

Papua New Guinea Risk: Moderate-High

In the wake of the most violent election in Papua New Guinea's history, which resulted in thousands of people internally displaced, the government has announced an in-house inquiry, led by the special parliamentary committee on the 2022 General Elections.¹ The process will investigate various aspects of the election, including those related to inaccuracy of the electoral roll, as well as issues with voting and counting of votes, pre-election issues such as campaigning, declarations and disputed returns, and a range of factors relating to the Electoral Commission.² Consultations will be held with the public and relevant departments as part of the process.

In addition to internally acknowledged issues, international analysis has found a suite of problems relating to PNG election processes including fraud, corruption, vote-rigging, under-resourcing, an unstable political culture, widespread mistrust, a tendency to vote for MPs with local promises, violence and intimidation, and a massive gender imbalance.³ Transparency International, which has observed four PNG elections, has found the quality has deteriorated.⁴ The risk of future elections plagued with these issues to PNG's democracy, and in turn, peace, is significant.

While Australia has provided some funding for elections in PNG (and substantial amounts of aid more broadly), more support from Australia and the international community is required to prevent future elections from worsening further. In January 2023, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese met with PNG Prime Minister James Marape in PNG for the Annual Leaders' Dialogue. Key issues for the countries and their partnership include defence and security, as well as trade, human development, and climate change.⁵ The leaders agreed to a Bilateral Security Treaty (BST) designed to provide "a legally binding framework for security cooperation across our many areas of mutual interest and contribute to bilateral and regional security, trust, and stability."⁶ This extension of the existing relationship, in the context of geopolitical security in the Asia Pacific, is important for continuing peace and stability. The Australian Government also announced a new 5-year program, PNG Women Lead, to support women's leadership and equality.⁷ Addressing the endemic gender-based violence, and including women's perspectives in leaders' discussions, have been highlighted as requiring more attention.⁸

The link between gender-based violence and women's political rights has been analysed by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), which found that "social, cultural and institutional gender inequalities are connected to the prevalence of violence against women in electoral processes."⁹ In PNG, patriarchal social structures and underlying gender inequality can result in women being instructed by male relatives to vote for particular candidates, at the risk of harassment or violence. Women involved in political processes are frequently subjected to verbal, emotional and psychological violence in the pre-election period, including attacks on women's character, their private lives, and their family members.¹⁰

During the 16 Days of Activism in 2022, UN Women highlighted particular challenges for women living with HIV in PNG. High rates of financial abuse, sexual violence, and social isolation increase the risk for women of being infected with the virus, and for those who are HIV positive, the stigma adds yet another dimension, resulting sometimes in being ostracised from family, struggling financially, and finding it difficult to find work and access healthcare. UNAIDS has found a 45% increase in HIV infections between 2010 and 2021 in PNG, most of whom are women.¹¹

Sorcery accusation related violence continues in PNG with an average of 388 cases per year, and has spread to areas where it did not previously occur, such as in the Gulf Province.¹² Historically perpetrators have enjoyed impunity for their crimes, whereas survivors have to live with injuries, are

often ostracised from their communities and face ongoing stigma.¹³ However, there has been some progress, with the 2022 criminalisation of the practice of “glassmen and glassmeri”, those community members who are seen to have the power to accuse others of witchcraft.¹⁴

Incidents of tribal violence and massacres have taken place over recent months in PNG. In January 2023, 11 people were killed over two days in Kompiam area of Enga Province, and several children were kidnapped (and later rescued).¹⁵ Also in January, five people were killed during a conflict between the Wika and Waka tribes at Nondugl in the mountainous Jiwaka province. Police were able to intervene and hold subsequent peace talks.¹⁶

In addition to loss of life and property, the increasing brutality of tribal conflict has been found to disrupt the education of young people. Schools are sometimes destroyed or looted during violence, but also some children stay home in order to avoid unsafe journeys to schools, and in some cases, young boys are pressured to leave school and become fighters or to protect their families.¹⁷

Recommendations

The government of Papua New Guinea should:

- Facilitate access to humanitarian support to those displaced by election violence and work with international agencies to support their safe return;
- Ensure that students affected by the destruction of schools have other options to continue their education;
- Take action to hold perpetrators of election violence accountable;
- Consider issues raised by independent observers and the internal Inquiry when completed, and act on recommendations made;
- Prioritise action on gender-based violence and work towards gender equality across society and in the political sphere;
- Increase police presence in violence hotspots and work towards institutional change within the police force to better respond to victims of SGBV;
- Develop policy, program and community education in relation to sorcery accusation related violence and work with local communities on implementation.

The Australian Government and other nations in the region should continue to:

- Provide funding and capacity building and other support to PNG to reform and improve the election process;
- Provide capacity building training to the security sector;
- Continue to provide humanitarian support for those displaced by election violence, including support services for victims of SGBV;
- Continue to support strategies for achieving gender equality and a reduction in gender-based violence.

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- ³ Terence Wood, Why are Papua New Guinea’s Elections Plagued with Problems? United States Institute of Peace, 11 January 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/01/why-are-papua-new-guineas-elections-plagued-problems>
- ⁴ Transparency International PNG (TIPNG) Election Observation Report 2022, <https://transparencypng.org.pg/tipng-domestic-election-observation-report-2022/>
- ⁵ Lucy Albiston, Australia’s close bonds with Papua New Guinea can help build a stronger nation, ASPI, 9 January 2023, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australias-close-bonds-with-papua-new-guinea-can-help-build-a-stronger-nation/>
- ⁶ PAPUA NEW GUINEA-AUSTRALIA BILATERAL SECURITY AGREEMENT, Joint Statement, 12 January 2023, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/papua-new-guinea-australia-bilateral-security-agreement>
- ⁷ Prime Ministerial Visit to Papua New Guinea, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet Media Statement, 13 January 2023, <https://www.pmc.gov.au/news/prime-ministerial-visit-papua-new-guinea>
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- ¹³ Marjorie Finkeo, It is never too late to end sorcery, Port Courier, 30 December 2022, <https://postcourier.com.pg/it-is-never-too-late-to-end-sorcery/>
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