



Unravelling Parliamentary Instability: Ministerial Durations in Papua New Guinea, 1972–2012

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Executive summary

This Discussion Paper examines political instability in Papua New Guinea (PNG) by tracking the country's changes of government and discussing both the constitutional amendments made to prolong the life of governments and the Supreme Court's responses to these amendments. It also discusses the importance of ministerial tenure for government continuity and effective public administration.

The paper then examines the average length of time members of parliament (MPs) and prime ministers (PMs) were assigned to their portfolios from 1972 to 2012, in terms of all portfolios as well as the average duration for each portfolio during this period.

The average duration of ministers' portfolios was 29 months under each parliament, but under each PM it was only 24 months. The average duration per portfolio was even lower, at 15 months, under each PM and 16 months for each parliament.

To date, discussion and analysis in PNG has focused on changes in government instead of changes in ministers, which has escaped the purview of reforms on parliamentary instability. The degree of ministers' 'continuity', namely the appointment of individual ministers from a collapsed government to the next government under a new PM, is also discussed.

The analysis suggests that parliamentary instability is a complex issue, and that reforms to improve parliamentary instability should be evidence-based and supported by research. The limited durations of ministers in PNG over the 40-year period covered here highlights this factor as a potent challenge to good governance and effective public administration.

1. Introduction

Melanesian states in the South Pacific are notorious for their political instability, as shown by the perceived frequency of changes of government in their parliaments and ministries. Seen as a weakness in their democracies, this instability affects the continuity of policies, and hence development outcomes. Even if they are not focused on the perquisites of office, politically insecure leaders are likely to spend much of their energy prolonging their survival in office, and to engage in short-term politics rather than longer-term development plans.

A number of Pacific Island states have undertaken constitutional and legislative reforms to address the perceived problem of parliamentary instability, especially frequent changes of governments as a result of successful no confidence motions. Both Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Solomon Islands have introduced specific legislation to help seek stability and to reduce the incidence of no-confidence motions, although they have had far fewer changes in government resulting from no-confidence votes than Nauru and Vanuatu.

While mandatory rules designed to ensure parliamentary stability allow a government time to govern effectively and implement policies, *enforced* government longevity can entrench poor governance. In PNG, new governments are guaranteed a six-month 'grace period' that gives them immunity from a vote of no confidence just after national elections. The five-year parliamentary term was designed to foster continuity to allow programmes to operate effectively. However, subsequent rule changes were arguably designed to prevent or delay challenges to governments in order to prolong their time in power. These measures can seriously damage parliamentary accountability (and the health of a democracy), and desperate survival manoeuvres can undermine longer-term policy planning and even basic services.

Executive fear of a motion of no confidence can induce policy paralysis and the wasteful misallocation of resources. While some no-confidence attempts have occurred during times of economic stress and political crisis, critics have argued that the prime motives behind such motions have not been to ensure accountability but rather to replace the prime minister (PM) and bring in new members of parliament (MPs) as ministers—often with little change in policy and programmes but major changes in patronage politics (see e.g. Ghai 1997: 318–19).

2. Changes of governments in Papua New Guinea

PNG had its only three successful votes of no confidence in the 1980s, but since then has threatened and attempted multiple no-confidence motions. The March 1980 vote, when Sir Julius Chan replaced the first PM, Sir Michael Somare, was already the fourth attempted no-confidence motion. Other successes were in November 1985 (Paias Wingti overthrowing Somare) and July 1988 (Rabbie Namaliu replacing Wingti). These changes involved new combinations of parties in government and MPs switching parties, also known as ‘yo-yo’ politics (May 2008: 92).

Two governments were changed in the 1990s due to fears of defeat in no-confidence votes. Prime Minister Wingti resigned in August 1993 in a ploy to extend his grace period by 18 months. In 1994 the Supreme Court declared his re-election the following morning illegal, precipitating a vote in which his deputy, Chan, once again became PM. In mid-1999, PM Bill Skate resigned just before an expected no confidence vote, and Sir Mekere Morauta succeeded him as PM. Such fears persist today. A further change of government occurred when PM Somare was ousted on 2 August 2011 after many MPs and ministers from the ruling coalition crossed the floor to join the opposition, and Parliament elected Peter O’Neill to lead a new government (May 2011). The Supreme Court later declared the parliamentary vote that ousted Somare—because of his allegedly unapproved absence from Parliament—unconstitutional, a ruling that Parliament ignored. Reforms undertaken to improve parliamentary stability and governance are discussed below.

Such reforms should be based on a clear analysis of the performance of the existing political structures and institutions. After discussing PNG’s successive changes to the ‘rules of the game’ relating to votes of no confidence, this Discussion Paper delves deeper into the issues by examining the stability in office of parliamentarians who have served as ministers. Proponents of parliamentary stability—and, in particular, governments that have introduced measures aimed at addressing parliamentary instability—perceive that, the longer governments (or ministers) stay in power, the more their performance should improve. The average duration of ministers in PNG is about 30 months. This equates to half the term of a parliament, and is of course influenced by the duration of each PM’s government.

Based on data compiled on the durations of ministers in PNG over a 40-year period (1972–2012), this paper shows that mean ministerial terms under different PMs have

fallen to as low as 24 months.¹ In the year prior to the July 2012 general elections, from which O'Neill emerged as PM for a second time, ministerial terms fell to an average low of just nine months (see Section 8). Overall, the average duration that a minister served in each parliament during this period is 29 months or about 2.5 years, whereas the average duration under each PM for the same period is 24 months or two years.

Factors other than changes of government that affect ministerial durations include resignations, dismissals, ministerial reshuffles and deaths. Short ministerial durations pose a potent challenge to governance, even though they are not as visible as a change in PM or government, yet they do not fall under the remit of the reforms designed to strengthen overall governmental stability.

1 Most of the information on ministers in PNG was collected from the *National Gazette* published under the following headings: 'Determination of Titles and Responsibilities of Ministers', 'Amendment of Determination of Titles and Responsibilities of Ministers', 'Determination of Temporary Responsibility of Minister', 'Appointment of Ministers' and 'Dismissal of Ministers'.

3. Papua New Guinea's national government

PNG gained independence from Australia in 1975 under the leadership of Michael Somare. The head of state is Queen Elizabeth II, who is represented by a Governor-General elected by Parliament. The present Parliament, a unicameral legislature, has 111 members and is elected every five years by universal suffrage using the limited preferential voting system first used nationally in the 2007 general elections. MPs are elected from each of the 89 single-member 'open' seats and 20 provincial seats, as well as those for the National Capital District and the Autonomous Region of Bougainville.

The PM is the head of government and is appointed by the Governor-General on his or her election by Parliament. The PM heads the cabinet, called the National Executive Council (NEC), which currently has 32 members. The Governor-General appoints members of the NEC on the recommendation of the PM. Forming coalition governments involves a highly robust and intense negotiation process. Since ministerial portfolios are highly prized, their allocation forms an integral part of the negotiation process. All 15 governments since 1972, including the current one, have been coalitions, because until 2015 no single political party had achieved the parliamentary majority required to form a government (Okole 2002: 38).

PNG's political parties are mostly small and lack strong identities, coherent programmes, viable support bases and organizational capacities (May 2008). Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that several governments in recent decades have included members from 10 parties. Their parliamentary memberships and loyalties have been very 'fluid' (Okole 2005). Yet by early 2015 this fluidity had allowed O'Neill's Peoples National Congress to attract sufficient MPs from other parties to exceed the threshold of 55 MPs needed to form a government, partly by delaying payments of constituency funds to opposition MPs. O'Neill's current coalition government had over 100 MPs until 22 July 2016, when the government defeated a no-confidence motion by 85 votes to 21. As identified by constitutional lawyer Yash Ghai (1997: 315–19), continuous contestation for ministries and their rewards, combined with the profound weakness of political parties, foster the political instability in PNG's Parliament that is discussed in this paper.

4. Amending the Constitution to prolong the life of governments, and Supreme Court responses

PNG's Constitution at independence in 1975 incorporated a six-month grace period after elections during which no-confidence motions are banned. According to John Momis, the aim is 'to allow a government sufficient time to settle into office, develop policies and proceed to implement the policies, and if it was [later] deemed unfit to hold office that it would be held accountable' (*Namah v O'Neill* 2015: para. 8). Apart from the tactic of adjourning Parliament for extended periods when a government was under threat, the main strategy to secure a government's tenure in office became extending the grace period.

In 1991, after a turbulent three years under Rabbie Namaliu as PM, Parliament amended section 145(4) of the Constitution to extend the grace period from 6 months to 18 months. John Momis, who was backbench leader of the Constitutional Planning Committee from 1972–74, argued recently that it was the prevalence of weak party discipline that encouraged MPs to switch party allegiance—and made it easier to enlist supporters for motions of no confidence—that convinced MPs to extend the grace period to 18 months (*Namah v O'Neill* 2015: para. 8). In 2003–04, PM Sir Michael Somare attempted to amend the constitution to extend the grace period to 36 months, which was resisted in Parliament. Two of his coalition parties split over this and several ministers were sacked. An attempt to mount a vote of no confidence failed; Somare's government survived but he dropped the proposed extension.

In 2012, soon after O'Neill's election as PM, Parliament amended section 145(4) to further extend the grace period by another year to 30 months. Additional measures to protect government tenures were then introduced. For example, in 2013 Parliament amended section 145(1)(b) of the Constitution to increase the period of notice required for a motion of no confidence from one week to one month. The number of MPs required to endorse the notice of a no confidence motion was also increased from one-tenth of Parliament (11 MPs) to one-fifth (22 MPs).

Furthermore, in 2013, MPs amended section 124(1) of the Constitution to reduce the number of days Parliament sat from 'not less than frequently than three times in each period of 12 months, and in principle, for not less than nine weeks in each period',

down to ‘not less than 40 days in each period of 12 months’—that is, approximately 6 weeks (*Namah v O’Neill* 2015: para. 9).

The ‘in principle’ 27 weeks was never achieved. The Supreme Court noted in its 2015 judgement that while the 2012 and 2013 constitutional amendments had received overwhelming support from MPs to maintain political stability, the debates lacked discussion of or concerns about Parliament ensuring ministerial responsibility, accountability and attention to the business of legislation (*Namah v O’Neill* 2015: para. 34).

Accordingly, in September 2015, the Supreme Court declared that these amendments to the Constitution were illegal and unconstitutional. The court reasoned that the increased number of MPs required to endorse a motion of no confidence impeded their rights to move such a motion, given the difficulty of obtaining support from multiple small political parties (*Namah v O’Neill* 2015: para. 88).

On the amendment to section 145(1)(b), which increased the period required to issue notice to move a no confidence vote from one to four weeks, the Supreme Court found that this restricted MPs’ rights under section 111 of the Constitution to expeditiously move motions of no confidence votes, especially in crisis situations of bad governance (*Namah v O’Neill* 2015: para. 89).

With regard to the amendment on section 124(1) to reduce the number of sitting days, the Supreme Court found that it restricted Parliament’s ability to convene and allow itself adequate time to conduct its business, particularly debating motions of no confidence (*Namah v O’Neill* 2015: paras. 90–91). The court argued that ‘No right thinking Parliament, as an instrument of participatory democracy, would consider it in its own interest to limit or deprive itself of reasonable opportunities and mechanisms provided by law ... to require its own creature, the executive government, to accept responsibility and account to it on concerns of MPs over the executive government’s management of government business’ (*Namah v O’Neill* 2015: para. 92).

On the constitutional amendment of the extension of the grace period, the Supreme Court noted that ‘A motion of no confidence ... is a healthy check for Parliamentary democracy and it should not be feared’ and added that it ‘is not abused’ (*Namah v O’Neill* 2015: paras. 94–95). The government, according to the Supreme Court, should ‘resist any temptation to resist, frustrate or delay or make it difficult for a motion of no confidence to be moved, using its numerical superiority in Parliament, to manipulate the conduct of the business or worst still, to amend the Constitution ... to entrench itself in power and escape responsibility to Parliament’ (*Namah v O’Neill* 2015: para. 94).

Although there was an application to review the 1991 extension of the grace period from 6 to 18 months, the Supreme Court determined that the challenge on this amendment ‘is far too belated’ and ‘unduly delayed’ and dismissed it (*Namah v O’Neill* 2015: para. 71). The Supreme Court also found the 30-month grace period ‘too excessive’ and a ‘wrong prescription for the ill brought about by political instability caused by MPs severing party allegiance’ when motions of no confidence are tabled (*Namah v O’Neill* 2013: para. 84).

Moreover, the court noted that there had been only three successful no confidence votes since independence, and in the absence of additional information (such as the number of attempted motions of no confidence) argued that the case for extending grace periods was ‘unsubstantiated’ (*Namah v O’Neill* 2015: para. 85).

5. The ‘Integrity law’ seeks to keep parties together

In response to the upheavals in the 1990s, PM Sir Mekere Morauta said his government’s first objective was ‘to restore integrity to our great institutions of state, the very institutions that are necessary for our personal security and our prosperity’ (Standish 1999: 23). He introduced a constitutional law, the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) 2001, which with its amended version in 2003 was designed to ensure parliamentary stability.

The OLIPPAC instituted stringent party membership rules designed to make parties stronger and governments more secure. Under this law, MPs would be penalized if they switched parties. Although MPs could abstain from voting, under OLIPPAC if they voted they had to do so with their party, including on policies on constitutional amendments, budgets and motions of no confidence (see Gelu 2005; Baker 2005; Standish 2007a; Okole 2012). As political events transpired during the period of this law, especially in 2003–04 with regard to Somare’s proposed extension of the grace period, some MPs did not adhere to these rules, and consequently OLIPPAC did not have the desired effect of ensuring party unity.

Other factors helped save the Somare government from an attempted vote of no confidence: the motion was stymied in early 2004 because the rival team could not agree on their nominee to replace him, and then Morauta’s Papua New Guinea Party crossed the floor to support Somare. Nevertheless, OLIPPAC is often regarded as one factor that enabled the Somare-led government to survive a full parliamentary term (2002–07).

In 2010, after a constitutional challenge by the Fly River provincial government, certain key provisions of the 2003 OLIPPAC were declared void by the Supreme Court, on the grounds that they restricted ‘in certain circumstances the voting rights of a member of Parliament on three important matters that the Constitution requires to be brought to Parliament for its decision: a vote to elect a PM, a vote on the National Budget, and a vote to enact or repeal a Constitutional Law’ (see *Special Reference by Fly River Provincial Executive Council* 2010; *Namah v O’Neill* 2015).

The Supreme Court also declared certain provisions of the 2003 OLIPPAC unconstitutional, arguing that restrictions were ‘imposed on the rights and freedoms of MPs to assemble and associate freely through their political parties, to exercise their rights with freedom to debate and vote on those important Constitutional matters’ (*Namah v O’Neill* 2015). The OLIPPAC had lost its main teeth. Within weeks, several MPs had abandoned their parties in the Somare coalition, but nonetheless the PM was able to use a tactical adjournment and a compliant Speaker of Parliament to block a no-confidence motion (Standish 2010).

6. The concept of ministerial tenure

While restraints such as the grace period and OLIPPAC deferred and deterred motions of no confidence, evidence on the duration of ministers in PNG highlights concerns about ministerial stability and the time ministers in government can spend on policy development and implementation.

According to Berlinski, Dewan and Dowding, ‘tenure is the duration of each ministerial spell served in a specific administration’ (2007: 247). In their study of ministers in British governments between 1945 and 2007, they used information on ministers’ personal characteristics, among other factors, to ascertain how long they served and what affected their tenure.

A specific area of their research examined the power of the PM to hire and fire ministers, as well as the PM’s control over the length of a ministerial spell (Berlinski, Dewan and Dowding 2012: 1–2). They found that the ministers’ experience, levels of education, gender and age affected the length of tenure (Berlinski, Dewan and Dowding 2012: 150). Longevity in a ministerial portfolio had little to do with serving a particular administration or the impact of specific incidents.

Although the personal and socio-political information on ministers in PNG has been collected, it has not been analysed for this paper. The analysis of the tenure of ministers in PNG basically calculates the duration of ministerial spells without reference to personal characteristics in order to inform the policy audience on the tenure of ministers, and to highlight the variations over time and the key political factors behind these variations, particularly, changes of government.

In general, ministers’ tenures are largely subject to the survival of coalition governments and the political security offered by coalition partners. The fact that many ministers retain their posts after changes of government indicates that their policies are likely to continue, and is a clear sign that policy considerations are often not a major factor in government formation.

7. Contextualizing ministerial tenure in Papua New Guinea

Some local rules determine the shape of governments in PNG. Regional identities are strong, and so the PM has to incorporate MPs from all regions—and preferably provinces—across the country. Yet all PMs face real challenges related to managing the demands of coalition partners to keep their governments intact and ensure survival amidst the constant threats from parliamentary opposition and potential rivals within government, especially after the end of the grace period. Ministerial tenure is inevitably subject to such machinations. For example, despite its claims of stability, PNG's government from 2002–07 saw four deputy PMs come and go, some more than once, and whole parties left and joined the Somare-led coalition (Standish 2010).

Underpinning ministerial tenure is the relationship between a PM and government ministers. PMs must depend on ministers, and need their support to run the government effectively. Therefore, they need to select ministers who can advance their agenda while enabling them to further their own ambitions. Berlinski et al. argue (2012: 14) that understanding these ambitions is essential to understanding cabinet relations and policymaking. Where government survival is subject to highly tenuous coalition arrangements between multiple political parties, independent MPs and backbenchers, as it is in PNG, the PM's decisions on the appointment, dismissal, promotion or reshuffle of ministers are usually the outcome of delicate negotiations between key political actors.

In PNG immediately after elections (or even before votes of no confidence) coalition partners move into hotels away from the capital (Port Moresby) to 'camp' and prevent poaching by rivals. Usually the focus is on the distribution of ministries, but in July 2012 for the first time in PNG the formation of the O'Neill government was sealed with a formal agreement on a platform for action known as the Alotau Accord (PNG Government 2012).

8. Ministerial tenure in Papua New Guinea, 1972–2012

For the purposes of the analyses discussed below, it is important to note that there was a 21-month period immediately after independence in which a motion of no confidence was not possible. This was because, in 1976, the Supreme Court answered a reference from the Parliament on whether motions of no confidence may be moved during the life of the first Parliament by ruling in the negative (see *Re Motion of No Confidence* [1976] PNGLR 288).

This affects the analysis of the duration of the government and ministries from 1972 to 1977, in which average tenures were 48 months.

Only three ministers were removed from office during this period. The dismissal of one was deliberated on and voted in Parliament as it occurred before independence, when the chief minister's power to dismiss ministers was regulated. He sacked two rebellious ministers in early 1976, but their National Party colleagues showed no party solidarity and gladly took over the vacant ministries. They joined the PM's Pangu Party, an early sign of political parties' weak hold over MPs in PNG (Denoon 1998: 275).

Average duration of all ministers

The calculations of how long MPs held office are based on 449 ministerial appointments between 1972 and 2012.² Since many MPs held ministerial portfolios in different governments over the 40-year period, there were a total of 527 ministerial appointments. The calculations of the duration of ministers over this period are presented in two groups.³ One is grouped by Parliament (Figure 1) and the other is grouped by individual PMs or their governments (Figure 2).

Where there were two governments during a single parliamentary term, the differences in the average durations of ministers between the two governments for each Parliament are distinctive. Moreover, the difference in the average duration for ministers is also distinctive between the two groups.

2 Two ministers are excluded from this count, due to a lack of information on their appointments and portfolios. Also excluded from the analysis are vice ministers.

3 Using information on ministers of state published in the *National Gazette*, the duration that each minister served in each portfolio, measured in months, is enumerated to obtain the total duration served in a term of Parliament. The average durations were calculated for ministers in that Parliament. Where there were two governments in a term of Parliament, ministers' durations were also enumerated to calculate the average durations served by ministers under each government. These calculations are shown in Figures 1–4.

Figure 1. Average ministerial durations under parliaments in Papua New Guinea, 1972–2012



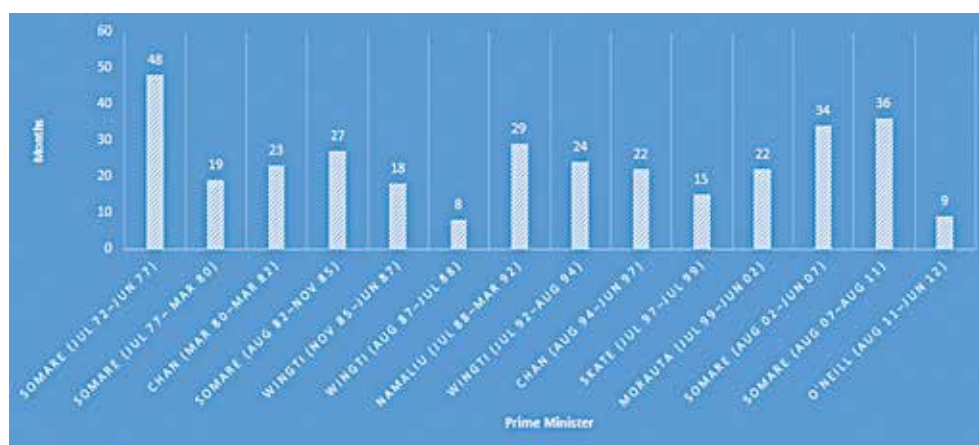
The duration of ministers declined dramatically during the second parliament from 1977–82, and then stayed fairly constant. Thereafter, ministers' durations grew to an average of 23 months. The first Parliament had 24 ministers and only one government in power, whereas the second Parliament had 55 ministers and two governments under two different PMs, Somare (1977–80) and Chan (1980–82).

Since the second Parliament, the average duration of ministers has remained around 2–2.5 years. Although a number of ministers served long durations that averaged 49 months, most were in office for only 30 months. Factors such as changes of government and the high number of ministerial appointments—accompanied by the occasional resignations, deaths, dismissals and reshuffling of ministers—influenced ministers' tenure in office.

Whereas the average duration for ministers in PNG between 1972 and 2012 under parliaments is 30 months (Figure 1), it is 24 months under PMs (Figure 2). The median duration is 27 months; many ministers held portfolios for 30 months despite changes in government, which is a major factor in their durations. In fact, the average duration for ministers in five governments (Somare, July 1977–March 1980; Wingti, November 1985–June 1987, August 1987–July 1988; Skate, July 1997–July 1999; and O'Neill, August 2011–June 2012) was under 20 months.

While the length of time a government was in power before it was overthrown (or how long it held power after overthrowing a government) affected the duration of ministers, the number of MPs appointed as ministers—as well as the number of portfolios they were often appointed to—had a significant impact on their duration as ministers (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Average ministerial durations under each Prime Minister in Papua New Guinea, 1972–2012



Where there are two governments during a parliamentary term, the duration of ministers in the first government tends to be short, which has implications for governance and public administration (Figure 2). However, three of the second governments within parliamentary terms were of relatively long duration—those of Namaliu (July 1988–March 1992), Chan (August 1994–June 1997) and Morauta (July 1999–June 2002).

There is a constitutional rule that if there is a successful vote of no confidence in the fifth year of a parliamentary term an immediate election should be called, and few (if any) sitting members would want that. So the second government in a term has a relatively easy ride in the home stretch while preparing for the next election.

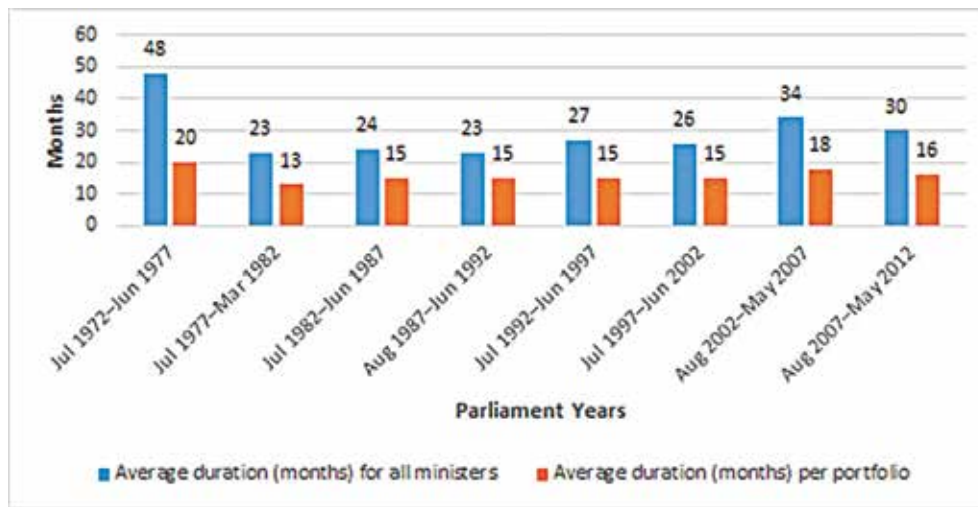
Average durations of ministers per portfolio

Data on the average durations that ministers collectively served does not provide insights into executive instability. For this, information on the individual durations of ministers in each portfolio under each government is needed. The average durations of ministers per portfolio also show the length of time that each minister held each portfolio, which provides more useful information about the state of governance, policymaking, implementation and public administration. This information is presented for ministers in each parliament (Figure 3) and under each PM (Figure 4).

The average durations of all ministers per portfolio under each parliament and under each PM is 16 and 15 months, respectively. They are derived from the average durations for the different portfolios that ministers held. Aside from the exceptional period of 1972–77, the average time that ministers spent on a particular portfolio is just over 12 months for each parliament and under each PM.

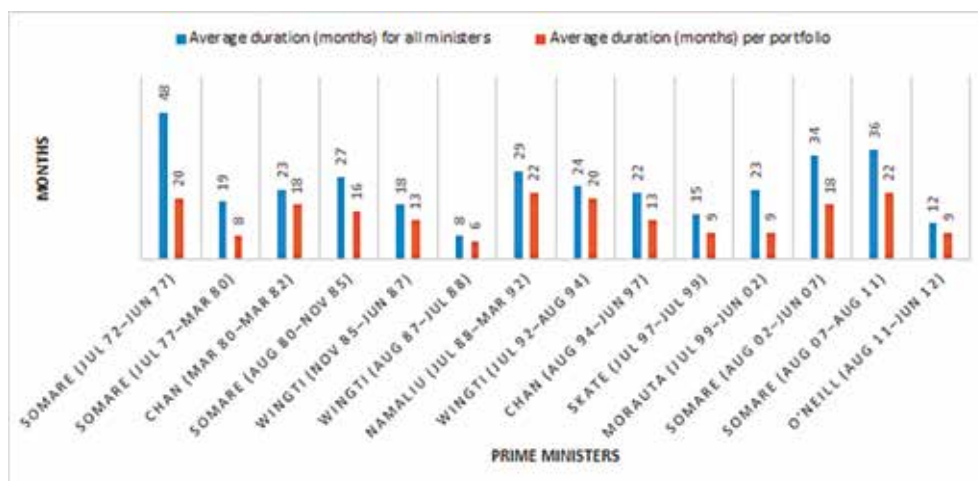
Under five PMs, the average duration per portfolio for ministers was less than 12 months. Key factors of such short tenures include a change of government and a high number of ministerial appointments and turnovers, which seems to have been more pronounced when Bill Skate and Sir Mekere Morauta were PMs.

Figure 3. Average duration for all ministers versus average duration per minister (per portfolio) for each parliament in Papua New Guinea, 1972–2012



In hindsight, Wingti’s 1993 ploy to extend his tenure as PM is understandable once it becomes clear that the tenures of ministers in his most recent government were the shortest, largely as a result of being ousted by Namaliu’s coalition not long after Wingti won power in the 1987 election. While Sir Mekere Morauta introduced legislative measures to stabilize parties and parliament, they did not take effect in his term, and ministers in his government held portfolios for an average of only nine months, similar to that of ministers in the Skate government that he succeeded and the 2011–12 O’Neill government.

Figure 4. Average duration for all ministers versus average duration per minister (per portfolio) under each Prime Minister in Papua New Guinea, 1972–2012



The main factors behind shorter ministerial durations in post-1977 parliaments are the large number of ministerial appointments, combined with the reshuffling of ministers

and the frequent changes of government arising from the fluidity of parties. All are consequences of changes of government, which often resulted in an increase in the number of ministers appointed.

From 1972–75 there were 18 ministerial posts, and potentially 27 from 1975 under the new national Constitution. In the 2002 Parliament, PM Somare increased the constitutional cap on the number of ministers in government from 27 to 32. Between 1972 and 2012, 45 per cent (or 233 MPs) were appointed to a single portfolio, whereas 27 per cent (140 MPs) held two different portfolios and 16 per cent held up to three different portfolios. Very few MPs were given four or more portfolios, although one MP under the government of Morauta held a total of nine different portfolios.

The average number of ministers appointed during each government between 1972 and 2012 was 38. To appease coalition partners and satisfy other political demands in order to remain in power, PMs come under pressure to apportion available ministries among the parties in government (Okole 2002: 38), and thus have also appointed vice ministers and other remunerated positions including chairs of parliamentary committees.

While the duration of ministers was longer in the government that ran a full term, the average duration per portfolio per minister shows that ministers' tenure in a particular portfolio was shorter. Observers might have expected ministerial duration to have improved significantly in the Parliament of 2002–07 when there was only one PM in power, but the average duration per portfolio per minister then was similar to the period in which there were two distinct governments.

Although Somare had the ability to retain the prime ministership despite constant moves to oust him, and that may have contributed to increasing the average tenure of ministers (Chin 2002: 191–92), the story is different in terms of average duration per portfolio per minister. In that Parliament, ministers served, on average, for 34 months, but the average time that ministers spent on one portfolio only averaged 18 months. Most ministers also held ministerial portfolios throughout the entire term of Parliament, that is, 58 months. The lower averages overall were caused by the upheavals in 2003–04.

In the 2007–12 Parliament, when Sir Michael Somare was in power for most of the term, his ministers stayed in office for an average of 36 months; most MPs were ministers for four years. Yet the average time spent by a minister in each portfolio was shorter, at 22 months. Similar length durations for ministers can also be observed during Namaliu's tenure as PM following his replacement of Pias Wingti in 1988 (see Figures 2 and 4). Wingti had adjourned Parliament in mid-1988 to avoid a no confidence motion in an attempt to hold onto power.

Since 1988, PMs have often employed tactics such as abruptly adjourning Parliament for extended periods to avoid no confidence votes, and sometimes not reconvening it until the threat of a vote of no confidence had passed (Wesley-Smith 1992: 195; Chin 2002: 150), or until budget generosity could win over the malcontents. Such political tactics also factored in the longevity of both governments and ministers.

Most PMs have been reluctant to discipline (and probably antagonize) ministers when managing the executive. The reason was clear in 2011, while Sam Abal was serving as

acting PM in Somare's absence. In June that year, Abal demoted several prominent ministers, including Peter O'Neill and Don Polye, both of whom were seen as possible successors to Somare (Standish 2011). Soon afterwards, they crossed the floor, thereby removing Somare and Abal. O'Neill became PM and Somare's National Alliance Party halved in size to 22 MPs.

In a contrary example, in early 2014 Polye was sacked as Treasurer for strongly critiquing O'Neill's financial governance. Polye subsequently became opposition leader, but O'Neill's government retained power for another year.

In 2016, in the context of widespread student protests and some strikes against the government, the Parliament's prolonged blocking of a no confidence motion led the Supreme Court to order the legislature to consider a motion of no confidence led by Polye against the O'Neill government. After allocating PGK 2 million (approximately USD 630,000) to supporters, O'Neill defeated the motion by a reduced majority of 85 votes to 21.

As of late 2016, O'Neill's government, which was elected in 2012, looks set to survive a full term until the mid-2017 election. Its longevity is breaking the overall pattern, and some commentators now talk of the 'O'Neill regime', as if this is a quantum shift in PNG bases of power and political behaviour and institutions. At the time of writing, the average duration of ministers under his government is 42 months, with many ministers continuously holding the same portfolio for 51 months, thus rivalling the long durations of ministers under the government of Somare (2002–07). Meanwhile, opposition critiques of governance continue.

Continuity of government?

Some MPs served considerably longer durations as ministers because their political parties played a significant role in forming the coalition that replaced an outgoing government. Leaders of the larger political parties usually instigated or provided the numerical strength needed to overthrow the government and were rewarded accordingly with ministries.

Table 1 shows that where there was a change in government, some ministers migrated from the government that fell to join the incoming one as ministers, or were subsequently appointed ministers. On average, 11 MPs who had been ministers at various times in the preceding government became ministers in the new government either immediately or soon afterwards.

The largest exodus of ministers precipitated Bill Skate's resignation as PM. In what is referred to as a 'crisis of governance', 29 MPs abandoned Skate's government to join the opposition (Standish 1999), 23 of whom were later appointed as ministers in the next government led by Morauta.

Table 1. Continuity of ministers from ousted governments to new governments, PNG, 1977–02 and 2007–12

	Change of PMs (governments)	Total number of ministers that served in two governments	Number of ministers continuing immediately from the ousted government to the new government	Number of immediately continuing ministers appointed to same portfolio held in the ousted government
1	Somare – Chan	11	1	0
2	Somare – Wingti	2	2	1
3	Wingti – Namaliu	10	3	0
4	Wingti – Chan	9	8	3
5	Skate – Morauta	23	3	2
6	Somare – O’Neill	13	7	3
	Total	68	24	9

Source: *National Gazettes*, 1972–2012

So although a PM’s term ended after being ousted from office, the fact that some ministers in his government became part of the new government coalition suggests a certain degree of ‘continuity of government’. But some qualification is required to make this point. Although an average of 11 ministers were appointed in the new governments, they were not necessarily ministers in the government that had just been ousted. Rather, as pointed out above, some were ministers at various times in the ousted government and many were dismissed prior to the downfall of the government.

On average, four ministers held portfolios in governments that fell and were then immediately reappointed by the new PM. For example, eight ministers in the Wingti government that fell on 31 August 1994 were appointed ministers in the Chan government, and three of them kept the same portfolios. Similarly, seven ministers in the Somare government were appointed ministers by O’Neill when he became PM; three of them retained the portfolios they had held in Somare’s administration.

When a change of government is viewed in this way it raises more questions about parliamentary instability, such as exactly where instability exists and how to design reforms to combat the perceived instability. Is it at the parliamentary level? Does it lie within the executive? The evidence on the durations of ministers between 1972 and 2012 in PNG points to a decline in the time ministers spend in office, especially when there is a change in government, which poses a potent challenge for government, development and public administration in general.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Parliamentary instability remains a concern in PNG and neighbouring Melanesian states. Governments with 18 months of initial security should have ‘sufficient’ time to formulate and implement policies. Given the often-tenuous coalition arrangements, executive stability in terms of the durations of ministers has a definite impact on how successfully a PM can be in leading the country. Changes of government occur when enough MPs are persuaded to break their coalition and party bonds, which highlights the significant role that political parties play in PNG’s instability.

Ministers serve an average of 2.5 years, which is a likely sign of executive instability, an area that is lacking research interest and analysis but is relevant to support policy reforms aimed at addressing parliamentary instability. Constitutional attempts to create stability have been ruled out or weakened by judicial review, and so various parliamentary tactics are still used to block no confidence challenges.

The evidence presented here shows a drop in the average durations of ministers. Their tenure is considerably longer in terms with only one government in power, as shown in the parliamentary period 2002–07 when Somare and O’Neill were PMs. Where a change of government occurred during a parliamentary term, the average duration of ministers is also longer when the government survives until the general election, as was the case under Namaliu as PM (8 July 1988–19 March 1992) and from 13 August 2007 to 2 August 2011 under Somare before he was ousted by O’Neill.

The government under Somare (5 August 2002–30 June 2007) is renowned for being the first uninterrupted tenure of a PM since 1977, and it is unusual. Average ministerial durations are comparatively shorter in parliamentary periods in which there were two governments. In such cases, party instability causes executive instability, which suggests that the challenge to governance and public administration takes place within the legislature.

This paper shows that ministers in PNG serve an average of 2.5 years in all portfolios, but only 16 months per portfolio under each parliament, and 15 months per portfolio under each PM. This relatively high turnover rate highlights concerns for governance, public administration and development, even if there were elements of ‘continuity of government’. These durations are too short for ministers to perform well and ‘make a positive difference’ during their tenure.

The degree of executive instability is acute and has been overlooked until now due to a lack of analysis on the duration of ministers. Constitutional attempts to create stability have not looked deeper into the causes and possible remedies for PNG’s political problems.

Policy recommendations

The duration of governments and their ministers has important implications for policy formulation, policy implementation, governance and public administration in general, especially where such durations are short. While mindful of the political nature of the executive, reformers seeking to strengthen parliamentary stability must try not only to increase the durations of ministers but also to strengthen the capacity and performance of governments and ministers, which includes subjecting ministers to the requisite parliamentary accountability measures. No confidence motions, among others, provide for such accountability in parliamentary democracies.

Improved parliamentary democracy will improve executive political stability, and both are required to enhance development-oriented governance. Reforms designed to strengthen parliamentary stability must recognize the complexities and be based on evidence. The debate in PNG has been limited, and has lacked the necessary data to draw on as evidence-based reform.

While noting that the period 1972–77 was atypical, the evidence on the duration of ministers in PNG, particularly in 1977–2012, offers one approach to filling the gap in hard evidence to support such reforms. Examining these issues has revealed that the volatility of PNG’s political system is unlikely to stabilize without stronger political parties with coherent policy programmes. Further strengthening work by political parties is required to help rectify the instability identified in this study.

The government and MPs must support the work of the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates Commission (IPPCC), which administers the OLIPPAC on reforms to this constitutional law. The IPPCC has identified party weakness as a major cause of parliamentary and executive instability, and therefore wants to help strengthen parties by requiring increased minimum party membership even before registration, requiring members to be committed to party policies and parties to have active branches involving members of the public in party affairs.

However, the PNG government appears to be uninterested in discussing and debating the IPPCC’s recommendations (*Papua New Guinea Today 2016; The National 2016*). The aim is to have a solid basis for parliamentary government and to ensure that the executive is accountable to the legislature, and thus increase parliamentary and executive stability.

Proposals of this nature to strengthen parties accord with the findings of this study and deserve widespread circulation and discussion, with a view to assisting in the reform process. Such an approach would also appear to require revisiting and re-analysing previous studies of voting behaviour at the electorate level, in order to help increase the viability of political parties in society.

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