

	Results
1.	No-Confidence Motion in PNG's Prime Minister Rejected Once Again Global Insight, November 25, 2010, Main Story, 1225 words, Neil Ashdown

[Return to List](#)

9 of 37 DOCUMENTS



Global Insight

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No-Confidence Motion in PNG's Prime Minister Rejected Once Again

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An attempt to bring down the government of Papua New Guinea was defeated yesterday by a series of parliamentary manoeuvres that raise real questions about the long-term stability of the country's political system.

The motion of no-confidence against the government of Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare was first brought in July this year. At that time the motion was postponed when parliament was adjourned by its speaker, Jeffrey Nape. The body did not sit again until this month, when it was required to sit to pass the budget. Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare employed a similar tactic in 2004, when he adjourned parliament for several months to avoid a vote of no-confidence.

According to the local *The National* newspaper, the motion of no-confidence was rejected by the Private Members Committee (PMC) on 23 November. The PMC is chaired by Speaker of Parliament Jeffrey Nape and includes among its members MP Isaac Joseph and East Sepik governor Peter Waranaka. The decision was reportedly made on the grounds that three MPs who originally signed the motion in July had written letters to the speaker indicating that they wished to withdraw their support for the motion. They are John Garia, Charles Abel, and Paru Aihi.

IHS Global Insight Perspective Significance

Implications

The parliament of Papua New Guinea was adjourned yesterday after a motion of no-confidence against the prime minister was rejected by a parliamentary committee.

Both decisions were motivated by apparent uncertainty over the membership of the parliamentary opposition. The situation is indicative of the increasing ease with which members of parliament have been able to switch sides following the Supreme Court's decision to overrule key parts of the country's law on political parties in July this year.

IHS Global Insight Perspective Outlook

The situation bodes poorly for the country, which has enjoyed a period of unprecedented stability in government since the passage of the political party law in 2001. It also suggests that the opposition is declining in effectiveness and may be less able to hold the government to account.

This follows the defection in September of a number of MPs from the opposition PNG Party to the United Resource Party, which supports Sir Michael Somare's government. The MPs who defected then included Joseph, Garia, and Aihi. At that time there was some confusion about whether the members had been allowed to switch parties (see **Papua New Guinea: 27 September 2010**). Francis Potape, the URP member who helped to orchestrate the defection, briefly lost his ministerial portfolio. Furthermore, the leader of the URP, William Duma, was opposed to the move. He invoked the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) to prevent the MPs from switching sides. The OLIPPAC was introduced in 2001 by then prime minister Sir Mekere Morauta. It aims to strengthen the country's weak party system by forcing MPs to vote with the party they supported when they first elected and makes it difficult for MPs to cross the floor. However, sections of the act were overruled by the Supreme Court in July 2010 on the grounds that they broke constitutional provisions defending free speech. Since then there has been a rise in political defections.

Which Side Are You On?

Announcing the PMC's decision, Nape also asked the opposition to clarify its membership. The apparent uncertainty appears to have arisen out of two factors. Firstly, in October leadership of the PNG Party passed from Morauta to former forestry minister Belden Namah. Despite this, Morauta has held onto the position of leader of the opposition. Yesterday Morauta maintained that the position need not necessarily refer to the leader of the largest opposition party; in this case Namah.

The second factor came during the parliamentary debate on the budget, when the opposition's official response was given by Shadow Treasurer Bart Philemon. Nape, in his role as speaker, gave Philemon the opportunity to speak but denied Morauta the chance to do so. This led Morauta, who later published the speech he was unable to give, to leave the chamber in silence. The decision apparently came as a surprise to Philemon, who said to Nape: "I appreciate this rare occasion you are on our side". However, by having Philemon deliver the speech, Nape appears to have effectively created grounds for the government's side to question the leadership of the opposition.

Parliament was adjourned at 10:00 am local time yesterday. The adjournment was provoked when Waranaka questioned a directive from a parliamentary officer that he vacate his seat on the government's benches. This led him to put a question to the speaker asking him to clarify the membership of the opposition and its leadership. Nape recognised the point and asked Paul Tiensten, a key member of the cabinet and the leader of government business in the house, to move for the adjournment of parliament, which was promptly passed. Given Waranaka's position, it is highly likely that the sequence of events was orchestrated to allow him to put the question to the speaker.

Morauta attempted to respond, arguing that Philemon's presentation of the budget reply did not make him the leader of the opposition. Morauta also described the adjournment of parliament as "a government tactic" designed to forestall the motion of no-confidence. If this is the case then it has proven an effective tactic. Moreover, reports in the local *Post-Courier* newspaper suggest that Morauta may be unable to detail the membership of the opposition because five of its members are not recognised by the parliamentary authorities as having switched party allegiance. Political Party and Candidates Registrar Sir Kina Bona was reported by the paper as saying that the five candidates still belonged to their old parties.

Outlook and Implications

The situation raises important questions about the continued efficacy of the OLIPPAC. Under the terms of the law, Somare was able to become the first prime minister in the country's history to serve out a full five-year term. Its effective undoing would be particularly problematic ahead of his planned retirement in 2014, which already promised a period of political instability. More serious still would be if the law was preserved in an altered state. The apparent recognition of the defection of MPs to the government but not to the opposi-

tion could potentially set a dangerous precedent for the country and adds weight to claims that the government is manipulating the system to maintain its hold on power.

In addition, the situation is suggestive of confusion, if not factionalisation, within the opposition. A former prime minister, Morauta is undoubtedly the senior figure on the opposition benches. However, his position is increasingly challenged by figures such as the up-and-coming Namah, Philemon, and Sir Puka Temu, who defected from the government along with Namah ahead of the attempt to bring down the government in July this year. The situation raises concerns that the opposition may be unable to effectively bring the government to account. Papua New Guinea is on the verge of a massive resource boom with the development of the flagship ExxonMobil LNG project. At a time when corruption and inefficiency could prove significant issues, a decline in parliamentary scrutiny does not bode well for the country.

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