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PAPUA NEW GUINEA

After the 2017 general elections dominated the headlines, the major event to capture the spotlight in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 2018 was the country's hosting of the quadrennial summit of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Indeed, the APEC meetings garnered large amounts of attention within Papua New Guinea while also attracting international scrutiny into the country's role as host as well as conditions across the country generally. The APEC meetings led to a fresh look into Papua New

Guinea by foreign media outlets and acted as a microcosm of international relationships between China and other powers. To a certain degree, Chinese relations with Pacific Island states were on display, but events showing tensions between China and the United States became the main talking points as they were scrutinized by analysts and journalists from across the globe. While the critically important APEC summit and related events raised many issues, many other significant happenings highlighted internal challenges to governance, including emergency responses to natural disasters in the form of earthquake relief and resettlement of victims of volcanic activity, continuing strife in the wake of the 2017 elections, accusations of corruption at various levels, upticks in various diseases, devolution of powers to provinces via an as-yet-undefined form of special autonomy, preparation for the referendum on Bougainville, land and development projects, and the long-standing saga of those seeking asylum in Australia but waylaid on Manus Island for the sixth year.

Among the many challenges to face the people and government of Papua New Guinea, perhaps none had a broader reach than the handful of natural disasters that affected citizens from almost all regions in one form or another. The largest and most destructive of these was the magnitude 7.5 earthquake that struck in February and wrought devastation across the interior. The Highlands region was especially hard hit, as subsequent landslides buried homes and villages, cut off access roads, and damaged airstrips in many communities already considered isolated. Equally dangerous

to the initial quake were the numerous aftershocks that continued to shake the mountainous regions for at least a month. The destructive effects of the tremors were not limited to just the areas that felt them; sedimentation due to landslides muddied drinking water and damaged or killed food sources in downstream communities, especially those in Gulf Province. Census information for the area is hard to collect, making an exact death toll difficult to extrapolate, but most estimates show a loss of life of at least 180 individuals. Offers of aid and relief from international sources came quickly, with Australia and New Zealand leading the charge. In a show of solidarity, young people in Indonesia's colonial provinces in West New Guinea took up a collection, but the organizers were promptly arrested. The logistics of distributing aid relief across the breadth of destruction—which spanned the Hela, Southern Highlands, Western, Enga, and West Sepik provinces—would present a challenge to any nation, but by August, Emergency Controller Bill Hamblin told Radio New Zealand's Johnny Blades in an interview that efforts had started to transition from relief to recovery (RNZ 2018f).

Also posing a challenge to those in disaster response positions were volcanic eruptions on the islands of Kadovar and Manam, both situated on the northern coast. Eruptions on both islands necessitated large-scale evacuations and brought promises from the government for permanent resettlement of residents. Such events on Manam are not new, with a large portion of the population having been resettled after several eruptions in the

past, including a 2004 event that led to the displacement of more than nine thousand people. In the aftermath of the 2018 eruption, delayed responses from the government appear to have created an atmosphere of mistrust as residents waited for assistance. Local chief Paul Maburau told reporters that “it’s all talk and no action,” citing that the government had set aside US\$922,000 for the resettlement of the islanders but that “no one seems to know where the money has gone” (RNZ 2018e).

Although the general elections were completed in 2017, controversy regarding their final outcomes continued in 2018. The Australian National University's Nicole Haley highlighted widespread occurrences of corruption, including fraud, violence, restriction of female voters, shortcomings of the electoral rolls, theft, and destruction of ballot boxes, leading her to describe the final outcome as “hijacked.” While concern over such issues is common during PNG elections, Haley remarked that the 2017 case was “qualitatively different to previous elections” (Chandler 2018).

Disputes over the final outcome of the election in Southern Highlands Province continued as tensions mounted over the legitimacy of the governorship of William Powi. The seat had been hotly contested even after the election's conclusion, and it was the final parliamentary seat declared, the announcement coming after the legislative body had already started sessions. While the declaration was supposed to finalize all challenges, supporters of rival candidate Joseph Kobol continued to cite the declaration of Powi, a member

of Peter O'Neill's People's National Congress, as an act of corruption. After the National Court in Waigani struck down a petition against Powi in June, large numbers of Kobol backers wrought violence and arson throughout the provincial capital of Mendi, where they burned down the governor's residence, the courthouse, and two other buildings. The rioters also made their way to the airport and set alight a Bombardier Dash-8 aircraft operated by Link PNG, a subsidiary of Air Niugini. The aircraft was targeted because the state-owned air carrier was seen as a symbol of the national government, despite the separate corporate management. Photos and videos of the incident—which was carried out with a calm and deliberate demeanor by the perpetrators, who included an explanation of what they were doing and why—were posted on social-media accounts and discussed widely across the country. The national government quickly declared a state of emergency and dispatched security forces to quell the violence. Conditions in the area improved quickly, and eventually thirteen men were arrested for their participation in the riots and arson (Poiya 2018).

With the 2019 referendum on independence for Bougainville looming large in the minds of many, the national government undertook several steps to prepare for the vote as well as to try and sway the outcome. It is beyond the scope of this review to undertake an in-depth analysis of the goings on in Bougainville itself (for more on these events, see Boege, this issue), but for many in leadership positions in Port Moresby, the upcoming vote was of major con-

cern. Three former prime ministers who served during the Bougainville Crisis—Sir Julius Chan, Sir Rabbie Namaliu, and Paias Wingti—visited the island in March to campaign for the continuation of Bougainville as an integral part of Papua New Guinea. The irony of Chan's inclusion in the delegation—his government had led an escalation in the war, including the contract hiring of the Sandline International mercenaries in 1997—was not lost on the people. The unpopular scandal quickly led to his resignation. Martin Miriori, an outspoken critic and former secretary to the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, criticized the event, saying that, “for us, there is no more turning back as the people cannot simply forget about all the injustices and unfair treatment and the injuries caused to them during the crisis and they obviously blame the PNG leaders at that time” (Hakalits 2018). In an April about-face of policy, the O'Neill government backtracked on previous statements that the referendum result would be nonbinding and vowed to honor whatever choice the people make, opening the road for further discussions to outline the phrasing and definition of the coming referendum (RNZ 2018h).

One of the other major preparations for the Bougainville referendum came as Prime Minister Peter O'Neill sat down with John Momis, president of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, in order to determine the wording of the ballot question. After several delays to the meeting and prolonged discussions once it occurred, the two delegations were finally able to agree that the ballot question will simply ask “Do you agree for Bou-

gainville to have: (1) Greater Autonomy (2) Independence” (RNZ 2018d). While the question remains of what greater autonomy means and how it will be legally defined, the referendum has been tentatively set for June 2019.

Attainment of something like the special autonomy arrangement currently in place in Bougainville has been the focus of several other provinces for many years. For example, in East New Britain Province and as illustrated by the activities of the Mataungan Society (see Epstein 1970), this has been a dream since before the realization of independence, as official decentralization of powers through the granting of special autonomy was launched during ceremonies at Kokopo on 2 October. The provinces of Manus and West New Britain are exploring ways to receive greater powers, while the provinces of New Ireland and Enga are taking part in an official process to grant greater autonomy through devolution of powers, which was initiated by the Inter Government Agreement signed by O’Neill in July (O’Keeffe 2018). Many questions still remain over what legal definitions and mechanisms will look like under such arrangements and whether their realization in the present is more representative of contemporary political maneuverings such as increased factionalization along regional lines by political elites (O’Keeffe 2018). Despite the confusion of such pronouncements without detailed explanations, the most certain fact is that such processes will not include options for independence.

Development efforts across the country seemed to increase in 2018. This is in no small part due to the

APEC meetings. Preparations for the summit involved several building projects, including two new convention centers: the International Convention Centre near the Parliament building and the uniquely designed APEC Haus, built in the shape of a lagatoi vessel sail on reclaimed land near the freshly renovated Ela Beach. Announcements of other projects to be launched came at the APEC summit’s conclusion. However, many projects were already in the works, with China being the most conspicuous funder and partner. While Australia is still Papua New Guinea’s largest aid donor and trading partner, private Chinese companies have been contracted to do numerous building projects around Papua New Guinea for many years, and both corporate and individual investors from the Asian powerhouse have become heavily entrenched in the economic growth of the country in both rural areas and urban centers. China’s government has been officially engaged as well, and it “has pledged some US\$5.9 billion on more than 200 projects in the region since 2011” (Campbell 2018).

In June, the PNG government procured a loan of K463 million (US\$145 million) from China’s Export Import Bank, better known as Exim, to fund the installation of electricity transmission infrastructure, including 189 kilometers of power lines and four substations in the Western Highlands and Hela Provinces (Taime 2018). Later that same month, Prime Minister O’Neill paved the way for the development and maintenance of a series of improvements by signing on to China’s One Belt, One Road initiative, a massive network of develop-

ment projects across sixty countries. Later, Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei was contracted to lay a submarine internet cable to run around the country's coastlines, connecting fourteen coastal towns and providing an international link to Jayapura. The project is valued at an estimated US\$200 million and is also to be financed by Exim (RNZ 2018c). The plan to install such a cable came at the behest of Australia and the United States, who made counter offers to oversee the project's development and warned that Huawei's telecommunications infrastructure could be used for purposes of espionage. Minister of State Investment William Duma called the efforts to dissuade Papua New Guinea from honoring its contract after work had already begun "patronizing" (RNZ 2018g). The increase in Chinese involvement in similar projects around the world has been a hot-button point of discussion, and the same can be said for Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands region, where concerns include what this new influence will mean to existing relationships, how debts incurred in development plans might affect control over resources, and what role related obligations will play when it comes to issues of sovereignty. That said, the increased presence of China in the region "demonstrates the region's significance to Beijing's thinking" (Campbell 2018).

Illustrative of China's increased focus on Oceania is the fact that Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that he would be staying in Port Moresby for the duration of the APEC summit, even arriving early to hold meetings and participate in ceremo-

nies to open two Chinese-funded projects: a new school and a six-lane road leading directly to Parliament Haus. Meanwhile, the president of the United States, Donald Trump, sent Vice President Mike Pence to Port Moresby in his place, and the president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, opted to dispatch Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev in his stead. Early announcements from US officials further stated that Vice President Pence would attend daytime meetings but would fly in and out of Cairns, Australia. This plan was eventually changed so that Pence would spend one night in Papua New Guinea, quite possibly to save face, as President Xi planned to spend four days in the country.

The hosting of the APEC summit by the organization's second-newest member, which is widely viewed as "the member country that can least afford it" (Griffith 2018), brought unprecedented media coverage to the country as media outlets worldwide descended on Port Moresby to cover the events of the summit. Early questions focused on whether the developing nation would even be able to pull off the event, citing the massive logistic challenges of hosting such a large number of delegations and the attached reporters, security personnel, and other involved parties. Several years of planning paid off as the PNG Immigration and Citizenship Authority rolled out new protocols and technologies to process some 46,000 arrivals (*Post-Courier* 2018b), many of whom were put up in three chartered cruise liners and transported to venues in hundreds of vehicles procured just for the event. These prepa-

rations were not without controversy, however, as the one thousand vehicles purchased included forty new Maserati luxury sports cars flown directly from Italy on a pair of chartered 747 jumbo jets, as well as three Bentleys. The use of government funds on these and other big-ticket items while rural clinics experienced profound medication shortages, especially drugs for treating tuberculosis, and diseases like polio and leprosy—once again diagnosed in the country long after they were believed to have been eradicated—raised the ire of many in the general public. Calls for work boycotts echoed across social media and were realized on Friday 26 October when citizens vented their outrage at what was painted as a government scandal by leaving thousands of offices and desks empty for one day. Even some visiting delegates took issue with the expenses, such as New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who vowed that she would not ride in one of the Maseratis. Blogger and activist Martyn Namorong told the *Guardian* that “there are a lot of people, not just in Port Moresby but around PNG who are outraged by the spending on APEC which seems to be extravagant” and that “many people feel it’s not been clearly articulated to them what the benefits of APEC will be” (Lyons 2018).

In a June speech at the Lowy Institute in Sydney, Australia, Deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer Charles Abel outlined his vision, justifying APEC spending as a symbol of economic recovery that ought to be “seen as a combination of sorts, of an effort to bring focused investment, tourism, and engagement for Papua New

Guinea and the Pacific” through this and other large scale events. He further stated that the PNG government took on the summit knowing it would be a massive challenge for such a small country, but it did so in order to fulfill obligations as a member; to put a positive spotlight on the country and its people and resources while elevating regional issues of trade, financial facilitation, and climate change mitigation; and to encourage future investments in the country (Abel 2018).

Hopes that investments as a result of APEC exposure would be greater than the investment to host the event drove many leaders and supporters of the move. Large investments like the Maseratis were also justified by highlighting the fact that the government would sell them immediately after the meetings and therefore break even. The issues surrounding the purchase of the Maseratis remained salient even after the summit, as EMTV journalist Scott Waide, generally regarded as one of Papua New Guinea’s best, was suspended from duties at the apparent direction of the government after a broadcast in which he reported on the vehicles in a manner that was deemed unfavorable. As a state-owned entity, EMTV management was obligated to follow the instruction but did so unwillingly (Moses 2018). Waide was subsequently reinstated. While all of the high-end luxury vehicles have been turned in to the Central Supplies Tender Board, the branch of the Ministry of Finance dealing with physical assets, approximately one-tenth of the total vehicles have not been returned (Australian Associated Press 2019). Even if assets are resold at or near to their original value, the

total cost of hosting the APEC summit may never be known, as Opposition Member of Parliament and Governor of Oro Province Gary Juffa's demands that the government submit a detailed report to Parliament have not been met (RNZ 2018b).

Although preparations for the APEC summit were rife with controversy, the meetings themselves seemed to move forward without issue. There were no major security breaches, and Port Moresby's working citizens even enjoyed a public holiday at the conclusion of the event. There was some controversy in the meetings themselves. For example, non-Chinese journalists, including local PNG reporters, were dismissed from a meeting of Pacific leaders while Chinese news agencies were allowed to remain in the room. Indeed, the interactions of the Chinese delegation with other states captured the full attention of the press, and the ire of some diplomats, especially as tensions mounted from political jousting between China and the United States on issues of policy and trade. These diplomatic spats resulted in the summit concluding without a joint communiqué for the first time in the event's history. Opposition leader Patrick Pruaitch and allied ministers of Parliament, including former Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta, criticized Prime Minister O'Neill for not fulfilling his role as chair to facilitate agreements between the two superpowers and for providing China with extra opportunities to shine during President Xi's state visit just before the meeting commenced. The O'Neill government responded that critics were ignorant of the processes

of international diplomacy (Harriman 2018).

Just prior to the anticlimactic end to the APEC summit, several attending states announced various partnerships, scholarships, and development aid. Most pertinent to Papua New Guinea was the multilateral partnership between Papua New Guinea, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand to continue to expand the country's electric grid. The project is worth US\$1.16 billion and will extend power services to 75 percent of the population (RNZ 2018a), thus going a long way toward helping the government realize its existing goal to deliver electric power to 70 percent of the country's population by 2030. Australia also announced a scholarship for Pacific students and an extension and expansion of the Federal Police Training program. Perhaps the most surprising proclamation of aid and development was Australia and Papua New Guinea's announcement regarding the refurbishment of the Lombrum Naval Base in Manus Province, which was soon followed by US Vice President Mike Pence's declaration that the project would become a joint venture between the three states. Indonesian authorities quickly expressed concern over the base expansion, as it would be close to their territorial claims and near strategic shipping lanes and would possibly disrupt trade and create or exacerbate international tensions (Laksmana 2018). Perhaps no one was more shocked to hear of the expansion than Manus Governor Charlie Benjamin, who noted that neither he nor his people had been consulted and stated his opinion that the plan is "ill conceived" and that,

“while upgrade of the Lombrum naval base would make Manus become a significant security shield for Australia and USA, there is no real justification for it for the Manus people” (*Post-Courier* 2018a).

As previously stated, a massive security presence of domestic and international personnel ensured that the APEC proceedings and assets were protected without major incident. Within forty-eight hours of the meeting’s conclusion, a break in the calm over Port Moresby came as military and police personnel gathered at a local sporting facility to air grievances over missing pay for services during the event. A large contingent of officers then proceeded to make their way to Parliament Haus, where they vented their frustration by bashing cars, smashing the building’s windows and doors, harassing employees, and walking away with office items like cold-water dispensers. The unrest was manifest in other parts of the city as opportunists caused problems knowing that police responses would be minimal (Davidson 2018). Parliament Speaker Job Pomat estimated the value of damage to the capitol building at K10–15 million (approximately US\$325,000–488,000) (Nicholas 2018). Eleven police officers were subsequently arrested for possession of items stolen from Parliament (EMTV Online 2018), but the wide-ranging punishment sought by National Capitol District Governor Powes Parkop does not appear to have eventuated (Davidson 2018), likely because some one hundred to three hundred individuals may have been involved.

Would-be refugees to Australia

spent their sixth Christmas in facilities on Manus Island. Detailed information regarding the number and living situation of those remaining in Manus are difficult, as sources are generally vague and sometimes contradictory. Despite efforts to bring their plight to the attention of world leaders and media outlets during the APEC proceedings, the situation of the Manus asylum seekers was generally overshadowed in the international press by asylum seekers housed in Nauru. Several groups of the all-male contingency of asylum seekers still in Papua New Guinea were resettled in batches, usually numbering between ten and twenty individuals. Approximately one hundred men were able to relocate in 2018, mostly to the United States, but roughly five hundred are still housed in facilities in the East Lorengau Transit Centre on Manus. Numerous suicide attempts, some twenty-seven in the latter half of November (Robinson-Drawbridge 2018), and some successful suicides had previously highlighted the growing despair, deteriorating mental health, and hopelessness of a large number of those still on the island.

However, some of the refugees have willingly engaged with the local community, and a handful have married local women and started families. Some of those resettled are also believed to have left behind children. Reports of the total number of children fathered by asylum seekers are contradictory. The Citizenship and Immigration Services Authority recognizes seven children with asylum-seeker fathers, while local leaders of the Catholic Church have asserted that as many as thirty-nine babies have

been born. Church leaders also claim that birth certificates for these children are incredibly hard to get and are possibly being denied by government authorities from the National Identification Office (Togiba and Cheng 2018). Long-term futures for those still on Manus are unclear, as most continue to express a desire to leave but resettlement processes are slower than they desire.

The close of 2018 marked another turbulent year of stark contrasts, with Papua New Guinea successfully pulling off an enormous inter-governmental meeting in the capital without major incident while infrastructure and medical resources waned, especially in rural areas. The promises of several large development projects were met, while other projects faced discontinuation or protests. The current government's focus on developing extractive industries as a foundation for the national economy is increasing both the national budget and national debt and is a gamble that will have long-term ramifications. The tenure of the O'Neill government may be at stake, as Opposition leaders were already moving to hold a vote of no confidence in the early part of 2019. While Papua New Guinea is proving an increasing capacity to engage with larger competing world powers overseas and at home, the perceived uneven nature of the distribution of benefits will likely determine the longevity of the current stewards of the government and whether their large development gambles will pay off.

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SOLOMON ISLANDS

The year 2018 was marked by the expectation that the newly formed Solomon Islands Democratic Coalition for Change Government (SIDCCG) under the prime ministership of Rick Hou would deliver on its promises. When it came into office in November 2017, the SIDCCG “made strong emphasis on integrity in leadership and governance” (SIDCCG 2017). As part of its policy implementation, it promised to pursue stabilization of the country’s fiscal situation, restoration of basic services to rural areas, the passing of a number of outstanding pieces of legislation, including the anti-corruption bill, and work on the undersea fiber-optic internet cable project with Australia. The SIDCCG’s formation was basically a replica of the regime led by Manasseh Sogavare, which was ousted in a no-confidence vote in November 2017 but remained intact and joined forces with Hou’s political grouping to form the new government (RNZ 2017). While the SIDCCG was determined to work together as a coalition pack for a one-year term, the challenge was to effectively implement its policies and achieve related objectives (see SIDCCG 2017). It was against this background that the SIDCCG took a pragmatic approach in pursuing the implementation of its policies in 2018 (see SIDCCG 2017).

Solomon Islands as a country is vulnerable to earthquakes, cyclones, and other disasters such as floods and tsunamis. On 24 January 2018, the country experienced a tropical depression. According to the National Disaster Management Office, the