

# 1. Standoff in Papua New Guinea

## Students take issue over corruption

**Commentary:** A widespread student national boycott of classes and protests against the government of Peter O'Neill in Papua New Guinea during May and June 2016, supported by many civil society groups and activists. The epicentre of these protests was the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) in the nation's capital, Port Moresby. Demonstrations stirred by allegations of corruption against Prime Minister O'Neill grew in intensity until police opened fire on peaceful protesters on June 8. The protests were largely organised by the elected UPNG Student Representative Council, which entered into alliances with other tertiary student bodies, especially at the University of Technology in Lae, and civil society groups such as UPNG Focus and the Community Coalition Against Corruption. The essential argument of the students was that instead of thwarting investigations into allegations that \$30 million of fraudulent legal bills were paid to the legal firm Paraka Lawyers, O'Neill should resign from office and present himself to the police investigators for questioning as they had demanded. This article focuses on the student leadership's role and critiques the coverage of two major national press outlets, the *PNG Post-Courier* and *The National*, leading to the temporary shutdown of the university. It argues that there were issues of ethics and integrity at stake with both students and the news media.

**Keywords:** corruption, education, Papua New Guinea, press freedom, protest

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THE NEWS media in Papua New Guinea is one of the strongest and most independent in the Pacific region and, until recently, enjoyed a relatively free hand. However, this freedom was seriously put to the test early in 2016 when students, especially at the University of Papua New Guinea, protested against the current regime of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill, accusing him of official corruption (Pryke, June 8).

A student protest led to a standoff lasting almost two months in May and June that attracted regional and international attention as well as local media coverage. Although the protests were peaceful, they grew in intensity and eventually climaxed with the shooting of students by heavily armed police who opened fire

with tear gas and live rounds on June 8. This echoed an incident on so-called Black Tuesday in 2001 when three students were shot dead by police (Wakus, 2001). This article focuses on two national media outlets, *PNG Post-Courier* and *The National*, which were accused by the students of being biased against them and examines whether the upheaval was for the benefit of public interest.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is the largest country in the Pacific with more than 900 different indigenous languages and diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. It is a country divided by languages and regions, but united in a desire to see good governance and transparency in the corridors of power so that basic government services can trickle down to the bulk of the rural population. According to the World Bank, this section of people makes up 87 percent of Papua New Guinea's total population of 7.6 million (World Bank, n.d.). More significant is the number of students who come from rural subsistence backgrounds making inroads in tertiary education to support their families, tribes and communities in search of a better life. That life can come from the decisions made by leaders who are for the people; leaders who will fight to eradicate corruption and promote good governance and transparency.

On May 3, World Media Freedom Day, the Journalism Strand at UPNG, the oldest university journalism course in a South Pacific island state (founded at independence in 1975), was preparing to celebrate freedom of the press. However, this did not eventuate because the academic meeting space was taken up



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**Emily Matasororo: Student protests at the University of Papua New Guinea led to police shootings on the edge of the campus on 8 June 2016.**

by a student forum.

This was the beginning of an eight-week standoff by students who demanded that Prime Minister Peter O'Neill step down from office and face police questioning over allegations of corruption and fraud. However, the Prime Minister replied defiantly: 'I will not step down' (Kama, 2016a).

The Prime Minister challenged the issue of an arrest warrant against him and this case is now before the courts. Under PNG's Constitution, he can be removed by a vote of no confidence on the floor of Parliament and/or on criminal charges.

Among other events that occurred prior to the student forums was the controversial disbanding and dismantling of the National Fraud and Anti-Corruption Directorate, the special police office that wanted to investigate the Prime Minister over allegations that he had signed off on \$30 million in fraudulent payments to the legal firm Paraka Lawyers (PNG fraud squad still locked out, 2016). The directorate was later reinstated by court order.

Another major event was the adjournment of Parliament to November 2016 to avoid the possibility of a vote of no confidence against O'Neill.

These events led to students boycotting classes to show their concerns and frustrations over O'Neill's handling of national issues. The Supreme Court ordered Parliament to reconvene and high on the agenda was a vote of no confidence against the Prime Minister. The vote was eventually held on July 22 and easily fended off by the Prime Minister, 85 votes to 21 (ABC News, 2016).

Earlier in the standoff, students burned copies of both of PNG's two daily newspapers, *PNG Post-Courier* and *The National*, that were being sold in front of the campus gates (UPNG students burn 800 newspapers, 2016). They did this to show their frustration at how they perceived the media to be taking sides and promoting the government's agenda.

The burning was an indication they disliked the newspapers' coverage of events leading up to the protest. Why should the elected Student Representative Council (SRC) go as far as preferring certain media outlets over others? The *PNG Post-Courier*, *The National* daily newspapers and a television station, EM TV, were banned by the students from covering their activities on campus. UPNG is a public and state-run institution and is a public space open to everyone, including the media. For students, the coverage raised issues of credibility, ethics and integrity of the freedom of the press in PNG:

We saw the newspapers and saw that the reports were very shallow and biased.

They are not actual reports of what we students are portraying at the university. That's why to show our frustration, we went out to the bus stop and burnt those papers.

What we displayed in the morning shows that we have no trust in the

media,” the student leader said. (Gware, 2016)

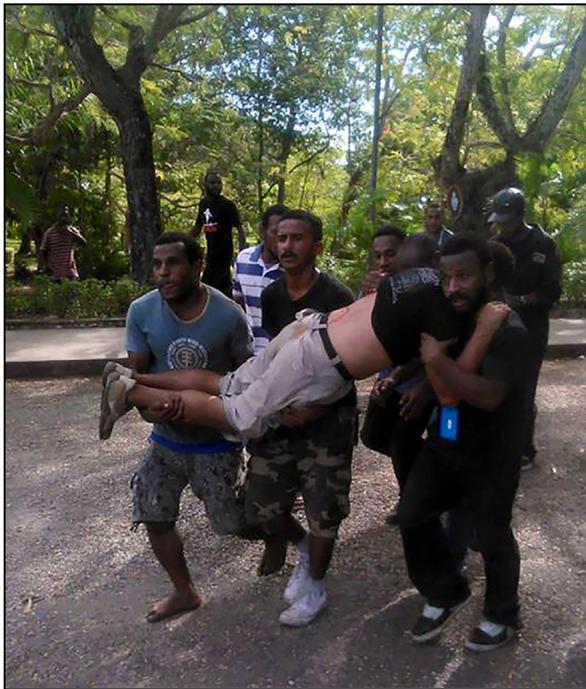
While I acknowledge and appreciate the tireless efforts of the media to cover the student protest, for me this was a very strong statement that needed to be investigated. It needed to be done by all stakeholders concerned to promote fair and just reporting and the essence of good ethics and good journalism. The stakeholders included, but were not limited to, the publisher and the management of the newspapers, the Media Council of PNG, Transparency International, Ombudsman Commission and the institutional educators of journalism—the University of Papua New Guinea and the Catholic-run Divine Word University in Madang.

For the publishers, credibility is questioned, for the Media Council it is a threat against the profession and for the educators there is the question: Where are we going wrong in teaching ethics and are we giving enough prominence that this issue deserves?

These are questions that needed to be answered in order to promote a robust and conducive environment in which journalists could operate.

On June 8 the protest took an ugly turn. Several students were injured, some seriously, when police opened fire on student protesters when they tried to detain SRC president Kenneth Rapa. Social media ran hot with images and comments (Tiozek, 2016).

Some of what appeared on social media was emotional. Information was distorted with some news stations reporting casualties. An Australian-based media outlet incorrectly reported four deaths and isolated reports on radio, television and social media that day created a new level of fear, confusion and anxiety among residents (Davidson, 2016). On that day, I saw how powerful the media was and how, when its power is misused, tragedy can follow (Robie, 2016).



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**Students carry a wounded colleague to safety, and then to hospital, after the police shootings at the University of Papua New Guinea on June 8.**

Among all the confusion, radio broadcaster PNGFM's Legend FM acted, in my view, responsibly to curtail any more confusion and disorder. It broadcast Port Moresby governor, Powes Parkop, a former UPNG politics lecturer, telling residents to remain calm and saying that the city's services were not affected when in fact the city came to a standstill. The governor also said that he could not confirm any casualties at that time of broadcast. Immediately after his address, lines were opened to the public.

One resident called to say he witnessed injured students being rushed to the hospital with the possibility of some deaths. Before he could elaborate, the announcer swiftly put him off air. Would that be suppression of information or responsible journalism? This station had a strategy that day to control what it could broadcast and it did to the benefit of the common good of the people even though there were small pockets of disturbances in the city.

Almost every day after that, student activities seemed to attract news coverage. By then many students had vacated the campus and for many of them, the only way to get updates was from the media. In this regard, the media played an important role in keeping the students updated about events and decisions taken by the university management (Hayward-Jones, 2016).

The standoff continued with staff locked out of campus from time to time. In a meeting held away from the main academic space, the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Albert Mellam, addressed the staff and told them the management had stopped talking to the media, accusing it of misreporting and aggravating the situation.

The whole protest turned sour when students stepped out of line on June 23 and damaged state property worth millions of kina. The protest came to an end as the university's highest governing body announced the termination of the 2016 academic year, disbanded the SRC and barred its elected leaders from further studies (Kinjap, 2016).

PNG Media Council president Alex Rheoney, who is also editor-in-chief of the *PNG Post-Courier*, described it as a wakeup call for the industry and said: 'We need to pull our socks up.' His comments applied to every person in the industry including the educators. Speaking at the World Journalism Education Congress (WJEC) conference in Auckland in July 2016, he addressed the 'pitfalls' in the reportage of the shootings (Hutt, 2016).

Rheoney also touched on challenges facing journalism educators in Papua New Guinea, namely the flow-on effects from a 'drastic' decline in the quality of high school graduates over the past 20 years in areas such as literacy. (Rheoney, quoted in Hutt, 2016)

Apart from the news, I strongly believe that it was the media coverage of the protest that provoked debate and discussions about the issues of governance

and corruption. It provided a foretaste of what to expect in 2017 when PNG is due to have a general election. I can only hope that it is through this experience that Papua New Guineans will see wisdom prevail in the leaders they vote into power.

In remembrance of this event, the Journalism Strand at UPNG is going to unveil a wall to display 'untold stories' and create a photo montage for 'unseen images' to serve as a reminder of the student protest and something for future students to ponder (UPNG students speak out, 2016). Although UPNG students led these protests, they were also powered and supported by students at other campuses across the nation, especially the University of Technology at Lae (Unitech). The inquiry into the police shooting has been delayed and possibly shelved. The SRC students who brought a court action against UPNG, including Kenneth Rapa, were able to continue studies when the Supreme Court upheld the student injunction appeal. The entire saga raised serious dilemmas over ethics and integrity on the part of students, the mainstream news media, and the university administration. Although, unlike in previous standoffs, such as during the *Uni Tavour* coverage of the Sandline mercenary crisis<sup>1</sup> in 1996 (Robie, 2004, p. 76), and the *Uni Tavour* student journalists who gave evidence to a Commission of Inquiry into the shootings in 2001 (Wakus), this was a lesson for journalism education with Pacific ramifications.

### Note

1. The Sandline mercenary affair, named after the British-based private military contractor Sandline International, led to the ousting of the Sir Julius Chan government and almost sparked civil war in Papua New Guinea in 1996. Military commander Jerry Singirok led a rebellion by the PNG Defence Force to arrest mercenaries hired by the Chan government in a bid to crush a revolt by the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA). See O'Callaghan, M-L. (1999). *Enemies within: Papua New Guinea, Australia, and the Sandline crisis: The inside story*. Sydney: Doubleday.

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