

**Papua New Guinea Risk: Moderate – High**

Papua New Guinea's election began on 4 July 2022, with three weeks of polling by five million people.<sup>1</sup> The last election was in 2017. While vote counting continues in some electorates, and others have been affected by interrupted counting, destroyed ballots and ballot boxes,<sup>2</sup> and even arson, incumbent PM James Marape has been returned to lead a coalition government.<sup>3</sup> Parliament has had its first sitting despite an attempt by the opposition to delay it until counting finished.

Observers have called for a review of the electoral process and experts have noted the extreme levels of “violence, intimidation, corruption as well as administrative ineptitude” during this election process.<sup>4</sup> Issues with the electoral roll meant that one million people were unable to vote, a problem the newly returned PM has promised to address through the 2023 census and modernising voter ID. A Commonwealth team of observers found that as many as half of eligible voters were not on the voter register.<sup>5</sup> Other inconsistencies and rapid changes such as the creation of seven new districts weeks before the election period, may also have had ramifications on the fairness of the democratic process. Overall, predictions of voting irregularities and election fraud<sup>6</sup> have transpired, and this election has cemented the sense that free and fair elections are a distant prospect for PNG.

Corruption is endemic in PNG. According to Transparency International, PNG ranks 124<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index. 96% of people in PNG believe government corruption is a big problem. 57% say they were offered a bribe in exchange for their vote in the last 5 years.<sup>7</sup> Weak governance and a widespread lack of trust in the government<sup>8</sup> are significant issues that affect PNG's ability to carry out core democratic functions, and rather than improving over time, it appears these issues have worsened.

Moreover, the election has been marred by violence and atrocities. The first death, the shooting of an election officer, occurred in May in Western Highlands, after official lists of election officers were delayed and false lists spread.<sup>9</sup> By late July dozens of people had been killed during the voting process, including 18 people massacred in tribal violence near the disputed Porgera mine site in the Highlands.<sup>10</sup> As in the case of previous massacres in these remote parts of PNG, police presence in the area has been insufficient, and the availability of illegal firearms facilitates deadly violence. There also reports of sexual violence against women and girls over past weeks (sexual and gender based violence is rife in PNG), and thousands of people have been displaced and cut off from food and medicine.<sup>11</sup> A young woman holding her 1 year old son was shot by police while voting in Port Moresby, as unrest flared due to delayed delivery of ballot boxes.<sup>12</sup>

Despite advance warning of increased numbers of voters and electorates, and indeed of election-related violence, slightly fewer security personnel were deployed to maintain order during this election than the last. In addition, underfunding, inadequate preparation along with insufficient staff and equipment across the security sector were highlighted prior to the election process.<sup>13</sup>

Local issues like access to health care, education and water, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic,<sup>14</sup> have been important factors during this election. More broadly, geopolitical questions relating to PNG's diplomatic allegiances have attracted attention, with a visit by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during the campaign.<sup>15</sup>

After 50 years in which only seven women have been voted into PNG's parliament, and the last decade which saw a parliament consisting of only male MPs, PNG has voted in economist Rufina Peter. She was one of 167 women candidates out of a total of more than 3000.<sup>16</sup> Structural obstacles including gendered stereotypes of women, as well as direct threats to female candidates' safety, have prevented women from achieving political equality in PNG.<sup>17</sup> Gender inequality is stark in PNG, which has some of the highest rates of gendered violence in the world and patriarchal societal attitudes. Previous attempts to reserve seats for women in parliament have been consistently resisted.

The lack of women's representation in parliament and other democratic forums has a direct impact on government policy. It is also argued that greater gender equality can strengthen democratic institutions.<sup>18</sup>

The Pacific Islands Forum Women Leaders Meeting was held in June 2022, with a view to pursuing gender equality across the Pacific. There is a broader policy shift in the region towards empowering Pacific women to lead and achieve economic opportunities, alongside longstanding international programs to assist survivors of violence.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, underlying social and economic issues continue to increase the risk of violence and atrocities. Covid-19 and PNG's low vaccination rate have exacerbated existing issues like poverty, unemployment and poor health.<sup>20</sup>

Though the PNG government is working towards economic development via industry and international investment, there are concerns about adverse impacts on local communities. A lack of environmental risk assessment and management in the mining industry, for instance, could have long term negative consequences for the environment and for communities living near extraction projects.<sup>21</sup>

## **Recommendations**

### The Papua New Guinea government should:

- Urgently address the endemic levels of gender based violence and work towards gender equality across society and in the political sphere.
- Ensure perpetrators of recent violence during the election are held accountable.
- Permit independent review of the election process regarding governance, transparency and voting irregularities.
- Take tangible steps to reduce government corruption
- Ensure mining projects do not cause harm to the environment or local communities or elevate risks of violence.

### Neighbouring states should:

- Support humanitarian action and policies aimed to address socio-economic inequality in PNG.
- Offer training and other support to the security sector.
- Encourage PNG to adopt anti-corruption practices and improve transparency
- Call on PNG to urgently address rampant SGBV and gender inequality and continue to support programs such as Pacific Women Lead.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr Nicholas Ferns, A Smooth Election? - Papua New Guinea Votes 2022, Australian Institute of International Affairs, 14 July 2022, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/a-smooth-election-papua-new-guinea-votes-2022/>

<sup>2</sup> Maholopa Laveil, PNG's election a violent event, Lowy Interpreter, 27 July 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/png-s-election-violent-event>

<sup>3</sup> Natalie Whiting, James Marape will be Papua New Guinea's prime minister after an election marred by violence, ABC, 9 August, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-09/papua-new-guinea-election-results-james-marape-to-govern/101311978>

<sup>4</sup> Miranda Forsyth and Gordon Peake, Violence in the PNG elections is the result of broken systems that Australia cannot ignore, The Guardian, 29 July 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/29/violence-in-the-png-elections-is-the-result-of-broken-systems-that-australia-cannot-ignore>

<sup>5</sup> Commonwealth observers advise "urgent review" as many voters left out of Papua New Guinea polling, 25 July 2022, <https://thecommonwealth.org/news/commonwealth-observers-advise-urgent-review-many-voters-left-out-papua-new>

<sup>6</sup> Theresa Meki and Geejay Milli, Papua New Guinea's pandemic election: Concern for the health of the country's democracy, Asia and the Pacific Policy Society, 25 March 2022, <https://www.policyforum.net/papua-new-guineas-pandemic-election/>

<sup>7</sup> Transparency International, The Global Corruption Barometer – Pacific 2021, <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/gcb-pacific-2021-survey-people-voices-corruption-bribery>

<sup>8</sup> Miranda Forsyth and Gordon Peake, Papua New Guinea: Election Violence Shows Lack of Trust in the State, United States Institute of Peace, 2 August 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/papua-new-guinea-election-violence-shows-lack-trust-state>

<sup>9</sup> Maholopa Laveil, PNG's election a violent event, Lowy Interpreter, 27 July 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/png-s-election-violent-event>

<sup>10</sup> Lyanne Togiba, Dozens killed and thousands displaced in election fighting in Papua New Guinea, UN says, The Guardian, 22 July 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/22/dozens-killed-and-thousands-displaced-in-election-fighting-in-papua-new-guinea-un-says>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Natalie Whiting, With Papua New Guinea's election in full swing, Annaisha went to cast her ballot. But when tensions flared, she was shot dead, ABC, 21 July 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-21/electoral-violence-flares-during-png-election/101248114>

<sup>13</sup> Okole Midelit, Too little, too late? Securing PNG's 2022 national election, DevPolicyBlog, 13 May 2022, <https://devpolicy.org/too-little-too-late-securing-pngs-2022-national-election-20220513/>

<sup>14</sup> Dr Nicholas Ferns, A Smooth Election? - Papua New Guinea Votes 2022, Australian Institute of International Affairs, 14 July 2022, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/a-smooth-election-papua-new-guinea-votes-2022/>

<sup>15</sup> Natalie Whiting, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi says resetting China–Australia relations requires 'concrete action', ABC, 4 June 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-04/wang-yi-pacific-tour-png-china-relation-reset-with-australia/101126648>

<sup>16</sup> Ian Kemish, Why Papua New Guinea urgently needs to elect more women to parliament, The Conversation, 5 August 2022, <https://theconversation.com/why-papua-new-guinea-urgently-needs-to-elect-more-women-to-parliament-188058>

<sup>17</sup> Brianna Boecker, Rufina Peter becomes the first woman elected to Papua New Guinea's parliament in over a decade, Women's Agenda, 9 August 2022, <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/rufina-peter-becomes-the-first-woman-elected-to-papua-new-guineas-parliament-in-over-a-decade/>

<sup>18</sup> Ian Kemish, Why Papua New Guinea urgently needs to elect more women to parliament, The Conversation, 5 August 2022, <https://theconversation.com/why-papua-new-guinea-urgently-needs-to-elect-more-women-to-parliament-188058>

<sup>19</sup> Jessica Collins, Gender equality in the Pacific: less talk and more action, Lowy Interpreter, 27 June 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/gender-equality-pacific-less-talk-and-more-action>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/png-s-troubled-election-should-be-wake-call-australia>

<sup>21</sup> Michael Main, Australia can help ensure the biggest mine in PNG's history won't leave a toxic legacy, The Conversation, 30 June 2022, <https://theconversation.com/australia-can-help-ensure-the-biggest-mine-in-pngs-history-wont-leave-a-toxic-legacy-185580>