projects, Sir Michael left Enga earlier than expected. (One PNG kina [k1] equals approximately US$0.37.) The Joint District Planning and Budget Priorities Committee was to coordinate the spending, which caused some controversy. Sir Michael was offended by comments made by Enga Governor Peter Ipatas, who questioned the capabilities of the committee to account for millions of kina given to them. Ipatas questioned why the funds were going to committees instead of going to the established provincial government system (Post Courier, 2 March 2009).

The government also faced a number of challenges as it clung tightly to power in its endeavor to set a new record of successfully completing a second term. On 28 July 2009, the Opposition brought a no-confidence motion against the prime minister. The leader of Government Business and Minister for National Planning Paul Tiensten responded with a motion to adjourn Parliament until 10 November, even though there was a full quorum. All hell broke loose when the Speaker of Parliament, Jeffery Nape, ruled in favor of the adjournment motion, thus circumventing a vote of no confidence. This, as expected, drew the ire of the Opposition and nationwide condemnation of the integrity of the Speaker and the political process. Some observers commented that the government has used the office of the Speaker to protect the prime minister when a motion of no confidence was presented. Long-time political analyst Dr Ray Anere argued that the adjournment might prevent Parliament from meeting the constitutional requirement to sit for sixty-three days and would deny members of Parliament the free-

Papua New Guinea

The government of Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare is pulling through in spite of the scandals that plagued the government in 2008 and is likely to successfully complete its full second term (2007–2012) in Parliament, provided that there is no major shift in allegiance and a vote of no confidence does not dissolve the government in the next two years. Prime Minister Somare announced during the country’s thirty-fourth independence anniversary that he will not step down as prime minister until Papua New Guinea gets back on the right track (Post Courier, 17 Sept 2009). That was the latest pledge from Sir Michael, who is serving as the longest-running member of Parliament (MP) ever in the Commonwealth group of nations.

In March 2009, the National Executive Council (NEC) had its first meeting of the year in Enga Province. It was one of the biggest political events ever held in the province. To welcome the prime minister and the NEC, the people of Enga had almost one hundred pigs, thirty cassowaries, and twenty goats on the menu. It was also a courtesy on the part of the Enga people to celebrate Sir Michael’s forty years in politics. However, after delivering more than k142 million for...
The opposition threatened to refer Prime Minister Somare, Speaker Nape, and Tiensten to the Ombudsman Commission for a possible breach of the constitution for their part in adjourning the Parliament. The Opposition also echoed the claim that Parliament would not reach its full nine weeks or sixty-three days a year (Post Courier, 13 Oct 2009).

On 29 July, in a move that surprised many, eleven members of Parliament from the ruling National Alliance Party joined the Opposition. These members were PNG Country Party Leader Jamie Maxtone-Graham (Anglimp South Wahgi), Thompson Harokaqveh (Goroka), Peter Ipatas (Enga Province), Samson Kuli (Usino Bundi), Sai Sailon (Kainantu), Jim Nomane (Chuave), Boka Kondra (North Fly), Bob Danaya (Western Province), Jack Cameron (Kiriwina-Goodenough), John Boito (Obura-Wanenara), and Peter Iwei (Telefomin). They described the Somare regime as evil, corrupt, and dictatorial. The members reported that when they had spoken of moving to the Opposition they had been threatened with cuts to their annual discretionary funds or special project funds (Post Courier, 29 July 2009).

After thirty-five years of struggle, by 2012 Papua New Guinea will have two new provinces: Hela and Jiwaka. On 11 March 2009, Parliament gave unanimous support for a law allowing for the creation of the provincial headquarters and administration of the new provinces. Papua New Guinea will then have a total of twenty-two provinces. The vote was 86 to 0, far above the absolute majority vote of 73 (Post Courier, 12 March 2009).

The Somare government continued to fare exceptionally well in the face of tremendous odds and in spite of the scandals that dominated the previous year. In 2008, issues such as the clandestine flight of Julian Moti to Solomon Islands on a PNG Defence Force aircraft; the US$40 million from the 2.1 percent of the sale of log exports held in a bank account in Singapore by a government minister; the US$30 million “Taiwan dollar diplomacy scandal”; Prime Minister Somare’s shareholding in the company Pacific Registry of Ship Ltd “in trust for the Independent State of PNG”; and the prime minister’s court actions to stop the Ombudsman Commission and Public Prosecutor from referring him on allegations that he had not completed or provided annual returns since 1992 were all big news (see Kanta 2009). However, all these scandals, with the exception of the Moti Affair, were never fully investigated. Prime Minister Sir Michael and others were implicated for allegedly authorizing the covert flight of Moti out of the country but were not prosecuted. These scandals remain a dark spot in the record of the Somare government since it took office.

Perhaps the most dominant issue of this year was the liquefied natural gas (LNG) project. The government held and continues to hold many positive expectations that the K30 billion LNG project will drastically change the economic face and stature of the country. The landowners and the State stand to reap a considerable share of the benefits. The PNG government
and LNG project developer Exxon-Mobil spent a few months in early 2009 on the arduous task of negotiating the benefit-sharing agreement with the landowner groups. The government was successful in negotiating an agreement, but many landowners were caught unprepared and still lack a full understanding about how the project will affect them.

A forum on the benefit-sharing agreement involving landowner groups and government representatives was held at Kokopo in the East New Britain Province. To ensure that the LNG project remained on schedule, the government wanted an umbrella agreement, even though some landowners were against holding the forum at that time because no independent cost and benefit analysis was carried out (The National, 16 April 2009).

Aggrieved landowners took out a court injunction to prevent the forum—which they called a “development forum”—from being held in Kokopo. They argued that the State, through the Department of Petroleum and Energy and the developers, did not comply with the Oil and Gas Act. That act requires that a benefit-sharing agreement can only be agreed to in a “development forum,” and that a “development forum” can only be held or convened after a full-scale social mapping and landowner identification is carried out (Post Courier, 28 April 2009). The landowners finally agreed to convene the forum when the government explained that the meeting in Kokopo was not a “development forum” but was simply intended to promote cooperation and understanding of the different roles the stakeholders would play. Therefore, any agreement reached by the State, developers, or landowners in that forum would not be binding.

Talks at the benefit-sharing agreement forum reached a stalemate when landowners and the Southern Highlands Provincial Government, led by MP Anderson Agiru, insisted that they be given 10 percent equity in the LNG project, when the State offered them 2 percent as the legally prescribed ceiling. The landowners threatened that they would not proceed with any agreements until their demands were considered. The State responded with an offer of 6.88 percent, but that still did not satisfy the landowners. The State eventually was compelled to settle at 8 percent. The landowners have therefore struck a landmark multibillion-dollar agreement, setting the benchmark for companies looking to share the proceeds of future projects with affected landowners. The landowners are expected to receive more than K20 billion in the thirty-year life of the project (Murphy 2009).

Even though the LNG project is not yet fully into its construction phase, the hype has already raised high expectations in the capital city, Port Moresby. A domino effect can be seen in numerous construction projects, expansion and competition between business houses, and new real estate developments taking place. Consequently, accommodation facilities such as rented apartments in some of the affluent locations of the city have sold out, and rental costs have reached extraordinarily high levels.

For most ordinary citizens, the looming LNG project may be just the opportunity they have been waiting for. It is anticipated that they will also
benefit, directly and indirectly, from the project. Local business ventures expect rapid expansion to supply the increased demand from the LNG workers and project developers. Perhaps most significant is that the increased employment opportunities will give workers leverage to negotiate better salaries. The government and the private sector are already seeing an exodus of highly educated and experienced public servants and technically skilled workers who are taking up jobs on the LNG project for salaries double, triple, and even quadruple what they were earning before.

However, there are also concerns that Papua New Guinea might not actually have the capacity to provide the required labor for the project. It was revealed by the Department of Labour and Industrial Relations that more than 7,500 local employees will be needed for the multibillion-kina LNG project, and the country cannot provide this labor force, let alone the 500 welders that the developers require. As the country lacks enough highly skilled or trained people to fill the huge number of job openings, Papua New Guinea now faces a possible influx of foreign workers taking those jobs while locals become mere spectators (Post Courier, 5 Nov 2009).

Nevertheless, the Somare government has generally performed extremely well in securing major partners and participating interests in the LNG project. These include ExxonMobil (through various affiliates, including Esso Highlands Ltd as operator) at 41.5 percent, Oil Search 34 percent, Santos 17.7 percent, Nippon Oil 5.4 percent, Mineral Resources Development Company 1.2 percent, and Petromin PNG Holdings Ltd 0.2 percent (Post Courier, 7 Dec 2009).

Meanwhile, China, the world’s second-biggest energy user, has agreed to buy liquefied natural gas from ExxonMobil Corporation’s US$10 billion venture in Papua New Guinea. Unipec Asia Co Ltd, a subsidiary of China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation (Sinopec, a state-owned oil company) signed an agreement to buy two million metric tonnes of liquefied natural gas a year under a multiyear contract—about 32 percent of the project’s proposed output (The National, 28 April 2009). Prime Minister Somare said that the agreement was a boost for PNG–China bilateral relations (The National, 11 May 2009).

In December, Somare announced that the cabinet had approved another LNG project agreement led by Inter Oil. He also announced that the cabinet has also endorsed the appointment of the state company Petromin as equity shareholder in the project. Petromin is the 22.5 percent equity holder on behalf of the PNG government, with 20.5 percent of revenue to go to Petromin and 2.0 percent to the project agreement landowners. It is a significant milestone for Papua New Guinea to have two LNG projects that will add value to the development of the country and its people (Sunday Chronicle, 13 Dec 2009).

In an economic update for the East Asia and Pacific region, the World Bank said that Papua New Guinea’s multibillion-kina LNG project holds major potential in terms of revenues and economic growth, both during the construction stage (2010–2013) and especially after production starts.
in 2014. The report adds that a key challenge will be translating the strong macroeconomic performance and revenues from the extractive industry into improvements in living standards. The report also says that it is time to start thinking about setting up more robust institutional structures and mechanisms to save and use the windfalls from liquefied natural gas and other commodities in the future (World Bank 2009).

The government was heavily criticized by the Opposition and members of the public for the purchase of a new Falcon ultra-long range executive jet from the United States for K120 million. The Opposition described the purchase as a complete waste of public funds, particularly when the majority of grassroots people are struggling day by day to make ends meet. The government responded that the jet would be put on hire for government use by Air Niugini (Post Courier, 8 April 2009).

In May, an anti-Asian protest in Port Moresby organized by a non-governmental organization led to a chain-reaction attack on Asian businesses in the provincial towns of Lae, Madang, and Goroka. On 18 May, opportunists attempted to loot several Asian-owned shops in the provinces of Western Highlands, Chimbu, and Eastern Highlands, but quick action from police prevented what could have been a calamitous situation in these provinces. The looters’ actions were condemned by a host of politicians and civil society leaders including Prime Minister Somare, Foreign Affairs Minister Sam Abal, Opposition leader Sir Mekere Morauta, and PNG Trade Union Congress General Secretary John Paska. The Chinese Embassy in Port Moresby also expressed grave concern for the safety of its nationals and their businesses (The National, 19 May 2009).

Ousted Madang Governor Sir Arnold Amet called on the government and businesses to be serious about the localization of jobs, stop the continued employment of noncitizens for jobs that could be done by nationals, and ensure that skills transfer from noncitizens to locals actually occurs and is not just something on paper. Eastern Highlands Province Governor Malcolm Kela Smith petitioned the government in Parliament to remove Asian business people in the country, claiming that they have exploited locals. He claimed that Asian businesses were oppressing local employees and depriving them of their rights. Governor Smith further claimed that the problems were not the Asians themselves but the responsible government departments and leaders who had allowed foreigners to enter the country (Post Courier, 21 May 2009).

Soon after the anti-Asian riot, a Parliamentary Bipartisan Committee was set up to investigate the causes of the riot. During its deliberations the committee was told by immigration officers that there were up to 15,000 foreigners of Asian origin living illegally in Papua New Guinea (Post Courier, 5 Nov 2009). A member of the committee, MP Philip Kikala, commented that he had been informed by Philippines Ambassador Madam Shirley Ho-Vicario at a luncheon that of the 19,000 Filipinos working in the country, 16,000 were working illegally (Post Courier, 20 Nov 2009). The comment was greeted by wrath on
the part of the Filipino community in Papua New Guinea, who argued that it was not a factual reflection of the situation.

In November, the Parliament disbanded the bipartisan committee established to look into the anti-Asian riots, arguing that the panel had become a “tool to sabotage” the economic bilateral relations between the Philippines and Papua New Guinea. The Parliament caucus deemed that MP Jamie Maxtone-Graham was no longer fit to chair the panel (The National, 16 Nov 2009). Three other committee members submitted their resignations in protest over the decision.

There were also fears that the anti-Asian riots could affect the LNG project. Trade Union President Michael Malabag warned the public not to take part in riots after an anonymous e-mail was widely circulated giving the deadline of 31 December for all Asian businesses to pack up and leave the country. Malabag said that the Asian markets would play a major role in the LNG export and that a riot would reflect badly on the country (Post Courier, 31 Dec 2009).

On the climate change front, the cabinet made a decision in July to suspend Theo Yasause, the executive director of the Office of Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability (occes), pending a full-scale investigation into the operations of the office (The National, 1 July 2009). Yasause was embroiled in many controversies, such as signing sample carbon-trade certificates without having any policy or legislative framework in place. The office had been set up in 2008 as a government initiative to have an institution to take the lead on carbon trading and climate-change issues affecting the country. Weeks before the December 2009 Copenhagen meeting on climate change, the government officially announced the abolition of the Office of Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability, and K3.2 million was approved to be paid out to seventy former oces staff who would have to find new employment. The government also reportedly spent K3 million for the total cost of Papua New Guinea’s thirty-member delegation to Copenhagen (Post Courier, 11 Dec 2009). The functions of the oces are now to be handled by the Department of Environment and Conservation under Secretary Wari Iamo.

It was also reported in September that National Alliance Party Vice President James Kond received K200,000 from Australian company Carbon Planet for his part in liaising with and advising the PNG Government. After Yasause’s suspension and eventual termination, oces Acting Director Wari Iamo announced that carbon-trading agreements could not be legally signed until the government has put in place an appropriate policy and legal framework (The National, 28 Sept 2010).

The National Court on 14 August ruled that the Kandep sitting member, National Alliance Party candidate Don Polye, had not been duly elected and that his 2007 election was void. The court found that the total number of votes subject to illegal practices exceeded the winning margin. There were incidences of hijacking of ballot boxes, stuffing ballot boxes, officials marking ballots contrary to the wishes
of the voter, complete destruction of ballot boxes, electoral officials mistakenly sending ballot boxes to incorrect locations, and manipulation of the counting of ballot papers (Butler and Wheen 2009). Polye has been a sitting member since 2002, was the deputy prime minister from 2002–2007, and most recently served as minister for transport, civil aviation, and works.

When Polye opted not to appeal the decision of the court to prove to his family and electorate that he had been legitimately elected and had won by popular choice, a by-election took place. It was widely reported that the Kandep open electorate by-election was absolute chaos and a disaster. The security situation deteriorated to the extent that the returning officer for the by-election abandoned three of the polling areas. Counting was also moved to Goroka in the Eastern Highlands Province to be completed due to the security situation in the Kandep electorate in Enga Province. When the results of the counting were declared, Polye reclaimed his seat by a landslide victory of primary votes. Electoral Commissioner Andrew Trawen described the Kandep electorate as one of the most difficult and challenging in Papua New Guinea when he returned the writs of the election to Governor-General Sir Paulias Matane. The by-election was marred by loss of lives due to a series of violent clashes between supporters of different candidates and police, changes of counting venues, and complaints over ballot box distribution (The National, 18 Dec 2009).

While campaigning for the National Alliance candidate Polye, Prime Minister Somare announced that he will bow out of politics in 2012 (The National, 6 Nov 2010). Sir Michael has led the National Alliance Party since its inception and plans to hand over the reins to a successor in 2012. However, there is still much uncertainty as to the leadership of the party after he retires. Sir Michael has not announced or provided a short list of potential successors, and there have ostensibly been tussles for the leadership among regional branch leaders of the party. Some have also speculated that Sir Michael’s son, MP Arthur Somare, would most likely succeed his father. Others have predicted the fall of the National Alliance Party in the coming 2012 national elections if Sir Michael relinquishes the leadership role.

In early September, the country experienced one of its worst recorded catastrophes with the sudden outbreak of cholera in Morobe Province. The cholera outbreak, which was first detected in the remote district of Wasu, quickly spread to the main township of Lae and to parts of the Highlands including Madang and East Sepik provinces. The government declared a public health emergency and committed more than US$4 million to combat the disease, but none of the funds were released in time, leaving local health authorities and nongovernmental organizations struggling to cope. Health workers have blamed the government’s inaction as a contributing factor to the spread of cholera. The most affected communities were squatter settlements, where poor sanitation practices and an acute lack of access to potable water fueled the spread of the disease. Of the 1,356 cases recorded from July to December
2009, the World Health Organization reported that 608 have occurred in the provinces of Madang, 462 in Morobe, 281 in East Sepik, and 5 in the Eastern Highlands, with at least 35 confirmed deaths (IRIN 2009).

Papua New Guinea conferred the title of the “grand chief” in October on former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke. Hawke received the highest honor as a non-Papua New Guinean when he was invested with the insignia of the Grand Companion of the Order of Logohu. Hawke received his award during the Independence Anniversary Awards from the Governor-General Sir Paulias Matane at the Government House. Hawke was recognized for service to Papua New Guinea prior to and since Independence through the involvement in the establishment of the trade union movement and early national wage development (The National, 22 Oct 2009).

On 26 October, the National Executive Council approved three nominated seats for women in Parliament. A total of ninety-five women had submitted expressions of interest (The National, 20 Jan 2010). In July 2009, the three nominees for the special measures for women to be considered for appointment to Parliament were named: Enny Moaitz, Priscilla Kare, and Mary Toliman. However, there was a split among women leaders on the final nominees. National Council of Women (NCW) President Scholar Kakas argued that the prime minister should reconsider the nominees and have a NCW representative among them.

Meanwhile, Chairman of the PNG Millennium Good Governance Organization Peter Garry criticized the government’s appointment of three women representatives as a bad precedent. He argued that he was not against women entering Parliament, but that the House itself was for leaders who had been mandated by the people. If women were to be appointed to Parliament, then youth and churches should have representation in Parliament as well (The National, 18 March 2009).

A number of leaders from the Highlands, namely Branch President of Simbu Women in Politics Dere Cecilia Kimagl and community leader Michael Wak, separately said that the move to nominate women was not in the best interest of the nation as these women were trying to get a “free ride” into Parliament, and suggested that the move actually treats women in Papua New Guinea cheaply. Several women from the Highlands expressed disappointment, as there were no women from the Highlands nominated (The National, 16 July 2009). A group of concerned women in Port Moresby supported the option put forward by the Opposition calling on Parliament to reserve twenty elected seats for women only to contest in the provinces. Their representative, Susan Nengen, said that they are not seeking free access into Parliament but that they do want women to run for public office (The National, 17 March 2009).

When Parliament resumed, the government on 11 November failed to produce the numbers required to pass the historic motion to have women representatives in Parliament. The Opposition, led by Sir Mekere Morauta, argued against the motion and voted against it. The motion
required a two-thirds majority of seventy-three votes in order to vote in the first women nominees (The National, 3 Nov 2009). Minister for Community Development Dame Carol Kidu and Prime Minister Somare, who have been vocal on the bill and have given their backing throughout the entire process, vowed to continue pushing to see women representatives in Parliament.

On 2 November, Prime Minister Somare received from Justice Maurice Sheehan the final report of the Commission of Inquiry, which had looked into financial mismanagement and corruption at the Department of Finance. A number of prominent government officials and members of Parliament were implicated in the report. Sir Michael mentioned that he would study the 800-page report and seek the endorsement of the cabinet on certain measures to enable implementation of the report’s recommendations (Business Times 2009). Observers and the public are now waiting to see what the government will do and hope that this report will not be shelved to collect dust like previous ones.

According to the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, which annually ranks countries by “the degree to which corruption is perceived to exist among public officials and politicians,” Papua New Guinea has dropped three places, from 151 in 2008 to 154 in 2009 (Transparency International 2009). This implies that the perception of corruption in Papua New Guinea has worsened, a worrying trend that could cast a lot of doubt on the government’s capability to manage the substantial income from the LNG project.

On 18 November, the government launched its grand forty-year plan, titled PNG Vision 2050, which projects that the country will become richer, safer, and healthier over the next four decades. Under the plan, it is expected that Papua New Guinea’s real gross domestic product will grow from around K12 billion in 2010 to a whopping K200 billion by 2050, with the country’s LNG project coming on stream and the implementation of land reforms. The gross domestic product per capita should have increased from around K2,000 to K13,000 in forty years. It is estimated that this is only the base case, meaning that the situation could be even better if other projects come on, and if the various sectors perform effectively under the plan (The National, 19 Nov 2010).

Prime Minister Somare said that Vision 2050 is a gift from the government to the people. Sir Michael added that it is the most significant instrument since the adoption of the PNG Constitution and the Eight-Point Plan in 1975 toward the improvement of Papua New Guinea’s performance as a nation. PNG Vision 2050 maps out the future directions the country should take, reflecting the hopes and aspirations of the people (The National, 19 Nov 2010). The launch of the plan was witnessed by thousands of people in the nation’s capital at the Sir John Guise Stadium.

In May, the Special Parliamentary Committee on the Ombudsman Commission proposed a constitutional amendment, which was introduced in a private member’s bill by Esa’ala MP Moses Maladina. The amendment would remove the power of the Ombudsman Commission to
issue directives preventing payments from public funds to officeholders it believes are using those funds improperly. The commission, which has previously used the provision to stop members of Parliament from using public money for their own personal or political activities, expressed fears that the proposed constitutional amendment would greatly hamper its ability to enforce the Leadership Code and make it difficult to hold leaders accountable. Chief Ombudsman Chronox Manek raised concerns about both the content of the new amendment and the processes used to develop the proposals (Post Courier, 11 May 2009).

In the evening of 11 December, when returning home after a function, Manek survived an assassination attempt. A car abruptly pulled up behind him as he was about to enter his driveway and a gunman fired several shots, which missed the chief ombudsman’s vital organs but severely injured him (Post Courier, 14 Dec 2009). The attempt on his life was condemned by a wide spectrum of society, terming the attack as the first of its kind in PNG history. Most people alleged that the attempt was made because of Manek’s commitment to investigating and referring some prominent leaders for their corrupt activities. The police vowed to investigate and bring to justice all those responsible for the assassination attempt.

In a joint news conference in Canberra in April, Prime Minister Somare met with Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and discussed historical problems with aid delivery. During the conference Rudd mentioned that Australian aid money to Papua New Guinea had been misspent on consultants rather than used to support teachers and health services. He said that the effectiveness of aid in Papua New Guinea must be tied to the United Nations–mandated Millennium Development Goals, so that outcomes from foreign aid spending can be measured (The National, 29 April 2009). In an article in The Australian, Professor Helen Hughes of the Centre for Independent Studies corroborated Rudd’s assertion, stating that aid money is being wasted on egregiously high salaries of aid-funded advisers, and that capacity building has failed to get Pacific Islands to grow (Hughes 2010). Meanwhile, PNG Trade Union Congress General Secretary John Paska argued that all aid to Papua New Guinea must continue to remain outside the control of the PNG government, as there is currently no safety net in place to deter politicians from abusing funds.

Poverty is still a significant and growing problem despite huge development projects such as that for liquefied natural gas. Papua New Guinea has been considered as being off track in its progress toward halving poverty (AusAID 2008). According to the Pacific Economic Survey (AusAID 2009), Papua New Guinea as one of the most populous Pacific Island nations is unlikely to meet any of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, including the targets of halving poverty, achieving universal primary education, reducing child and maternal mortality by two-thirds, or improving access to safe water and sanitation.

There are high expectations for
the LNG project, and the country’s economy is projected to transform significantly when the project comes into full swing. However, there is still much uncertainty in terms of the country’s preparedness and capacity to deal with the demands of the project in providing the local expertise and labor, as well as accommodations, catering, and social services for the huge number of workers, both local and foreign. Much remains to be seen in terms of how the country will manage the avalanche of cash and people. With this opportunity at the country’s doorstep, the onus is on the government to ensure that the people can meaningfully benefit from the LNG project. It is also timely for the government to start considering and working on institutional structures and mechanisms such as a Sovereign Wealth Fund to save the windfall from the project for future generations.

More so, the LNG project will give Papua New Guinea the capacity to take another look at its efforts in meeting the Millennium Development Goals. In the next few years, if the government prioritizes its national obligations in the right direction, it will be able to significantly reduce poverty, achieve universal primary education, reduce child and maternal mortality, and improve access to safe water and sanitation for its populace.

SOLOMON KANTHA

The views expressed in this review are those of the author and do not represent those of his employer, the International Organization for Migration.

References


Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands survived 2009 reasonably peacefully, with several challenges and achievements. As in 2008, citizens continued to call for decisive and visionary leadership throughout the year. Major issues that warrant some coverage in this review include the Fee Free Education policy; the continuation and conclusion of former Solomon Islands Attorney General Julian Moti’s child sex case; 2009 entitlements for members of Parliament; workers’ strikes (or their intentions for industrial action); by-elections; ministerial reshuffles and election of the new governor-general; the ongoing tug-of-war on the Political Parties Integrity Bill; double standards used by the Solomon Islands government in regional and international politics; lawlessness; and central-provincial government collaborations. By the end of 2009, the focus was once again on national elections scheduled to take place around August 2010.

The Coalition for National Unity and Rural Advancement (CNURA) government in late 2008 adopted the Fee Free Education policy. This was launched and implemented in 2009 despite a number of cautions. For instance, the premier of Choisuel province, Jackson Kiloe, warned that the policy could promote more dependency on aid, as donors were requested to foot the bill (STO, 2 Jan 2009). The implementation of this policy as a priority was reflected in the cabinet’s approval of the largest sector budget in 2009, with a 24 percent increase in the recurrent budget and 12 percent decrease in the development budget compared to 2008 (MEHRD 2009, 3). New Zealand Aid (NZAid) and the Republic of China (ROC) provided additional funds to implement the policy. By June 2009, the prime minister acknowledged that the policy had problems, and again in September he admitted that the Fee Free Education policy was challenging, although it relieved the burden on parents and guardians. The Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD) revealed that a major drawback of the policy was that it led to the misunderstanding that parents were no longer required to contribute toward school expenses (MEHRD 2009, 44). Moreover, the sustainability of funds for this bold move by government has yet to be determined, although $66 million was allocated for it in 2010 (STO, 18 Jan 2009). ($1 equals approximately US$8.33.)

The Julian Moti case continued to be featured in political commentaries throughout 2009. With the toppling of the Grand Coalition for Change (GCC) government, the installation of CNURA government, and Moti’s eventual deportation to face child sex charges in Australia, the issue has not