The ‘Fluid’ Party System of Papua New Guinea

HENRY OKOLE

Papua New Guinea is often seen as a curious exception in the literature on political parties. This paper investigates the operation of the PNG party system, using insights from Scott Mainwaring’s research on weak party systems in developing democracies. It highlights (i) absence of labour movement linkages, (ii) rapid shift to self-government in the 1970s, (iii) the role of the ‘wantok’ system, (iv) lack of well-defined issue-based politics at the national level and (v) local splintering encouraged by electoral institutions as the factors responsible for the weak institutionalisation of PNG’s party system. The paper also reviews the progress of contemporary reforms aimed at strengthening political parties in PNG and emphasises the importance of special sets of theoretical tools for analysing the politics of third wave democracies.

INTRODUCTION

Duverger’s Law is turned on its head in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Parties have proliferated, despite usage of a plurality electoral system. Scores of independents enter parliament after each election, and the assembly is marked by weak political leadership and fluctuating allegiances (so-called ‘yoyo politics’). Politics in PNG has consequently been characterised by extreme coalition instability and perpetual government changes. No political party has ever been able to secure a majority of seats in the 109-seat unicameral national parliament. There has been a history of truncated coalition government terms, and frequent ‘no confidence’ challenges. Since the first indigenous-led government of 1972–77, no government has served out a full five-year term. Far from whittling down from a multiple-party to a two-party...
system, PNG has witnessed the ‘disappearance of a meaningful party system’, and has consequently been described as a ‘deviant case’ and as an ‘aberration’.¹

Nevertheless, in terms of sustaining parliamentary democracy, PNG has often been hailed as a remarkable success story among developing countries.² There have been no coups, and frequent government change is an indicator appealed to elsewhere as a measure of vibrant and functioning democracy. The root problem is the lack of a robust party system, not the absence of democracy. What explains this? Why have strong political parties, often upheld as the bedrock of Westminster-style democracy, not emerged in PNG? The second part of this paper considers the relevance in the PNG context of the best-known theoretical approaches to the analysis of party systems. It draws in particular on insights from Scott Mainwaring’s investigations of weak party systems in ‘third wave’ democracies. The third part locates PNG at the extremely fluid end of Mainwaring’s institutionalised–fluid party system axis. The fourth part considers explanations for weak institutionalisation, including absence of labour movement linkages, the pattern of state development, influences associated with political culture, the impact of electoral laws and the absence of well-defined national-level issues around which parties might coalesce. Part five briefly examines two reforms in the new millennium that are aimed at reshaping PNG’s party system: limited preferential voting (LPV) and the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC).

FINDING A THEORETICAL FIT FOR PNG’S PARTY SYSTEM

The theoretical literature on party systems can be located along a continuum with those who emphasise the role of institutions on one end and those who emphasise sociological factors at the other. Maurice Duverger’s 1954 work Political Parties focused on the role of electoral systems in influencing the behaviour of political actors. The logic of associating single-member first-past-the-post electoral laws with two-party systems is that voters are unlikely to waste votes on third parties and so are inclined to switch allegiance to one of the two more successful parties.³ Duverger pointed to a ‘mechanical effect’ of plurality systems in disproportionately allocating larger parties a bigger share of seats than votes, and so disadvantaging smaller parties. He reasoned that where voters anticipate this, the eventual ‘psychological effect’ – after voters have had sufficient time and information to absorb this (normally several electoral cycles) – will encourage them to assess the relative strength of parties. They then avoid wasting their ballots on third or smaller parties or candidates.⁴ Eventually, two strong parties will emerge as people switch their votes away from less successful parties.⁵
Similarly, Anthony Downs anticipated a reaction to the presence of multiple parties, with voter calculations serving as a kind of pre-electoral party selection process:

A rational voter first decides what party he believes will benefit him most; then he tries to estimate whether this party has any chance of winning. He does this because his vote should be expended as part of a selection process, not an expression of preference. Hence even if he prefers party A, he is ‘wasting’ his vote on A if it has no chance of winning because very few other voters prefer it to B or C. The relevant choice in this case is between B and C. Since a vote for A is not useful in the actual process of selection, casting it is irrational.\textsuperscript{6}

In other words, rational voters will cast ballots for parties or candidates who are not their first preferences in order to maximise the impact of their votes. Yet in Papua New Guinea no such popular calculation has served to narrow down the number of political parties. Lack of party institutionalisation ensures that Duverger’s mechanical and psychological effects do not materialise. As Cox points out, ‘what strategic manipulation there is pushes the system toward further fractionalization’.\textsuperscript{7}

In contrast to the institutionalists, the sociological school views the emergence of party systems as a result of social cleavages. Parties are viewed as articulating prevalent lines of political division as they compete for political supremacy. Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan are among the main proponents of the sociological approach. They point out that even European party politics did not always follow Duvergerian expectations. In the 1920s, party systems became frozen in many parts of Europe.\textsuperscript{8} The ascendancy of established political parties then made it difficult for new parties to emerge. Thus, voting patterns in Europe in the 1960s were broadly similar to those of the 1920s.\textsuperscript{9} After the 1960s, those characteristic cleavages in European party systems broke down, with new ideological platforms providing the basis for an alternative range of political parties.

Drawing on this line of reasoning, Arend Lijphart focuses on seven distinct ‘issue dimensions’ as critical in shaping modern parties: cleavages that arise from socio-economic, religious, cultural–ethnic, or urban–rural divisions, and those associated with regime support or opposition, foreign policy questions, or post-materialist politics. In a study of 36 democratic countries between 1945 and 1996, Lijphart sought to assess the significance of these dimensions for party systems.\textsuperscript{10} He suggested that socio-economic, cultural–ethnic, religious and foreign policy-related cleavages were of primary relevance to PNG politics. In PNG, stances on foreign policy and socio-economic issues may have varied over time, but there has been little difference between the major parties in these respects. Given PNG’s extreme cultural and
ethnic fragmentation, one might reasonably expect this to be a decisive feature shaping the party system. Yet, this also has not been the case. Indeed, so great is PNG’s ethno-linguistic fractionalisation that it fails to serve as a viable basis for national-level party political mobilisation.11

Both the institutional and sociological approaches were primarily developed to deal with the western democracies. There has been little attempt to account for party systems, or the lack thereof, in the new democracies of the developing world and post-communist countries. Some scholars, such as Sartori, have highlighted this shortcoming:

[A] separate treatment of the ‘embryonic states’ is strongly justified on methodological grounds. The relative nature of the distinction between formed and formless states does not detract from the fact that near-astronomic distances and heterogeneities have to be accounted for. To say the least, therefore, the inclusion of the volatile polities within the overall context of the formed polities must be handled with a clear cognizance of the comparative problems that are involved.12

Influenced by this style of reasoning, Scott Mainwaring has attempted to find a theoretical ‘fit’ for those cases that fall outside the normal parameters of the literature. He emphasises the peculiarity of party systems in ‘third wave democracies’.13 Mainwaring cuts a middle path between the two established schools of thought; pointing out that ‘institutions reflect social patterns in addition to shaping them’.14 The direction of causation is neither unidirectional nor predicated on a predictable pattern. Mainwaring emphasises the degree of institutionalisation of party systems as an important variable for comparative purposes. Whereas Sartori argues that party systems only exist where they are consolidated, Mainwaring suggests that party systems are best ‘conceptualized along a continuum’ of institutionalisation. At the extremes are ‘institutionalised’ and ‘fluid’ party systems.15 Those party systems that have been around the longest are more institutionalised than more recent ones.

Using Brazil’s party system as a case study, Mainwaring identifies three longer term reasons why third wave party systems have encountered difficulties in becoming institutionalised. First, late democratising countries lack the type of political and socio-economic climate that allowed earlier democracies to nurture their party systems. Like Lipset and Rokkan, Mainwaring emphasises the role of the working class in Europe, but maintains that this experience is unique. The industrial revolution caused deep divisions among European populations. As suffrage was extended, parties that represented diverse interests developed along major social cleavages. Labour-based mass parties emerged, with formal memberships, financial subscriptions, and political education resources.16 Previously existing oligarchic and centrist parties were
forced to assume new forms to counter the widening appeal of people’s parties.

By contrast, the late democratising countries have party systems that developed at a time when democracy had already become the expected norm. Their labour movements tended to be relatively small and did not possess the type of unifying spirit that sustained similar movements in the developed democracies. For these countries, creative ways were used to incorporate the working class into a variety of political relationships. Brazil, like most third wave democratising countries, lacked the industrial spirit of camaraderie that captivated the working class in nineteenth century Europe. The country’s labour movement has been subjected to processes of cooptation, mainly in the form of clientelism, populism, and corporatism.17

Second, fluid party systems in third wave democracies respond to the way the state is established and the way political actors utilise its infrastructure before party systems emerge on the scene.18 The timing of state development can prove critical. Where emergent or decolonised state institutions become instantly accessible to politicians, they frequently become the most practical conduit for obtaining public goods and therefore provide an alternative to conventional political vehicles for advancing group or personal interests. In situations where politicians are able to use government agencies and departments to reach the public, the development of party systems is either delayed or of secondary importance. In such contexts, state institutions assume parties’ responsibilities. As Mainwaring explains,

\[
\text{if the state expands before the institutionalization of mass parties and becomes the major locus of political activity, political actors are likely to pursue their objectives through bureaucratic channels. Parties are likely to be more dependent on the state and to be less central players.}^{19}
\]

By contrast, developed democracies had party systems that were distinct from the state apparatus, and had a considerable degree of functional autonomy.

Third, fluid party systems can arise where there is a pervasive ‘antiorganizational political culture’.20 Brazil’s political culture permits politicians a great deal of autonomy vis-à-vis their parties.21 Some Brazilian political figures deliberately avoid utilising established organisations, including political parties, in order to maximise their political flexibility. Many political leaders chose to remain aloof from the constraints of the dominant parties, sometimes by establishing their own parties as vehicles for elections.22 Personal parties ultimately end up encouraging social networks that foster personalism and clientelism. In sum, by avoiding accountability to strong parties, politicians weaken the party system.
Papua New Guinea is situated in the southwest Pacific just to the north of Australia. During the nineteenth century scramble for the Pacific, the main island of New Guinea was divided between Holland, Germany and Britain. The western end, Irian Jaya or West Papua, remains part of Indonesia, whereas the German and British parts at the eastern end of the island came in the early twentieth century to be administered by Australia and comprise present-day PNG. The PNG population, around 5.2 million, is highly ethno-linguistically diverse. Over 800 distinct languages are spoken, and major regional differences exist between the highlands, coastal areas, urban centres like Port Moresby and the offshore islands of the Manus group, New Ireland, New Britain, Bougainville, and the d’Entrecasteaux Islands. At independence in 1975, PNG was left with a Westminster-based system, with a unicameral parliament, which elects a prime minister in the first sitting after each general election. The national parliament, with 109 seats, has 89 members returned from ‘open’ constituencies, and 20 returned from wider provincial constituencies (which were initially intended to encourage an element of expatriate representation).

Since independence, no PNG government has served a full term in office. As Table 1 indicates, government has changed hands ten times since 1977. Five changes have come through national elections, three as a result of votes of no confidence, and one each through a court ruling and a resignation. These numbers do not include numerous occasions when coalition partners

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Prime Minister</th>
<th>Deputy Prime Minister</th>
<th>Precursor of Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Michael Somare (Pangu)</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Michael Somare (Pangu)</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>Iambakey Okuk (NP)</td>
<td>Vote of No Confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Michael Somare (Pangu)</td>
<td>Paias Wingti (Pangu)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Paias Wingti (PDM)</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>Vote of No Confidence</td>
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<td>1987</td>
<td>Paias Wingti (PDM)</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>Rabbie Namaliu (Pangu)</td>
<td>Ted Diro (PAP)</td>
<td>Vote of No Confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Paias Wingti (PDM)</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Julius Chan (PPP)</td>
<td>Chris Haiveta (Pangu)</td>
<td>Court ousted PM</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>Bill Skate (PNC)</td>
<td>Chris Haiveta (Pangu)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Mekere Morauta (PDM)</td>
<td>John Pundari (PAP)</td>
<td>Incumbent PM resigned</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Michael Somare (NA)</td>
<td>Allan Marat (PPP)</td>
<td>National Elections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Key: Pangu = Pangu Pati; PPP = People’s Progress Party; NP = National Party; PDM = People’s Democratic Movement; PAP = People’s Action Party; PNC = People’s National Congress; NA = National Alliance.
changed but the main party remained at the helm. Nor does Table 1 indicate the number of unsuccessful and aborted no-confidence motions, or the extent of party switching by parliamentarians. In the wake of the 1982 national elections, the Pangu Pati, under the leadership of Michael Somare, became the most successful party in PNG’s post-colonial history. It obtained 50 out of the 109 seats. Yet by 1985 the Pangu Pati had succumbed to internal divisions and Somare lost the premiership. Ever since, party politics has become increasingly haphazard and volatile.

Mainwaring argues that four variables are useful for comparing institutionalised and fluid party systems; electoral volatility, party roots in society, the legitimacy of parties and elections, and party organisation. This section examines each variable in turn in the PNG context, with the objective of establishing the country’s position on the fluid–institutionalised party axis.

Electoral Volatility

The first dimension denotes the degree of stability among competing parties. When a party system is stable, volatility between successive elections is low. Stability is manifested through the periodic appearance of parties and the absence of large fluctuations in their respective vote shares from election to election. Stability indicates the existence of rules and institutionalised competition for political power among the parties. Parties with a longer lifespan are more typically found in institutionalised systems. The same cannot be said about fluid party systems, where electoral competition can be capricious. Political parties appear and disappear with increased regularity, and very often competition boils down to individual candidates and their local vote bases. Since support for parties changes from election to election, volatility becomes the norm.

In the early post-independence years, some commentators anticipated a consolidation and stabilisation of PNG’s party system. Based on a study of Port Moresby’s electorates after the 1977 national election, Premdas and Steeves predicted that the ‘days of the independent candidate appear to be numbered’. This trend towards a more party-based system appeared to have been strengthened in the 1982 national elections when there were only six political parties. Lijphart suggested that Papua New Guinea’s party system was moving toward consolidation in the early 1980s. The number of successful independents had dropped from 13 in the 1977 elections to four in 1982. Since the 1982 national elections, however, this trend has been reversed. Independents made up 63.4 per cent of all candidates in 1987, 74.1 per cent in 1992 and 73.2 per cent in 1997. For the same years, they won, respectively, 20.8, 35.8 and 33.0 per cent of seats in parliament. The share of seats won by independents fell to 16.5 per cent in 2002, a trend reversal which is not necessarily due to the introduction of OLIPPAC.
Secondly, the number of political parties also rose throughout this period, contrary to the expectations associated with Duverger’s Law. Table 2 shows that the number of parties that secured representation in parliament rose continually from 1977 to 2002, except in 1992 when the Bougainville civil war limited both participation in, and conduct of elections on, that island. Again, the 2002 increase reflects the altered incentives under the OLIPPAC, which encouraged 43 political parties to register before the 2002 polls, although many existed only on paper and only 22 actually secured seats. On its own, the number of registered or represented political parties tells us little about their respective weight in parliament. The most widely used method for calculating the ‘effective number of parties’ is Laakso and Taagepera’s index, also shown in Table 2. Since reliable data are lacking on party vote shares, the index

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<tr>
<td>Number of parties in parliament</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laakso-Taagepera Index</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>9.29</td>
<td>12.60</td>
<td>15.99</td>
<td>16.16</td>
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Notes: (1) The numbers in Table 1 are somewhat higher than those calculated by Lijphart (Patterns of Democracy, 76) for PNG.

is calculated using party seat shares in parliament. This also shows a trend towards multi-partyism, particularly after the mid-1980s.

A third indicator of electoral volatility is the average turnover of MPs in parliament. Strongly institutionalised party systems tend to witness considerable continuity in representation. Many parliamentarians secure at least two or three terms in office. In PNG, by contrast, over half of all MPs have lost their seats at every election since independence, reaching a high-point in 2002 when three-quarters of parliamentarians proved unable to retain their seats.

**Depth of Party Roots in Society**

Institutionalised systems have parties that are strongly rooted in society. Interest group-centred parties are usually the more firmly based and are able to garner more durable allegiances. When parties enjoy sustained support over time, the party system becomes more stable. In contrast, parties in fluid systems often have shallow roots. Partisan attachments and organised bases of support are non-existent, limited or fleeting. Whereas programmatic interests take precedence in strong party systems, narrow interests are personified through individuals in weak party systems.29

In PNG, parties do not articulate solid sectional interests. In a nationwide electoral survey conducted on electoral behaviour in 1987, only 4.8 per cent (or 30 out of 691 correspondents) listed party affiliation as a factor influencing candidacy choice.30 This confirmed conventional wisdom that parties do not appeal to voters; individual candidates do. Even though some of the major parties in PNG have survived since the pre-independence years, all of them lack the types of voter attachment that characterise institutionalised party systems. Party platforms prepared for the 1977 election gave few clues about what each party really stood for. Two of the parties from pre-independence years used slogans in *Pidgin-English* that revealed the extent of personalisation of their appeal. The Pangu Pati slogan was *Sanap Wantaim Somare* (‘Stand with Somare’), and was aimed at rallying support behind PNG’s popular first prime minister, Michael Somare.

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<tr>
<td>Incumbent turnover (%)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>75</td>
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Progress Party campaigned under *Papa Bilong Kina na Toea* (‘Father of PNG’s currency’), a reference to Julius Chan’s tenure as the country’s first minister of finance.\(^{31}\) The emphases on the personalities of Somare and Chan served as key focal points for parties in the absence of popular national-level issues around which support could be effectively mobilised.

By the 1982 elections, it was possible to distinguish between established parties that were capable of leading governments, and small parties that were not.\(^ {32}\) Yet this transitional period saw the wane (in terms of numerical size in parliament) of major parties, and the rise of small parties.\(^ {33}\) By the late 1980s and early 1990s, small parties appeared and disappeared with such regularity that it was difficult to keep track of them.\(^ {34}\) The associated instability of alignments within parliament posed an increasing threat to effective government and necessitated reform measures on the political front such as the enactment of the OLIPPAC and LPV (discussed further below).

**Legitimacy of Parties and Elections**

In institutionalised party systems, parties and their leaders enhance, or at least do not undermine, the legitimacy of elections, partisan competition and democratic institutions. The legitimacy of parties and elections are linked, and both can enhance the authority of governments.\(^ {35}\) When elections become used for ulterior motives, as in some countries with fluid party systems, the whole process is then brought into disrepute.

In PNG, mounting difficulties experienced at national elections have brought the democratic process close to a legitimacy crisis.\(^ {36}\) In dealing with electoral malpractices, parties are more easily held to account than independents. Parties themselves require legitimacy, as do governments and official oppositions (if they want to be seen as governments-in-waiting). Yet this is much more difficult in PNG’s candidate-centred system. An oft-quoted maxim of PNG politics is: ‘Candidates do not win because they are endorsed by parties; rather parties endorse candidates who are going to win’.\(^ {37}\) Parties survey constituencies to spot potential candidates who are likely to win seats. They have little to do with grooming, preparing or transforming individuals into candidates who appeal to voters. The fact that there is no strong adherence to ideology or party platforms means that an attractive personality is the ultimate qualification for party endorsement. Thus, and to reiterate, electoral competition becomes a contest between individual politicians rather than parties.

Table 4 shows the share of the vote secured by winning candidates across PNG’s 109 electorates from 1977 to 2002. It indicates that the number securing over 50 per cent, or even over 40 per cent, of the vote has steadily declined, whereas over half all MPs were elected on the basis of less than 20 per cent of the vote at the 1992, 1997 and 2002 polls. This, together with high rates of
incumbent turnover, casts into doubt the legitimacy of elections. It suggests that parliamentarians do not have an effective mandate from their constituents.

**Party Organisation**

Party organisations ‘matter’ in countries with institutionalised party systems. People and sufficient resources are indispensable for running effective party machines. Members – including elected leaders – are ideally subordinate to party decision-making processes. In fluid party systems, parties usually lack these necessary elements of organisation. In PNG, political parties do not have a firm or permanent membership among the populace. Most are not anchored in ideology, and do not produce *manifestos* or construct an appeal to voters based around distinctive political issues. Parties exist merely as vehicles for control by the national government; they remain ‘politicians’ parties, not mass parties’.

Commenting on party organisation in PNG during the late 1960s, David Hegarty emphasised the logistical difficulty of establishing parties with branches in a ‘small-scale political framework’. He anticipated that the incentives to support parties would disappear after independence. Apart from the Pangu Pati, which had a small organisation and network, the post-independence parties barely grew roots outside the legislative body. Today, the majority of the parties in PNG exist primarily as parliamentary factions. Lacking effective organisations, these parties’ fortunes rise and fall depending on the personal appeal and resources of leaders.

### TABLE 4

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<td>60+</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>40–49</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>30–39</td>
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<td>109</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
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Notes: 1. In three seats, elections were postponed after candidates died just before polling. 2. Six electorates in the Southern Highlands province were declared ‘failed’ by the PNG Electoral Commission in 2002. Supplementary elections were held again in April-May 2003.

EXPLAINING WEAK INSTITUTIONALISATION IN PNG

This section considers the relevance of Mainwaring’s previously summarised three main explanations for weakly institutionalised third wave democracies. It also adds a further two significant factors – (i) the absence of central issues around which a robust party system can emerge and the associated emphasis on personalism in PNG politics and (ii) the role of electoral laws in weakening PNG’s party system.

Trade Unionism and Labour-based Parties

The union movement of PNG is small and figures minimally in the political culture of the country.41 More than 80 per cent of the people are rural dwellers and invariably linked to the subsistence economy in one way or another. The formal sector, including the private sector, is confined principally to a few urban centres such as Port Moresby and Lae, and a few industrial locations such as mining areas. Social inequalities do exist, but the society lacks an industrial culture.42 The claims of some would-be politicians to represent the working class are greeted with widespread scepticism. For example, the PNG TUC’s reluctance to endorse the Leiba (pronounced ‘labour’) Party in 1987 was based on the general belief that politicians had used trade unions to advance their own careers.43 Generally, unions have been lethargic and lacked a coherent political role. The partial exceptions are the Papua New Guinea Trade Union Congress (PNGTUC) and the Public Employees Association (PEA). Overall, political parties have proved unable to establish roots in the rather small-scale PNG union movement.

State Machinery and the Party System

The introduction of state institutions preceded the creation of parties in PNG. The first indigenous majority legislature came into existence in 1964 before parties existed on a permanent basis. Over the following years, indigenous politicians were elevated to positions of power and responsibility without having to use political parties. Being elected was initially about developing local support, rather than using the state or the party to gain benefits. Politicians did not need to mobilise mass support beyond their local base within each electorate.

The transition from colonial control to self-government occurred in a compressed time frame before 1973. The governing structure remained intact; what changed were political and administrative personnel. Therefore there was little time for political leaders and the people to become accustomed to political parties and there was little need for their aggregating role. As Hegarty explains: ‘with the transfer of power coming so soon after parties had developed, the incentive to mobilise disappeared. As the new political
elite acquired a material interest in the continuation of the colonial institutions and economy, mobilization became, in its eyes, unnecessary’.

Even after a party system had emerged in the early 1970s, the role of parties was still downplayed by many parliamentarians. Some were even willing to completely do away with them. Partisanship was thought to prevent generation of consensus and competition was seen as potentially disruptive.

Anti-organisational Political Culture

Papua New Guinea does not have an elaborate anti-organisational political culture, but it does have societal idiosyncrasies that undercut political organisations in a similar fashion. Two factors deserve special mention. First, there is the wantok system (Pidgin-English for one-language, i.e., ‘one talk’). Apart from a common language, ‘wantokism’ also denotes common kinship connections, geographical area of origin, social associations or religious groups or beliefs. What frequently holds the wantok together are networks of mutual reciprocity and patron–client relationships. The wantok system provides an ideal framework for nurturing the candidate–voter relationship. The main factor in an electoral setting is that one player in the wantok relationship is a politician or would-be politician.

The second common characteristic among many traditional Melanesian societies, including PNG, is the presence of an unrestricted system of status mobility. In contrast to ascription-based structures where order is accorded through birthright, merit-based structures are open systems where people can move up the ranks through recognised achievements that are valued by the societies concerned. Bigmanship is a concept coined to describe this type of social status. Like many traditional practices, the culture of bigmanship was redefined as the modern political system introduced new opportunities. Many of the ‘wealthy’ bigmen and educated elite aspire to political roles at the government level. Bigmanship is not only about acquiring recognition and wealth accumulation. It is also about distribution to the leader’s followers. This obligation is continued and expanded as a bigman becomes an elected representative.

Issue Dimensions and Personalism

Viewing the PNG party system through the lens of the sociological approach reveals both gaps and insights. Lipset and Rokkan suggest that parties emerge primarily around social cleavages, rather than institutional arrangements. This is not the case in PNG where all the major or significant parties – apart from the Pangu Pati – were created within the legislative walls by already elected members. Similarly, as we saw above, the issue dimensions that Lijphart identified bear little resemblance to political realities in PNG. The problem is not that the wrong set of issues was emphasised, but rather that there is a
lack of any distinctive national-level issues around which coherent parties can form. Independence was the only focal point that temporarily triggered the emergence of partisan politics from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. After PNG gained sovereignty in 1975, parties lost their principal point of policy difference. Thereafter, the main role they fulfilled was as vehicles for coalition formation in parliament. With party politics reduced to competition for power in parliament, and no reason or obligation to remain loyal to a party, politicians’ behaviour became erratic and capricious. For many MPs, opportunism became the norm, and in the process undermined the legitimacy of the political system, manifested in continual party-hopping.

The absence of Lijphartian issue dimensions in PNG is not only linked to the absence of organised group interests, but also stimulates a flourishing personalism in politics. Political elites acquire control over the state machinery and cultivate networks of patronage through distribution of ministerial portfolios and other perks of office. Ministerial usage of patron–client relationships also extends to the private sector while, conversely, foreign-owned companies often cultivate political connections with the objective of securing concessions and minimising duty and tax payments.

**Institutional Design**

Institutional design also contributed to shaping PNG party space, although not in the way anticipated by Duverger. The Westminster-based constitutional framework and the usage of simple plurality (or first-past-the-post) voting provided a ‘winner-takes-all’ formula and encouraged electoral tactics that led to a sustained increase in the number of candidates contesting general elections. As Table 5 shows, the number of candidates per electorate increased modestly by between 5.5 and 6.1 per cent under the optional preference voting system (OPV) which PNG used during 1964–72. The switch to the plurality system triggered rampant candidate proliferation thereafter. Aspiring parliamentarians multiplied by at least a quarter in all but one of the plurality elections. Accordingly, winning margins fell, and it became increasingly possible for candidates to get elected with only 10 or 20 per cent of the vote. Spoiling tactics, such as fielding ‘vote splitters’ and ‘dummy’ candidates, became ever more effective.

Although important questions have been raised about whether the electoral system change was responsible for candidate proliferation and whether this can explain the worsening situation in the National Assembly, both Okole and Ketan have investigated areas where the plurality voting system has exacerbated cut-throat electoral politics. Gradual reduction in the winning margins have encouraged more candidates and their respective voters to strategise to obtain winning margins, even through unlawful practices (such as intimidation and threat of violence), to win legislative seats.
Why has Duverger’s Law not yielded the anticipated two-party structure? If strategic voting is critical for Duverger’s Law, then one should logically conclude that the law only applies to countries in which a significant proportion of the population can cast a sophisticated vote. This is clearly not the case in PNG. First, many people are yet to fully embrace the basic concepts and purpose behind elections and democracy. Second, given the lack of clear issues and well-defined interests, even potentially sophisticated voters are unlikely to have similar sets of transitive preference orderings. Thus, any strategic voting that does take place is unlikely to be concentrated behind a limited number of candidates or parties. Finally, given the sheer number of candidates and, increasingly close margins of victory, even the most sophisticated voter would often be hard pressed to make well-informed calculations and predictions of how to maximise their advantage. The lack of opinion polls outside Port Moresby and a few other urban centres make this task even more difficult.

**REFORMING PNG’S PARTY SYSTEM**

Papua New Guinea is still trying to find the appropriate role and niche for political parties. In an effort to deal with these issues, two important reforms were introduced in 2001–2.

In 2002, the Limited Preferential Voting (LPV) system was legislated to replace the plurality system. The new system requires compulsory ranking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Type of electoral system</th>
<th>No. of candidates</th>
<th>No. of elective seats in legislature</th>
<th>Average No. of candidates per electorate</th>
<th>Increase in the average No. of candidates (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>OPV</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>OPV</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>OPV</td>
<td>611</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
<td>879</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
<td>1125</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
<td>1513</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
<td>1655</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
<td>2371</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Plurality</td>
<td>2878</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** (1) The optional preferential voting (OPV) system used during 1964–72 was one where voters were able to rank any number candidates on the ballot paper. (2) The rate of growth of the average number of candidates noticeably fell in 1992, due mainly to the civil war on Bougainville Island.

of at least three candidates to cast a valid vote, unlike the optional variant used during 1964–72 when allocating preferences after the primary vote was optional. The main objective of the new voting system is to increase the proportion of the vote of victorious candidates. If no candidate secures a majority of votes at the primary count, the lowest polling candidate is eliminated and his or her votes are redistributed among the remaining candidates. Hence, winning candidates not only need a strong primary vote, but also need to attract second and third preference votes from voters who gave their primary vote to other candidates. This is different from the winner-takes-all formula under the plurality system which has encouraged hyper-competition among rival groups and their candidates in certain regions of PNG. The LPV was not used at the 2002 general elections, but came into force for by-elections thereafter and future general elections. Since by-elections are one-off small-scale operations, an adequate judgement of the new voting system needs to await the next nationwide elections scheduled for 2007.

The second reform was aimed to deal directly with the institutional weakness of PNG’s party system. The 2001 Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) aimed to bring into being a stronger party system, using provisions that outlaw party hopping and membership or association with more than one party at any one time. MPs are required to stick by the prime minister they have voted for in the wake of general elections in all votes of no confidence, constitutional amendments or the budget. Inevitably, difficulties have arisen with the implementation of this legislation, and some parts of the new piece of legislation may need strengthening. Alphonse Gelu has argued that the OLIPPAC has failed, an assertion founded on the initial premise that the design of the law was flawed from the start and therefore that it was bound to fail. He points to parliamentary behaviour from late 2003 onwards which appears to disregard the law. Those party splits which have occurred since the 2002 general elections are not allowed under OLIPPAC, suggesting that the main problem is rather a failure of implementation and that oversight agencies need strengthening. Political parties can only be allowed to perform their allotted roles if people allow them to do so. In other words, the much sought strengthening of political parties can only be achieved if the OLIPPAC is respected and protected. LPV and OLIPPAC cannot be effective in isolation. Rather, they have to be allowed to complement one another. With regard to the OLIPPAC and LPV, only the post-2007 general election context will provide an adequate test of success or failure.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS LEARNED

The degree of institutionalisation is pivotal to the understanding of politics in developing democracies. Over 30 years ago, Samuel Huntington addressed
this issue with a view toward strengthening state institutions. His main fear was that political turmoil could easily take place if high expectations arising from economic progress were not met. This would in turn lead to frustration and social disharmony. Implicit in Huntington’s hypothesis was the importance of timing, and particularly the time lapse needed for a state structure to develop and acquire an element of resilience in the face of multiple challenges. Political party maturity can also be measured on a time scale. Lack of institutionalisation can help explain the failure of Duverger’s Law to apply to party systems in countries like PNG. To reduce explanations to rational choice calculations or incongruent political cultures is to commit injustice to the richness and diversity of the countries concerned.

The established democracies do not provide an ideal template for the investigation of third wave party systems. The role of political parties in developing democracies needs to be analysed with different tools to their counterparts in developed democracies. This is, perhaps, hardly a great revelation. Yet, unfortunately, there is a common presumption that parties that do not conform to general expectations are ‘unusual’ or ‘aberrant’ for one reason or another. Instead of rejecting the institutional and social approaches, Scott Mainwaring provides a hybrid theory which, this paper has argued, offers a useful approach to understanding the dynamics of party systems in countries like Brazil and PNG. If social inquiry is to be aimed at pushing outwards the limits of knowledge, then the interesting cases should be those that fall outside the space offered by the available literature.

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NOTES

4. The impact of the plurality system occurs at the electoral district level. Thus, in a country that uses the plurality system in single-member districts, Duverger’s Law predicts that two main parties will emerge in each district, though not necessarily in the country as a whole. M. Duverger, Political Parties: The Organization and Activity in the Modern States (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966-first published 1954), 223.
11. H. Okole, ‘The Fluid Party System of Papua New Guinea: continuity and change in a Third Wave Democracy’ (PhD dissertation, Department of Political Science, Northern Illinois University, 2001), 140–45. A point worth acknowledging is that there have been instances in the past where parties took on regional identities. For example, the Combined Political Associations (Compass for short), which by the early 1970s changed its name to the United Party, was highlands-based. After independence, and particularly by the late 1980s, it was no longer possible to say that a party was regionally based. For a more elaborate explanation, see Okole, ‘The Fluid Party System of Papua New Guinea’, 96–114.
22. Mainwaring, *Rethinking Party Systems*, 233–4. Some of these parties are established purely for electoral purposes. Successful candidates abandon them as soon as they get elected and join other parties. Hence, the label *party for rent* (Mainwaring, ‘Politicians, Parties, and Electoral Systems’, 28).
28. For discussion of this index, see R. Taagepera and M.S. Shugart, *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), Chapter 8. The Laakso-Taagepera index is one minus the sum of squared seat shares. Independents are
calculated as parties with single seats. It may seem unusual that independent candidates are factored in under the Laakso/Taagepera index as equivalent to single-member parties, particularly where these members might be drawn into parties later. Nonetheless, this formula is concerned only with the outcome of elections. Perhaps as might be expected of a fluid party system, what represented the ‘effective’ parties in the immediate aftermath of an election is susceptible to change over time.


34. One observer was to label them ‘paper parties’ since they were little more than printed names. Y. Saffu, The 1992 PNG Election: Change and Continuity in Electoral Politics (Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1996), 31.


36. During the 2002 national elections, the PNG Electoral Commission declared six elections in the Southern Highlands province ‘failed’ due to improper conduct on the part of candidates and their respective parties. This was symptomatic of the increasingly violent and competitive character of recent national elections.


39. Oliver, Eleksin, 10.


43. Hess, Unions Under Economic Development, 175. Mainwaring (Rethinking Party Systems, 227) also emphasises the impact of corporatism on Brazil’s union movement. In PNG, there are also very mild elements of corporatism. These have come in the form of subtle working relationships between government agencies and interest groups.


47. The underlying premise is that an actor (person or group) within a wantok relationship can assume that it has something in common with other actors. The wantok system provides the basis for social interaction among actors that otherwise would have little in common. This is true for political relations too. It is also important to mention that reciprocity is a cultural phenomenon, just as much as it is a rationally calculated choice. Reciprocity has been described elsewhere as customarily ritualistic and, generally, as the basis of ‘Melanesian
morality’ (S. Dinnen, ‘In Weakness and Strength – State, Societies and Order in Papua New Guinea’, in Dauvergne (ed.), Weak and Strong States in Asia-Pacific Societies, 41). In a predominantly traditional society, such as PNG, this version of reciprocity cannot be easily discarded.


50. The only exception was in 1992, when a low number of candidates for the Bougainville seats during the civil war/secessionist crisis helped to hold the overall increase to 9.4%.

51. The low winning thresholds and increasingly slim margins of victory afforded by the plurality system increased the value of strategic behaviour. When it is relatively easy to spot the most popular candidates, PNG politicians often recruit ‘dummy’ candidates to enter a race with the sole purpose of pulling votes away from their main rivals. Such candidates make frequent appearances in closely contested races. Since it is counterproductive for dummy candidates to reveal their decoy roles to the voters, it is often difficult from afar to distinguish them from genuine candidates. However, electoral returns often provide strong evidence of dummy candidates, who are particularly easy to spot where they are utterly unsuccessful. For example, in the 1997 election, the Lagaip-Porgera open electorate had a huge field of 53 candidates. The winning candidate claimed a mere 9.1% of the valid vote. What is interesting is that 13 candidates shared 21 votes among them. Six candidates failed to garner a single vote. Who nominated them in the first place if they were not popular enough to attract a single vote? Why did the six candidates not vote for themselves? These plausibly could have been candidates who pulled out of the race in the last minute. But the most likely explanation is that these were dummy candidates who voted for the candidates with whom they had colluded, but failed to fool anyone to vote for themselves (Okole, The Fluid Party System of Papua New Guinea).


