



NRI Commentary

Time to End the Impasse

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I cannot claim to speak for the public, but most of my acquaintances have had enough with the current political impasse between the Somare and O'Neill camps. I would go along with my associates not because they are the bearers of righteousness, or their choices are divine, or that they are aloof well above the vicissitudes of PNG politics; far from it.

It is about time a semblance of normalcy and common sense is brought back into the Waigani political circles. At the outset, let us remind ourselves once more of a fundamental fact: the public elects its representatives into the National Parliament primarily because not all citizens above a certain age are able to represent their own individual interests in a legislature. Members of Parliament (MPs) are often referred to as elected representatives because that in essence is what they are; representatives of the people. This is not a government for Hon. Peter O'Neill, Chief Sir Michael Somare, any of the other 107 MPs or any political party. This is a government that rightfully belongs to the people. On that basis, the two factions of this impasse need to put aside their differences and seriously consider steps that can be taken to find a way out. They have a moral obligation to do what is right for the people of this country.

Society suffers because Parliament's role to impart leadership to the state machinery and society is curtailed. MPs need to get away from the blame game since it is a vicious cycle without any agreeable ending to the parties concerned. In that vein, parliamentarians as responsible leaders will have to realize that enough is enough – even if they agree to disagree on certain issues – and end the impasse. Part of the problem that PNG faces is how the national political culture is in variance with state institutions that were adopted to suit the particulars of a PNG society of 40 years ago. The National Parliament in particular in its present design can no longer address the wide and cumbersome political interests of a more sophisticated brand of MPs and how they see themselves as leaders for high maintenance voters. To a certain degree, therefore, both sides of the current impasse are victims of circumstances that transcend this particular parliamentary term.

False Guise of the OLIPPAC

People have diligently followed this political wrangling since Chief Somare checked into a Singaporean hospital in early 2011. Personally, I start with the Supreme Court ruling in relation to the *Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates* (OLIPPAC) in July

2010. The National Alliance's protective cover was blown wide open when specific provisions in that law that assured the continuity of a prime minister were rendered null and void. The OLIPPAC was well crafted but it was not the right solution for a problem (i.e. weak parties) at a time when there were other issues that were already in play. In the end, the law further strengthened the executive arm of government when it was already encroaching on the powers and responsibilities of the legislative arm. The disproportional strength between these two arms of government was already evident in the 1990s.

The Supreme Court ruling was what finally unscrewed the bolts of a period that many people regard as a period of 'stability' under the OLIPPAC. I prefer to call it a period of 'continuity' because the nine years under Somare (2002 – 2011) were hardly stable. Having four consecutive deputy prime ministers and numerous cabinet reshuffles were hardly indications of stability by any intelligent expandable definition.

In the haste to stabilize parliamentary politics, the OLIPPAC guaranteed a prime minister to serve out a full five year term while the option to invoke a vote of no confidence was technically shunned. In that regard, the inability to change the Somare government through a vote of no confidence did not create stability; rather it created animosity. No doubt, Somare's hospitalization – as many people would argue - did precipitate the domino effect that culminated in everything that has happened and ended with the current stalemate. People can talk about the divisive issues in the National Alliance, the acting role of Sam Abal as prime minister and the medical condition of Chief Somare, among many things. But the seeds of destruction were already sowed way before the Chief entered hospital. The change of government on 2 August 2011 was not only a change of prime minister and government. To some MPs, it was to avenge themselves - after feeling victimized and betrayed - against certain colleagues of theirs who plied their alleged dirty trade behind Chief Somare. In a way, the public support for the O'Neill-Namah government was a reaction also to some of these leaders who saw themselves as being indispensable to PNG politics.

Entangling the entangled

If we were to pick our way through the rubble, it might happen that we will lose direction given that there are now layers at end of events, factors and court cases (including counter cases) that have built up since the O'Neill government came into office in August 2011. There has been so much bad blood washed under the bridge that it would be confusing to know exactly where to start the corrective healing process. A five-man bench of the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Somare government, but they are in the minority in Parliament. How do they get to run the government unless of course some MPs from the O'Neill camp cross the floor? Only a test of numbers on the floor of Parliament would give an indication. However, it would be interesting to see whether such a vote – if it does take place – would compromise the coveted victory that the Supreme Court has given the Somare group.

Furthermore, Parliament has been able to rescind some of the decisions it took previously. It has also been able to take undertakings in reaction to the Supreme Court decision of 12 December 2011. Where is the state of play now for many of the issues? Thus, is the reinstatement of Chief

Somare – who was supposed to have been dismissed from Parliament – still tenable? What is the fate of the cabinet that he has put together? The O’Neill-Namah government continues to perform its duty as if it is the only government in existence. This government’s budget was passed in December. A few weeks back, Treasury Minister Hon Don Polye declared that the roll out has started for the 2012 national budget. Among the key undertakings to be funded and implemented is the Free-Education policy, something that has captured the heart and imagination of ordinary Papua New Guineans. What would be the implications if such policies were reversed? Needless to say, much of the agglomeration of things is very confusing to the public. More than that, it is the fate of the National Constitution and the image of the judiciary that should concern everyone.

We can go on, but my point is something has to give. This impasse should not deepen the mysteries of ordinary people, who - once again - are rightfully owners and partakers of the PNG government. A dual legitimacy claim to the executive arm should not go on unresolved indefinitely. It undermines our laws and institutions and it does not portray a positive image of the country abroad. It is time for Hon Peter O’Neill and Chief Michael Somare to put their respective political paraphernalia on the table, talk through their issues and agree to move the country forward to the eighth national elections in the post-independence period.

A Way Forward

It might not be possible for any quick solutions to be reached if the O’Neill and Somare camps were to sort out their differences as first order of business either in court or in Parliament. It is likely that such avenues would attract additional animosity and create more divisions at the outset before any understanding and compromise is reached. Therefore, it would be best if a group of eminent individuals were commissioned to broker a deal. Eminent individuals could come from either PNG alone or the Pacific region – or even beyond.

Once a way forward is agreed to, the proposal can then be brought to Parliament for debate and/or endorsement. It is the prerogative of Parliament to decide what exactly can be done between now and polling.

Finally, there should be an endeavor to review existing laws and institutional designs against our national political culture. An all out effort should be conjured to ensure that such a stalemate is never to be repeated again. It is dangerous and debilitating for the country.

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Editors note:

This article will precede the Two Part Articles on “Institutional Decay”. “The Institutional Decay” articles will be sent soon