
The Military in Papua New Guinea: A ‘Culture of Instability’ But No Coup

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In the lead-up to independence, there was debate in Papua New Guinea as to whether a defence force would safeguard national security or pose a threat to democracy. In the event, the Defence force was retained and has played a significant role in maintaining internal security and contributing to national development, as well as securing the country's borders. But there has been some deterioration since independence in the capacity and morale of the PNGDF, and several instances of tension between the military and the government, especially during the Bougainville conflict. Civil-military relations since independence are briefly traced and the question of why Papua New Guinea has not experienced a military coup is addressed.

In the lead-up to independence in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 1975, there was extensive debate about whether the post-independent state should have a defence force. Several of PNG's emerging leaders saw the existence of a well-trained cohesive defence force—what one Member of Parliament (MP) referred to as “a sort of super-tribe”¹—as a potential threat to democratic government. Australian journalist Peter Hastings referred to the “inescapable similarity between Africa and Papua New Guinea” and warned that after independence “the Army will inevitably be involved in the political direction of the country”.² Notwithstanding these forebodings, in 1974 the Constitutional Planning Committee (CPC) recommended that PNG retain its Defence Force, and the following year Brigadier-General Ted Diro was appointed as the first Papua New Guinean commander of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF).

Remarkably perhaps, considering the record of post-colonial states in Africa, Asia and even the Pacific, nearly forty years since independence PNG has remained ‘coup-less’—despite occasional rumours of imminent coups and ‘incidents’ involving tensions between government and the military. This article examines the record of civil-military relations in PNG since

¹ Ebia Olewale, ‘The Impact of National Institutions on Village Communities’, in M. W. Ward (ed.), *Change and Development in Rural Melanesia* (Canberra: University of Papua and New Guinea and Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, 1972), p. 223.

² Peter Hastings, ‘Thoughts on Taurama: The Myth of a “Non-political” Army’, *New Guinea*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1971), p. 32. For a more detailed account of the pre-independence debate and its constitutional outcomes see Ron J. May, *The Changing Role of the Military in Papua New Guinea*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 101 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, 1993), chapter 1.

independence and makes a tentative attempt to account for the lack of a coup.

Civil-Military Relations in the First Two Decades

Under the Australian colonial administration, a Pacific Islands Regiment, created during the Pacific War, was re-formed in 1951 and by 1973 had evolved into the PNGDF, with a growing number of Papua New Guinean officers. In recommending that an independent PNG retain its Defence Force, the CPC argued that the Defence Force should be “firmly oriented towards external defence” and expressed “very serious reservations” about the use of the defence force in internal security operations.³ The CPC’s recommendations were broadly endorsed by the parliament and written into the constitution. Section 201 lays down the supremacy of the civilian authority, providing for the superintendence and control of the force by the National Executive Council (NEC) through the minister responsible for the defence force (who may not be a serving member of the force), and Section 204 provides that the military can be called out only by the head of state (the governor general) acting on the advice of the NEC and in accordance with a request by the civilian authority embodied in an act of parliament.

Initially the PNGDF, which had a posted strength of 3,614 in 1975, maintained a fairly low profile—apart from its much celebrated intervention in Vanuatu in 1980 to put down a separatist rebellion in the newly-independent neighbouring Melanesian state—and concerns about the military’s intervention in politics dissipated. Indeed there were increasing calls for the PNGDF to play a role in internal security operations.⁴ In 1984 Army personnel were called out to assist police in an operation which lasted for about four months, following the declaration of a state of emergency in response to rising urban crime and violence in the national capital, Port Moresby. Further call-outs to assist police occurred in 1985, 1987 and 1988. In 1988 the PNGDF became involved in its most serious undertaking, attempting, with police, to address the emerging security situation in Bougainville, where a group of disgruntled landowners had backed up demands for increased compensation from the Bougainville gold and copper mine with attacks on the mine and mineworkers.⁵ The commitment of the PNGDF to the Bougainville conflict substantially reduced its capacity for

³ Constitutional Planning Committee, Papua New Guinea, *Final Report* (Port Moresby: Constitutional Planning Committee, 1974), chapter 13, p. 3.

⁴ In fact, as early as 1971, in the wake of increasing lawlessness in the highlands, some highlands politicians had called for the use of the Pacific Islands Regiment “for security purposes” and supported proposals for the secondment of Pacific Islands Regiment officers to train police, particularly police riot squads (see May, *The Changing Role of the Military*, p. 39).

⁵ For a comprehensive overview of the Bougainville conflict see Anthony J. Regan, *Light Intervention: Lessons from Bougainville* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010).

security operations elsewhere in the country, although troops were deployed to assist police in Morobe Province in 1991 and in the national election of 1992.

The involvement of the PNGDF in internal security operations in this period inevitably brought defence personnel face to face with the actuality of political decision making, and it was not long before strains appeared in relations between the military and the government and there were suggestions of politicisation of the PNGDF command. Despite the fact that the young men selected for early officer training came from much the same social and educational background as most of their counterparts in the civil service and, to a large extent, in the national parliament, relations between senior military officers on the one hand, and politicians and public servants on the other hand, were not particularly close. Indeed, in his history of the PNGDF Sinclair describes relations in the early 1970s as "frosty".⁶ This may have been a product of the military ethos inherited from the colonial period and the nature of the military training:

Politicians tended to see the military as elitist and a possible threat to civilian rule, and the military had misgivings about politicians who questioned the future role of the PNGDF and suggested that it might be too big.⁷

Tensions in relations between members of the government and senior PNGDF officers came to a head as early as 1977. In August, PNGDF Commander Ted Diro had held discussions with a leader from the West Papuan (Indonesian) separatist Organisasi Papua Merdeka. Although Diro claimed that the defence minister had been fully briefed on the talks, there was feeling within the government that Diro had exceeded his authority, and he was issued with an official reprimand. Diro, however, was supported by his senior officers, and there were rumours in Port Moresby of a possible coup.⁸ At the time Diro told the NEC:

I have now been able to assess who my friends are and who aren't ... Mr Prime Minister, I want you to know that the force is becoming sick to death of being made a political football by certain politicians and ex-politicians.⁹

Although the incident was described at the time as "the most serious threat to the authority of the government since independence",¹⁰ it appeared to blow over fairly quietly.

⁶ James Sinclair, *To Find a Path: the Papua New Guinea Defence Force and the Australians to Independence. Volume II, Keeping the Peace 1950-1974* (Bathurst: Crawford House Press, 1992), p. 297.

⁷ May, *The Changing Role of the Military*, p. 47.

⁸ David Hegarty, 'Political Chronicle: Papua New Guinea', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 24, no. 3 (1978), p. 402.

⁹ Quoted in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 October 1977.

¹⁰ Hegarty, 'Political Chronicle', p. 402.

Six years later, however, a former PNGDF officer told an ABC correspondent that had Diro been sacked in 1977, PNGDF officers would have staged an already-rehearsed operation, code-named 'Electric Shock', in which the prime minister and certain other politicians and public servants would have been taken hostage, and that PNGDF officers had been in contact with the Indonesian Government during this period. Diro's role in all this was unclear and the story was denied in some quarters, but it raised concerns that military intervention was not out of the question.¹¹

Four years later, in 1981, Diro announced that he was resigning from the PNGDF to contest the 1982 national election. He stood as leader of a (mostly Papuan) PNG Independent Group and was elected to parliament. In the process of coalition formation, Diro was at one stage tipped as possible prime minister, but he ended up in opposition, briefly accepting leadership of the National Party, and becoming minister for forests.¹²

Diro was not the first, nor the last, senior PNGDF officer to shift from the military to politics. Diro's early rival for the position of PNGDF commander, Patterson Lowa, resigned in 1975. He joined Prime Minister Somare's office and subsequently contested the national election in 1977 as a Pangu Pati candidate in Port Moresby. He was elected and became minister for police; there were subsequent rumours that he used his position to move for the sacking of both General Diro and the police commissioner (whose tenure was terminated in 1977).¹³ Lowa lost his seat later in 1977 as a result of a challenge to his residential qualifications. He subsequently became national organiser of the Melanesian Alliance party and was re-elected to parliament in 1987. The third of the three young officers groomed for leadership of the PNGDF, Ken Noga, also resigned to contest the 1977 election as a pro-Pangu candidate, but rejoined the force when he failed to gain office. Other PNGDF officers have also contested national elections over the years, some successfully, some unsuccessfully.¹⁴

With Diro's resignation from the PNGDF, it was generally expected that he would be succeeded by Colonel Noga. Instead, the position was given to Colonel Gago Mamae. In 1980 a split in the ruling Pangu-led coalition and a subsequent vote of no confidence against Somare had brought a new coalition to power, headed by People's Progress Party (PPP) leader Sir Julius Chan. There were suggestions that Mamae had been appointed over Noga in 1981 for political reasons (specifically, Noga's membership of the Somare-led Pangu Pati). The suggestion that political considerations had entered into the selection of the PNGDF command was reinforced in 1983 when, having been re-elected to office in the national election of the previous

¹¹ See May, *The Changing Role of the Military*, p. 48.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 48-9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

year, the Somare Government appointed Noga to replace Mamae. (Mamae later resigned from the PNGDF and became executive officer in Chan's PPP office, standing unsuccessfully as a PPP candidate in the 1987 election.)

The politicisation of senior PNGDF appointments was demonstrated even more blatantly in late 1985, when another vote of no confidence against Somare brought to office a government headed by Paias Wingti and Chan. Noga was replaced by Colonel Tony Huai. Huai had been in consideration for the top position in 1982. In 1984 he had resigned, criticising the Somare Government's handling of the PNGDF. He initially joined Mamae in Chan's PPP office and indicated his intention of standing for parliament in 1987. The appointment of a commander from outside the PNGDF was reportedly opposed by the Defence Department and resented by some senior officers. Huai proved to be a controversial figure as PNGDF commander and he was dismissed two years later. His replacement, Colonel Rochus Lokinap, was, coincidentally, from Chan's New Ireland electorate and the defence minister at the time, James Pokasui, a former officer in the PNGDF's Maritime Element, had served under him.¹⁵

In 1987 Diro was re-elected and became deputy prime minister in a coalition government headed by Wingti. However, accused of involvement in illicit transactions as minister for forests and of receiving undeclared funds from Indonesia's defence and security minister General Benny Murdani for his 1987 election campaign, and facing prosecution, Diro resigned from cabinet. In a parting statement to the press he said, ominously:

the events of the past couple of months have had implications leading to rumours of disobedience in the disciplined forces ... I have been one of the experts on military coups through the world [and] the ingredients are here for a coup ... I do not want to be blamed when that arises.¹⁶

In the wake of the unexpected military coups in Fiji in 1987, such comments were not taken lightly. With rumours circulating in Port Moresby about an impending coup,¹⁷ three colonels—all, like Diro, from Papua—were “redeployed within the Public Service”, although possible links between their “redeployment” and the talk of a coup were never made clear.¹⁸

Shortly after resigning from cabinet, Diro shifted the allegiance of the predominantly-Papuan party of which he was parliamentary leader, precipitating a change of government and returning to the position of deputy prime minister. The new government reinstated the three Papuan colonels. But in late 1991 Diro was found guilty of misconduct by a Leadership

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-51.

¹⁶ *Post-Courier*, 9, 16 November 1987.

¹⁷ Yaw Saffu, 'Political Chronicle: Papua New Guinea', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 34, no. 2 (1988), pp. 259-60.

¹⁸ *Times of Papua New Guinea*, 21-27 January 1988, 28 January - 3 February 1988.

Tribunal and lost his seat. Another reshuffle of senior PNGDF positions followed. Problems remained, however, and in early 1993 it was announced that the defence secretary was to be sacked following clashes between the secretary and the minister and Brigadier-General Dademo over alleged interference in the PNGDF's operations in Bougainville.¹⁹

Meanwhile, there were other confrontations between the PNGDF and the government. In 1988 the PNGDF mounted an operation to secure Lae City airport in defiance of a government decision to shift the Air Element's base from Lae City, and in 1989 some 100-200 soldiers marched on the National Parliament, smashing windows and overturning cars, in protest against lower than expected pay increases. In 1989 a Defence General Board of Inquiry reported a serious lack in discipline, some misuse of funds and equipment, and low morale.²⁰

The Bougainville Campaign and 'Sandline Affair'

With some exceptions, the PNGDF's participation with police in law and order operations between 1984 and 1988 had been generally regarded as successful. Its performance in Bougainville, however, following deployment there in 1989, quickly revealed problems in its capacity to operate effectively against the Bougainville rebels,²¹ and in its relations with the government. From an early stage in the Bougainville conflict, tensions arose between the government, which saw a need for a negotiated settlement with aggrieved landowners, and the disciplined forces—police and military—subsequently backed in parliament by hardliners led by Diro, who believed the situation could be resolved by firm military action against the rebels. In March 1989 Police Commissioner Paul Tohian reportedly complained of “political interference with essential police work and political indecision” and threatened to defy government directives in his attempts to capture rebel leader Francis Ona. Shortly after this, the acting PNGDF chief of staff, Colonel Leo Nuaia, publicly rebuked the defence minister, saying he “should refrain from making wild statements on matters affecting the operations of the soldiers and police” on Bougainville.²²

Twelve months later, following negotiation of a ceasefire and withdrawal of troops, Tohian ordered the removal of all police from Bougainville, leaving the island virtually in the hands of the rebel Bougainville Revolutionary Army

¹⁹ *Post-Courier*, 26 April 1993.

²⁰ Defence General Board of Inquiry, Papua New Guinea, *Report of the Defence General Board of Inquiry into Administration and Management of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force and the Department of Defence* (Boroko: Department of Defence, 1989).

²¹ For an insider's account of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force's (PNGDF) early campaign in Bougainville, see Yauka A. Liria, *Bougainville Campaign Diary* (Melbourne: Indra Publishing, 1993).

²² *Post-Courier*, 27 February 1989; *Niuginin Nius*, 12 April 1989.

(BRA),²³ a visiting Australian parliamentary committee described the situation as “a fairly serious breakdown in the control by the Papua New Guinea Government of its force” and bound to lead to chaos.²⁴ Shortly after, on his way home from an informal reception in Port Moresby for soldiers returning from Bougainville, a reportedly inebriated Tohian called over his car radio for police and army personnel to arm themselves and join him at the prime minister’s residence, where they were to arrest the prime minister and take over the government. Tohian and two of his officers were arrested and initially charged with treason, but the incident—widely referred to as ‘the barbecoup’—was not taken altogether seriously, and charges were subsequently dropped. (In 1992 Tohian was elected to the National Parliament and became minister for defence.)²⁵

As the Bougainville conflict dragged on, strains in the civil-military relationship were clearly evident. In April 1991, following peace talks between the BRA and the government which resulted in a joint commitment to resolution of the conflict as set out in the Honiara Declaration, a group of soldiers under the command of hardline Colonel Nuia made an unauthorised landing on north Bougainville. They launched an attack on the BRA, which clearly violated the Declaration and jeopardised the peace process. In June 1991 Nuia was dismissed (subsequently he was reinstated, dismissed again in 1996, and later reinstated as PNGDF commander). Bougainvillean minister for provincial affairs John Momis supported the action against Nuia, saying, “If we don’t put a stop to it, we cannot stop a coup”.²⁶ But Nuia’s removal did not stop the PNGDF from defying the government in blocking access to Bougainville, conducting raids across the border into Solomon Islands, and in 1996 being involved in the murder of the premier of the Bougainville Transitional Government established in the previous year.²⁷

In 1996, with promising peace initiatives having failed to yield results, a major military offensive against the BRA having achieved little, and a national election imminent, Prime Minister Chan was persuaded to accede to a covert contract with military consultants Sandline International. This involved Sandline personnel and the PNGDF in an operation (‘Project Contravene’) designed to defeat the BRA and recapture the Bougainville

²³ Several members of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, including its commander Sam Kauona, were former PNGDF officers.

²⁴ Joint Committee of Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade, The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, *Australia’s Relations with Papua New Guinea* (Canberra: Senate Publishing and Printing Unit, 1991), pp. 752, 783-84.

²⁵ May, *The Changing Role of the Military*, p. 61.

²⁶ *Post-Courier*, 25 June 1991.

²⁷ For a detailed account of the Bougainville conflict see Anthony J Regan, *Light Intervention: Lessons from Bougainville* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010).

mine.²⁸ The then-PNGDF commander, Jerry Singirok (who had previously commanded the force in Bougainville and became commander in 1995) initially went along with the proposal, but by January 1997 was having misgivings about the political impact of such a military operation, and about putting PNGDF personnel under the command of foreign mercenaries.²⁹

In February 1997 the details of Project Contravene became public. The use of mercenaries, and the dubious financial arrangements for funding the project, promptly came under widespread condemnation both in PNG and overseas. Then on 16 March 1997, under Singirok's direction, a group of PNGDF soldiers detained Sandline personnel in Port Moresby and Wewak, in an operation codenamed 'Rausim Kwik'. Singirok, having briefed PNGDF officers, the police commissioner and the governor general, read a statement over national radio raising his concerns about the Sandline contract and calling on Prime Minister Chan, Deputy Prime Minister Chris Haiveta and Defence Minister Mathias Ijape to resign. The police commissioner initially disassociated himself and the police from Singirok's actions. Chan rejected the call for his resignation, and Singirok—whom Chan accused of "gross insubordination bordering on treason"—was dismissed and later charged with sedition.³⁰

With mounting popular support for his actions, and some unruly demonstrations and looting in Moresby and several provincial capitals, Singirok and Major Walter Enuma, whom Singirok had appointed to carry out Operation Rausim Kwik, sought to diffuse the tensions. They called on soldiers to remain within the barracks, but most businesses and government offices in Port Moresby remained closed.

On 20 March 1997 Prime Minister Chan agreed to set up a judicial inquiry into the Sandline engagement, and with angry crowds surrounding the parliament building, Chan, Haiveta and Ijape took the advice of a group of prominent citizens to 'step aside' while the inquiry was conducted; an acting prime minister was appointed. Two weeks later Enuma declared that Operation Rausim Kwik had ended.

²⁸ For detailed accounts of the so-called 'Sandline Affair', see Sinclair Dinnen, Ron May and Anthony J. Regan, *Challenging the State: the Sandline Affair in Papua New Guinea* (Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, 1997); Sean Dorney, *The Sandline Affair: Politics, Mercenaries and the Bougainville Crisis* (Sydney: ABC Books, 1998); and Mary-Louise O'Callahan, *Enemies Within: Papua New Guinea, Australia, and the Sandline Crisis: the Inside Story* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1999).

²⁹ See May, 'The Military Factor in the Events of March 1997', in Dinnen, May and Regan, *Challenging the State*, pp. 102-3.

³⁰ Dinnen, May and Regan, *Challenging the State*, p. 18.

The report of the inquiry was submitted to the acting prime minister at the end of May 1997 and, claiming that the report cleared him of any wrongdoing, Chan resumed office. The same day he announced the appointment of Leo Nuia as commander PNGDF, apparently overlooking the fact that Nuia had been decommissioned in 1996 on the order of Singirok. Early in July, in one its final acts, the Chan Government re-enlisted Nuia, promoted him to brigadier-general, and made him commander; at the same time Singirok was formally decommissioned. Nuia's appointment was not a popular one within the PNGDF, and after the Sandline Affair divisions within the force, partly associated with the events of 1997, persisted for some time.³¹

Meanwhile, in mid-1997 polling took place in the country's fifth national election. Chan was defeated in his New Ireland electorate—the first sitting prime minister to lose his seat; Ijape also lost, though Haiveta retained his seat. Bill Skate emerged as the new prime minister and Haiveta became his deputy.

In the latter days of the election campaign, it was reported that Enuma and several soldiers involved in Operation Rausim Kwik had provided support for selected candidates in the highlands, and that sixteen soldiers had been arrested. Nuia ordered the arrest of Enuma and his troops to face charges under the Defence Force Act, but soldiers loyal to Enuma forcibly released him from police cells in Port Moresby and went on to briefly place Nuia under house arrest in Murray Barracks. After tense negotiations, Prime Minister Skate controversially ordered police to suspend all charges against military personnel and members of non-governmental organisations arising from actions against the Sandline contract. However, Enuma and four of his officers (including Captain Belden Namah) were charged with mutiny, and subsequently served gaol sentences.

At the time of the Sandline Affair, questions were raised (mostly by the foreign media) as to whether Singirok's actions constituted a coup. Addressing this question, one of the authors suggested that

Operation Rausim Kwik involved no attempt to detain political leaders or occupy the Parliament, nor any attempt to seize radio or TV stations or influence the press [and] when dismissed Singirok accepted his dismissal to

³¹ A major line of division was between those troops who had supported Singirok (particularly the Special Forces Unit which had been created under Singirok's command and had spearheaded Operation Rausim Kwik) and those who had not taken part in the Sandline Affair (and were associated with a Special Operations Group set up by Nuia after Singirok's dismissal). These often followed regional identities.

describe [the Sandline Affair] as a 'coup' would be to stretch that term well beyond its normal usage.³²

A 'Culture of Instability'?

In 1998, claiming that he could no longer work with Nuiia, Prime Minister Skate reinstated Singirok as commander, giving rise to mixed reactions from within the PNGDF.³³ With Skate facing a parliamentary vote of no confidence, there were rumours in Port Moresby in late 1998 that he had reappointed Singirok to strengthen his hand, and that a military coup was possible. It was claimed that the Special Forces Unit established by Singirok had been reconstituted and was training outside Port Moresby. The threat of a vote of no confidence was averted when Skate adjourned the parliament for six months and by early 1999 fears of a coup had subsided.

On his reappointment, Singirok promised "a massive clean-up" to restore standards and improve conditions for personnel, and to refocus on the PNGDF's role in civic action and nation building. Six senior colonels who had opposed Singirok in 1997 were sacked, and several other officers promoted, and a programme of reconciliation and confidence building was initiated. A new emphasis on sovereignty protection and defence of national interest, contributing to regional and collective security, and nation-building and development was affirmed in a Defence White Paper accepted by the NEC in May 1999.³⁴

Singirok was replaced by a new government in 1999 and there have since been four PNGDF commanders, the most recent being Colonel Gilbert Toropo, appointed in January 2014. Toropo is the first highlander to be appointed commander. Under successive commanders the process of rebuilding and modernising the PNGDF has continued, though not without further evidence of civil-military tensions.

In September 1999 troops on Bougainville threatened to withdraw in protest against poor food (due largely to non-payment of local suppliers) and non-payment of salaries and allowances, and in early 2000 a group of PNGDF personnel staged an angry protest outside Defence headquarters in Port

³² See Ron J. May, 'The Military Factor in the Events of March 1997', in Dinnen, May and Regan, *Challenging the State*, p. 104. This is not the place to embark on a review of the vast literature on coups; those seeking a definition of 'coup', however, might begin with Bruce W. Farcau, *The Coup: Tactics in the Seizure of Power* (Westport: Praeger, 1994) and Aurel Croissant, 'Coups and Post-coup Politics in South-East Asia and the Pacific: Conceptual and Comparative Perspectives', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 67, no. 3 (2013), pp. 264-80.

³³ The charge against Singirok of sedition had not been pursued, but was quickly re-activated by police following his reappointment. However, after a further lapse of six years, Singirok was acquitted in 2004.

³⁴ Government of PNG, *1999 Defence White Paper, Service to Others* (Port Moresby: Papua New Guinea Defence Organisation, 1999).

Moresby demanding a substantial pay rise. In September that year troops at Moem Barracks in Wewak went on a rampage over poor conditions, burning down the regimental headquarters and officers' mess. In a separate incident the following week, soldiers marched on Port Moresby Hospital after a colleague had been shot by police following an armed hold-up; rocks were thrown and a police vehicle set alight, and rumours that soldiers were about to march on the National Parliament resulted in the parliament postponing its session.

The incidents of September 2000 prompted the creation of a parliamentary Ministerial Task Force on Defence, whose report, tabled in October 2000, suggested that the basic needs of the PNGDF were not being met, that basic management structures and systems were not appropriate or not working, and that critical issues relating to the mission and purpose, capacity, resourcing and structure of the force needed to be reviewed. In introducing the report in parliament, Prime Minister Morauta spoke of a "culture of instability" within the PNGDF (between March 1997 and October 2001 the PNGDF had had seven commanders or acting commanders) and suggested that the institutional breakdown of the Force was the result of years of neglect and mismanagement. The following month a Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group (CEPG) began a review of the PNGDF.

The CEPG report was presented in January 2001. It recommended a dramatic reduction in force size, from 4,150 to 1,900 within six months.³⁵ While the recommendation of cutting force size was not new, it generated an angry response. Within Murray Barracks a group of around 100 soldiers called on the government to reject the CEPG's recommendations and to resign, and there were reports of soldiers breaking into the armoury. In the event, the dispute was resolved when cabinet rescinded the decision to reduce force size and granted amnesty to those involved in what was in effect another mutiny. Less than a year later, however, rebellious soldiers in Wewak, in a further protest about the proposed restructuring, took control of Moem Barracks, burning down the communications centre and an administration block and chasing some officers and their families out of the compound. A petition presented by the soldiers called for the resignation of the prime minister and the PNGDF commander, as well as addressing industrial issues and making a number of political demands (the latter including a halt to the privatisation of public assets and proposed reforms to land titles aimed at mobilising land for private investment). An editorial in *The National* newspaper warned: "Moem mutiny threatens our democracy ... the main aim of the rebellious soldiers is the political overthrow of the elected government of the day".³⁶ After a PNGDF crisis management team failed to negotiate a resolution of the dispute with the soldiers, the barracks was

³⁵ 'Commonwealth Eminent Persons' Group, *Review of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2001).

³⁶ *The National*, 12 March 2002.

retaken in a military operation and around thirty soldiers were arrested to face court-martial and civil criminal charges.

On the eve of the 2002 national election a new defence minister was appointed and changes in senior PNGDF positions were announced. A Defence Intelligence report suggested that this reshuffling was “election-related” and it was widely rumoured amongst PNGDF personnel and in his home electorate that the new defence minister utilised the PNGDF’s Air Transport Wing to collect a shipment of weapons from Jayapura which were subsequently used to arm his personal militia.

A Period of Relative Tranquillity

With the emergence of a new government, led by Sir Michael Somare, after the 2002 election, with a new commander (Commodore Peter Ilau, appointed in 2001), and with the withdrawal of the PNGDF from Bougainville following the signing of a Bougainville Peace Agreement the same year, civil-military relations entered a period of relative tranquillity.

This was slightly disrupted by the so-called Moti Affair. In 2006 a dispute between Australia and the Solomon Islands Government spread to PNG when the Australian Government sought to block the appointment of Fijian-born Australian citizen Julian Moti as Solomon Islands attorney general, by reviving allegations of a criminal offence by Moti in Vanuatu in 1997 and seeking Moti’s extradition to Australia. While in transit in PNG in September 2006, Moti was arrested at the request of the Australian Federal Police, released on bail, and secretly flown out of Moresby on a PNGDF aircraft to a small airfield in Solomon Islands. A Defence Board of Inquiry subsequently found that a number of laws and regulations had been violated by the removal of Moti, but was unable to establish who had authorised the flight, with contradictory evidence implicating a number of people, from the prime minister down. The chief secretary, the acting police commissioner and Commodore Ilau and his chief of staff were all briefly suspended, leading to rumours of a potential mutiny if Commodore Ilau were sacked. Investigation of the funding of the operation also uncovered a record of gross financial mismanagement, fraud, nepotism and intimidation within the Defence Department. But eventually the affair blew over with little lasting impact.³⁷

The relative tranquillity of the period 2002-2010 may have been linked to stability in government at that time. In 2007 the Somare Government became the first post-independence government to survive a full five-year term in office. This was due in large part to the enactment in 2001 of an

³⁷ For an overview of the ‘Moti Affair’, see Hank Nelson, ‘The Moti Affair in Papua New Guinea’. *SSGM Working Paper 2007/1* (Canberra: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2007).

Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC), whose principal purpose was to achieve greater political stability by strengthening political parties and stopping the common practice of MPs 'hopping' from one party to another, and parties shifting from one coalition to another, to gain political (and material) advantage. Somare was re-elected prime minister in 2007, as head of another coalition government dominated by his National Alliance party. Commodore Ilau served as Commander of the PNGDF for the greater part of this period, becoming the PNGDF's longest serving commander. Under Ilau's command the PNGDF underwent a significant downsizing, from 3,700 to 2,000 personnel, and the beginnings of a revitalisation, with the first in-country commissioning course conducted at the Defence Academy in Lae in 2004-2006.³⁸

In 2003 PNGDF troops were deployed to Solomon Islands as part of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI); the PNGDF continued to support the RAMSI operation for the next decade. Legislation passed in 2010 paved the way for PNGDF participation in UN peace-keeping operations (there are currently PNGDF personnel serving as UN military observers in Sudan and South Sudan). The PNGDF also found itself once again involved in a number of internal security operations, including operations as part of a Southern Highlands State of Emergency and Special Police Operations in 2006-2007, providing security for the 2007 national election, and disaster relief operations and civic action including the beginning of construction of a road from Baiyer River in the Western Highlands to Madang.³⁹

The 2007 national election security operations saw officers who had graduated from the first in-country commissioning course take on their first operational command. As a group they were determined to demonstrate their capability, against criticism regularly directed towards them by senior officers who received training in Australia. This group of young officers, most of whom are educated to tertiary level, see themselves as having a sense of corporate identity free of the regional divisions which have affected the rest of the officer corps over the past two to three decades.

The PNGDF in the Political Impasse of 2011-2012

In early 2010, the Supreme Court handed down a decision on a challenge to the OLIPPAC, which ruled that several sections of the OLIPPAC were unconstitutional—in particular the provisions restricting MPs from changing their allegiances in parliament. This decision opened the way for a return to

³⁸ Following the abolition of the Joint Services Staff College all PNGDF officers had been trained at the Royal Military College in Australia or the Officers Cadet School in New Zealand.

³⁹ In 2014 ten former PNGDF engineers were re-enlisted to work on this project.

the party hopping and 'yo-yo politics' which had characterised parliamentary behaviour before 2001.

In August 2011, with Prime Minister Somare on extended leave in Singapore, where he was receiving medical treatment, parliament declared that the prime ministership was vacant and elected Peter O'Neill, former finance minister in the Somare Government, as the new prime minister. About half of Somare's National Alliance crossed the floor to vote for O'Neill. Former PNGDF officer Belden Namah became deputy prime minister. Somare's supporters promptly challenged O'Neill's election and in December 2011 the Supreme Court handed down a majority decision against the National Parliament's actions.⁴⁰ O'Neill, citing his parliamentary majority, chose to ignore the Supreme Court decision. There followed a period of impasse, with two claimant prime ministers, and for a time two governors general, and two police commissioners. With public support and the allegiance of MPs, police, and senior public servants apparently flowing to O'Neill, Somare appealed to the PNGDF commander, Brigadier-General Agwi (who had been appointed by the Somare Government) to uphold the constitution. Agwi however declined to become involved in what he rightly saw as a civil issue, effectively lending weight to O'Neill (though sources within the PNGDF insisted that the military was neutral, being "pro-constitution and pro-flag").⁴¹

In January 2012, Somare announced that his government had appointed a new PNGDF commander, Colonel Yaura Sasa. Sasa had recently returned from an extended posting as military attaché to Indonesia and, according to reports, had been retrenched. Together with a group of about thirty armed soldiers, Sasa seized control of Taurama and Murray Barracks, placing the commanding officer at Taurama, Brigadier General Agwi and two other senior officers under house arrest, and calling for the reinstatement of Somare within seven days. Sasa denied he was leading a mutiny or military takeover; "My task", he declared, "is restoring the integrity and respect of the constitution and the judiciary".⁴²

Sasa failed to gain support from the officer corps, and by the end of the day he and most of his group had been detained or had withdrawn. Sasa was arrested and charged with inciting a mutiny (and later released on bail), but claimed he had been acting on the orders of the (Somare) government; Somare and his defence minister continued to argue that Sasa had been

⁴⁰ For a more detailed account of the background to 2 August and developments to just prior to the Supreme Court decision see Ron J. May, 'Papua New Guinea's "Political Coup": The Ousting of Sir Michael Somare', *SSGM Briefing Note No. 1/2011* (Canberra: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2011).

⁴¹ Discussions with serving and former PNGDF personnel.

⁴² *Post-Courier*, 27 January 2012.

appointed by their government and had done no wrong. Namah, appointed by O'Neill as acting defence minister, declared a general amnesty for the other ranks involved. In doing so he made reference to his own experience of serving over six years in gaol for his role in the Sandline Affair. Sources within the PNGDF have since claimed that the soldiers involved in the mutiny were initially paid by the Somare camp and that as part of the general amnesty were again paid by the O'Neill Government to hand in their weapons—weapons which, it was reported, did not come from the PNGDF armouries.⁴³

The impasse was eventually broken by a scheduled national election in June 2012—despite attempts by Namah to postpone the election. The PNGDF again assisted police in providing security for the election. O'Neill emerged as the leader of the party with the greatest number of seats, and was duly elected by parliament as prime minister. Somare, who before the election said he would put the architects of the August 2011 'political coup' behind bars if elected, surprisingly joined the O'Neill coalition, and after a falling-out with O'Neill, Namah became leader of the opposition.

Following a period of relative stability, the events of January 2012 have revived divisions within the PNGDF. In private, many in the force have been particularly critical of the part played by Namah, accusing him of using the PNGDF as his personal praetorian guard and usurping the role of the defence minister in the de facto government of 2011-2012. Although in opposition after the 2012 election, Namah has maintained close relations with elements within the PNGDF.

In 2013 a new Defence White Paper—the first since 1999—noted that PNG's defence capabilities had "degenerated significantly" and that the country faced challenges which are "complex, non-traditional and predominantly developmental in nature". It recommended an ambitious program for an expanded, reorganised and better-equipped force, including a Reserve Force, and placed emphasis on the PNGDF's role in supporting national development.⁴⁴

Why No Coup?

In 1977 Joseph LaPolombara wrote, "Military coups are now so frequent and widespread they must be considered as significant as elections".⁴⁵ Earlier, Morris Janowitz had suggested that

⁴³ Discussions with serving and former PNGDF personnel.

⁴⁴ Government of PNG, *Defence White Paper 2013, Defending PNG's Prosperity* (Port Moresby: Papua New Guinea Defence Organisation, 2013).

⁴⁵ Joseph LaPolombara, 'Foreword', in E. A. Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Governments* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1977), p. x.

The intervention of the military in the domestic politics [of non-Western states] is the norm; persistent patterns of civil supremacy are the deviant cases that require special exploration.⁴⁶

And yet despite a history of recurring civil-military tensions, and the continuing unpredictability of its politics, PNG has managed to confound early predictions by remaining 'coup-less'. As noted at the start of this article, observers of PNG in the early 1970s clearly foresaw the possibility of a military coup, or at least of some form of military intervention in government. This brief overview of civil-military relations in PNG shows that there have been persistent confrontations between civil and military personnel since the early years of independence, primarily over service conditions, corporate military identity and perceptions of the role of the military (including 'political interference' in what the PNGDF saw as military operations in Bougainville), and 'defence of the constitution' against corruption or political excess—the classic range of factors underlying military coups the world over. What is interesting about the PNG case is that in a series of demonstrations, mutinies and even political interventions, none has progressed to a full-scale coup as experienced in much of Africa, Asia and, closer to home, Fiji. How does one explain this 'deviant case'?

It might be tempting to argue that the concepts of civilian supremacy and military professionalism instilled during the Australian administration and the early years of independence militated against a coup. Certainly the behaviour of General Singirok and Major Enuma during the Sandline Affair, both in the way demands were channelled and control of angry troops and civilian demonstrators was maintained, showed a high degree of professionalism, and prevented the incident from becoming something more serious. And in April 2001, in what some described as an 'attempted coup' but was essentially industrial action over working conditions, soldiers remained in their barracks despite the urgings of some politicians and civilian protesters. More recently, Brigadier-General Agwi was firm in his refusal to have the PNGDF become involved in the confrontation between Somare and O'Neill, and the force was quick to reject the efforts of Colonel Sasa to take control of the PNGDF. But in other instances that professionalism has been lacking.

The fact that a number of military officers have left the Defence Force to contest elections for the National Parliament—two (Diro and Namah) serving as deputy prime minister and several becoming ministers—has perhaps provided something of a safety valve for military men frustrated at the limitations placed on them as soldiers. But there has been no easy road

⁴⁶ Morris Janowitz, 'The Comparative Analysis of Middle Eastern Military Institutions', in M. Janowitz and J. van Doorn (eds), *On Military Intervention* (Rotterdam: Rotterdam University Press, 1971), p. 306.

from the barracks to the parliament, so again this does not explain the absence of a coup.

Suggested 'explanations' for the absence of a coup have been the small size of the PNGDF (which having been reduced to about 2,000 by 2009 had grown back to 2,600 in 2013), split between three barracks, a small Air Transport Wing and a Maritime Operations Element in Port Moresby, barracks in Lae and Wewak, and smaller units in Kiunga, Vanimo and Manus, and its poor logistical capabilities, with aircraft and maritime craft out of commission for long periods. Given the localised, competitive and fractious nature of political power in PNG and the difficulties which even a legitimate government has in governing, it is difficult to envisage how a small military could achieve more than a temporary and geographically limited takeover of government.⁴⁷ However, the announcement by Prime Minister O'Neill in 2012 that the PNGDF is to be increased to 5,000 by 2015 and 15,000 by 2030 (a policy amended in the 2013 Defence White Paper to 5,000 by 2017 and 10,000 by 2030, but still viewed with some scepticism by many observers) belies the suggestion that the PNGDF has been kept small as a deliberate strategy to inhibit a coup.⁴⁸

Longstanding antipathy between the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary and the PNGDF—evident at the start of the Sandline Affair—might also inhibit any propensity towards coups.

Finally, a perception, at independence, of the PNGDF as a cohesive 'super-tribe' has dissipated over the years. It was clear that divisions—along 'ethnic'/regional lines (Papua/Momase/Highlands/Islands) and around individual personalities—existed within the Defence Force at the time of the Sandline Affair, and the events of 1997 exacerbated these divisions. Although this may have changed among younger officers in recent years, it seems likely that only a serious threat to the corporate identity of the PNGDF could generate the cohesion necessary for an effective challenge to the government.

⁴⁷ Ron J. May, 'The Military in Papua New Guinea: a "Culture of Instability"?', in R. J. May (ed.), *'Arc of Instability'? Melanesia in the Early 2000s* (Christchurch: Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury and State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, 2003), p. 6. However, a former Papua New Guinea-based Australian soldier has argued that these problems are not insurmountable, and does not rule out the possibility of a coup—see Trevor Rogers, 'The Papua New Guinea Defence Force. Vanuatu (1980) to Bougainville (1990)', unpublished PhD thesis, The Australian National University, Canberra, 2003.

⁴⁸ Cf. M. Mietzner and N. Farrelly, 'Mutinies, Coups and Military Interventionism: Papua New Guinea and South-East Asia in Comparison', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 67, no. 3 (2013), pp. 345-7.

Having said this, a possibility remains of collaboration between opportunistic politicians and disgruntled soldiers challenging government in order to achieve different political outcomes. The politicisation of senior PNGDF personnel, which was evident in the 1980s and 1990s and again since the January 2012 mutiny,⁴⁹ tends to undermine military professionalism and make such collaboration more likely.

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⁴⁹ The appointment by the O'Neill Government in early 2014 of a retired officer, Colonel Geoffrey Wiri, as chief of operations was strongly criticised from within and outside the PNGDF. (In the event Wiri did not take up the position.)