups acting to secure their own interests undermines the broader interests of society. Because time horizons are short, possible productive investments are curtailed. Energies are focused on short-term wealth distribution rather than long-term wealth creation. Rent-seeking—'the socially costly pursuit of wealth transfers' (Tollison 1997:506)—flourishes, as each tribal group attempts to monopolise any potential public good for their own ends. The result is that public goods are increasingly diverted towards the private enrichment of political entrepreneurs and the small ethnic interest groups they represent. Beneficial outcomes for society at large are overwhelmed by a collective action problem created by several thousand small ethnic collectives competing with each other for resources, prestige and public goods.⁵

In such a situation, each clan's candidate represents a potential financial and status windfall for the clan as a whole if he (or, very rarely, she) is elected. Each clan therefore has a strong 'selective incentive', in the words of collective action theory, to enforce the voting contract within its own ranks and make sure that their candidate gains as many votes as possible. But to do this, they have to overcome the collective action problem endemic to group politics (Olson 1971). Group leaders thus monitor and police their own block



voting choice, and ruthlessly sanction any deviations from this. From Simbu, Standish reported that

...in many polling booths officials were coerced with weapons (axes, knives and pistols) to give out ballot papers in bulk and accept people blatantly voting ten or twenty times...One intending voter was chased from a booth and stoned to death, and five were killed in post-election disturbances, including at least four for voting 'the wrong way', that is against the desire of their communities (Standish 1994:70–71).

While a cause of great concern, this type of 'gunpoint democracy' is not, however, a dominant pattern across Papua New Guinea as a whole—at least, not yet (see Saffu 1996:41). Indeed, there are clear regional and structural trends to election violence in Papua New Guinea: it is precisely those Highlands regions such as Enga, Simbu and the Western and Eastern Highlands provinces where ethnic fragmentation is most pronounced, and indicators of provincial social capital least developed, that electoral violence also appears to be a factor.⁶ Ominously, however, urban areas such as Papua New Guinea's main city, Port Moresby, are increasingly replicating these forms of negative social capital in an urban environment, via *raskol* criminal gangs and other collectivities formed along ethnic and cultural lines.

However, ethnic violence remains predominantly a local-level phenomenon. At the national level, Papua New Guinea's multiplicity of ethno-linguistic groups means that some degree of inter-ethnic cooperation and accommodation is usually unavoidable. One reason that Papua New Guinea has been able to maintain a system of continuous democracy at the national level is that no group has anything like the size or potential to act as a hegemon and dominate others, or to overthrow the incumbent regime. The result is that national politics is, by necessity,

characterised by the products of this societal diversity—shifting alliances, cross-ethnic bargains and diverse multi-ethnic coalitions—all of which have facilitated the continuity of formal democracy at the national level (see Reilly 2000). But because political leaders must service the needs of their tribal constituency rather than their electorate or the nation as a whole, the collective action dilemma affects government policy as well.

Papua New Guinea's national motto is 'unity in diversity', and there is no doubt that it has achieved some remarkable successes in uniting thousands of small stateless societies into one fractious but ongoing state structure. But at the same time, in the words of former Prime Minister Paias Wingti, 'this diversity is slowly strangling our nationhood' (in Connell 1997:299). Ethnic fragmentation, while ensuring the continuity of formal democracy at the national level, has undermined the development of social capital at the local level and effectively created a massive collective action problem. As a consequence, politics is characterised by intense zero-sum competition for a small and dwindling reward base, and life in some parts of Papua New Guinea has reverted to a Hobbesian struggle for meagre resources.

Desperate though such a situation is, it is irrational for any one individual to attempt to forge a cooperative alternative under prevailing forms of clan-based social organisation. Instead, the bleak logic of the collective action dilemma unwinds, as groups seeking to promote their own interests try to monopolise access to public goods and opportunities for rent-seeking by their group alone (Olson 1971). The fragmentation of Papua New Guinea society exacerbates this problem by creating a situation of many small clans operating effectively as interest groups, attempting to exploit any available public good for their membership. The result is grossly sub-optimal outcomes for the country as a whole.



Notes

- ¹ The following sections draw liberally on this earlier co-authored article.
- ² The term 'primordialism' is usually associated with Geertz (1963). For a discussion of this typology in the scholarly literature, see Esman (1994).
- ³ There is a considerable literature on ethnicity and ethnic identity. See Young (1976), Brass (1985), Smith (1986), Horowitz (1985) and Esman (1994).
- ⁴ This final variable uses district data, aggregated to the provincial level, from Hanson et al. (2001).
- ⁵ As Claxton (2000:268) notes, the cohesion and the utility of clan and tribal groups tends to increase as they decrease in size.
- ⁶ See Standish (1996:277–322) and Dinnen (1996:91–98).

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