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The unrepresentative democracy

Favourable public opinion egged the military on and forced Chan's hand over the resignation demand. Singirok struck a popular chord when he accused the Government of corruption in spite of the fact that he himself had been a party to the mercenary agreement.



By **ALAN ROBSON**

THE RECENT civil and military unrest in Papua New Guinea has been a further indication, if one was needed after the Fiji coups of 1987, that the small Pacific states are not just political rafts wallowing along in the tow of the two regional metropolitan powers, Australia and New Zealand.

The crisis began when the Papua New Guinea Defence Force chief, Brigadier-General Jerry Singirok, said on talk-back radio on March 17 that his army wasn't going to link up with a force of mercenaries brought into the country by the Government of Sir Julius Chan. These mercenaries were recruited from the London-based Sandline company to force an end to a long-standing secessionist rebellion on the northern island of Bougainville which has closed an economically critical copper mine for nearly a decade.

Initially it was not clear if this was going to be a coup or not. A majority of the PNG Defence Force rank and file and many officers stood by the general after he was sacked following his broadcast, blocking the assumption of command by his replacement. Singirok accepted his dismissal but called for the resignation of the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister Chris Haiveta and the Defence Minister, Mathias Ijape.

Over the next few days some small-scale rioting broke out near the army barracks where crowds supporting the military had gathered. Defence force soldiers frustrated the efforts of police to stop demonstrations around Parliament but collaborated with them in keeping the protests under control.

When a vote in the House calling for the Prime Minister to resign was

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defeated, troops and demonstrators prevented members from leaving Parliament. The next day the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister stepped aside for the duration of an inquiry into the mercenary deal.

Favourable public opinion egged the military on and forced Chan's hand over the resignation demand. Singarok struck a popular chord when he accused the Government of corruption in spite of the fact that he himself had been a party to the mercenary agreement.

Government contracts:

Allegations of corruption surround government contracts, purchases and commercial agreements. Among the examples cited by Singarok are the recent purchase of a commercial building in Cairns by the PNG government at twice its estimated value, the suspiciously high costs of a major urban freeway system, and expensive upgrades to the Port Moresby municipal water system.

The Sandline contract itself turned out to have cost US\$36 million just to set up, with a total cost over one year, of US\$120 million. This massive commitment was taken outside IMF and World Bank structural adjustment guidelines currently in place in PNG.

Papua New Guinea is a vital and enthusiastic democracy. Yet many problems stem from the grafting of an Australian style constituency based electoral system onto a clan based social system. Electors are primarily motivated by support for wantok (or clan) representatives.

In the 1992 election 1655 candidates contested 109 seats. This resulted in half the winning candidates receiving less than 20 per cent of the vote in their electorate. Only five candidates scored 50 per cent or more. The result is that governments are elected by a small fraction of the total voting population in spite of high voter turn-outs. Electorate control on the activities of governments is therefore minimal.

Political parties are parliament-based alliances of convenience. Switching between opposition and government in search of cabinet posts and other rewards is common. Prime Ministers achieve office through their ability to play what Papua New Guineans call the 'numbers game'. As more than half the MPs lose their seats every election, short-term rewards are eagerly sought while they are available.

Ironically, the rapid turn-over in MPs infuses the system with a degree of stability by handing control of the numbers game to a few long term members. Since 1975 there have only been four Prime Ministers, who musical-chair in and out of office. Unsurprisingly, governments change more often on no confidence votes than they do by election; at the same time coherent parliamentary monitoring of government actions is weak.

Numbers game:

Numbers game politics means that political support has to be pork-barreled. The size of slush funds allocated to each MP has blown out to half a million kina (about US\$355,000) a year. The money is supposed to be used for electorate development but adherence to auditing procedures are minimal. It achieves, at best, a few haphazard development projects at great expense.

Administrative controls at the centre offer some redress. Papua New Guinea's Ombudsman Commission has a healthy record of going after delinquent political leaders. But control agencies which arouse the ire of MPs are poorly funded. In the general government departments, lack of expertise and fear of persecution impedes too close a scrutiny of ministerial conduct. Press reporting of corruption and other government abuses is open but definite information is hard to come by and there is not usually much follow up.

The problem of corruption is exacerbated by the nature of the economy. Papua New Guinea generates most of its income from frontier mining, oil and forestry projects. These generate a large cash flow which is hard to supervise.

Post-independence governments have found few boundaries to their activities. The dispersed population structure deprives civil institutions of a centre of gravity to back up administrative control. Elections generate enthusiastic popular participation but this does not translate into accountability once governments are in power.

In some respects, Papua New Guinea is a classical 'weak state'. Yet it is by no means clear that there is a countervailing 'strong' society capable of imposing order if the state fails to do so. There is a pervasive fear that if things go badly wrong, other parts of the country could end up like Bougainville where uneducated and rebellious youths now roam the wreckage of the giant mining project.

General Singarok's action garnered a measure of popular support because it caused a hiatus in the drift. In the longer term, the hard measures needed to deepen the economy and concentrate the population will have to be taken.

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