The 1977 general elections in Papua New Guinea (PNG) were the first since independence was granted by Australia on September 16, 1975. Many observers had predicted that anarchy, bloodshed, and general instability would soon follow. Several indicators were very suggestive of this outcome. The country's 700 linguistic groups are not integrated notwithstanding claims by the emerging local intelligentsia that a "Melanesian Way" binds the population into a single national entity. The economy, built on copper, coffee, copra, and cocoa, has stagnated. The price of copper plunged to levels very close to the cost of production, and copper revenues, which provided over half of the country's internal taxes three years ago, yielded less than 20% in 1977. To some extent this decline was offset by the existence of a copper stabilization fund and the rise in coffee prices. Foreign investment has been reduced to a trickle, while large numbers of students who either drop out of school or graduate search unsuccessfully for jobs. The Public Service system, which over the last four years doubled in size to 50,000 employees in a country with only 2,700,000 people, has practically frozen its rate of recruitment. It is also evident that the PNG civil servant, having been raised in a traditional village based on subsistence agriculture and an unregulated routine, finds the imported Western bureaucratic structure and its insistence on efficiency boring and unrewarding. The urban population drift continues to increase at a rate of 20%, while old and new urban dwellers alike rely on foreign import sources for nearly 40% of their food needs. Endemic tribal fighting in the Highlands continues unabated, particularly in the Chimbu and Enga provinces where police intervention has become increasingly ineffective.

But while these problems continue to grow, they have not intensified to the point where public order is endangered. The government machinery continues to throttle along, lubricated by a massive Aus-
tralian aid package of over US $225 million per annum. Its capability can conceivably absorb the unemployment, economic stagnation, bureaucratic inefficiency, increasing urbanization, and a high import bill for fuel and food for a few more years before these factors deteriorate into forces that will disrupt the society. The problems have been recognized by decision-makers, but have been handled routinely rather than urgently.

In 1977, two events of critical significance to Papua New Guinea's future, however, did occur. First, the results of the general elections witnessed a legislative turnover of 50% bringing into office a very different set of Papua New Guinean Parliamentarians—better educated and more nationalistic than all previous groups—to handle the country's problems. Second, the border that PNG shares with the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya has been inflamed to unprecedented heights. These two events were linked in a critically significant way. While legislators in the previous Parliament chose to turn a blind eye to the problems of refugees crossing the border and Indonesian military expeditions against the Irian Jayanese Freedom Fighters, several members of the new Parliament have publicly and vocally challenged the PNG government to assist their "Melanesian brothers" across the border in their struggle against Indonesia. Indonesia has already served notice to the PNG government that it would not tolerate any assistance to the Freedom Fighters. Papua New Guinea's military is small with only about 3,500 soldiers, but its people, particularly the urban young and educated, are becoming openly defiant of their government's collaboration with Indonesia in arresting and returning refugees to the Indonesians. Papua New Guinean solidarity with their Melanesian counterparts across the border is growing. Therein lies a potentially explosive situation especially when new national legislative leaders display no inhibition in exploiting an emotional ethnic bond for political purposes. We shall look first at the 1977 elections, then the Irian Jaya issue.

The Election Results

Between June 19 and July 9, 1977, the fourth general elections in thirteen years occurred in Papua New Guinea. The number of candidates and electorates in PNG have varied significantly.

From 1964 to 1977, the average number of candidates has increased one and a half times per constituency from 5.5 to 8.0. Explanations for the increase include such factors as the persistence of clan and tribal cohesion; the lack of a strong grass-roots based party system; the financial and status attractiveness of the job as a Parliamentarian; and the very high interest in politics shared by the population as a whole.¹

We believe that all of these hypotheses are partially correct, but suggest that another important proposition emerges from an analysis of the backgrounds of the candidates, and especially the successful ones in the 1977 general elections. "Business" and "development" are pervasive themes in practically all parts of PNG. Large numbers of educated Papua New Guineans who have lived and worked in the modern sector, including 78 public servants, undertook individually to represent their people by promising to attract more business and government projects into their respective areas. Promoting the economic development of their clans and regions appears to have become a new arena for electoral rivalry among candidates.

The number of constituencies has also doubled since 1964, from 54 to 109. This increase partly stems from the realization that each constituency was too large and internally diverse to permit balanced representation of citizen interests in Parliament. In addition, the population had increased from 2 million in 1964 to nearly 3 million in 1977. New provinces (such as Enga, Chimbu, and the National Capital District) and geographically smaller electorates were created. The average population for each constituency was 30,000 in 1977, although the range extended from 18,297 in the case of Central Bougainville Open to 46,458 in the Okapa Open constituency.

The old two-tier system of open and regional electorates was retained in the 1977 elections to derive representatives for PNG's unicameral legislature. The relationship between candidate and electorate was mediated by two different electoral systems between 1964 and 1977. From 1964 to 1972, the electoral system was a modified version of the Australian preferential ballot. Several observers have argued that the preferential system, because of its complexity, discouraged voting participation. Consequently, the simple first-past-the-post system was introduced, but voting turnout decreased. Voting turnout in 1964 was 72.3%; in 1968, 63%; in 1972, 60%; and in 1977, between 58 and 59%.

A party system spearheaded by the formation of the Pangu Pati in 1967 began to take shape in 1968. Conservative anti-Pangu forces refused to call themselves "political parties," attributing to the appellation negative sentiments associated with "radicalism," "self-government," and "communism." This was, however, only a temporary phase when parties were "suspect." The 1977 elections consolidated the pattern of party preeminence established in 1972 and, equally important, showed that not only were parties now a permanent fact of political life but that certain parties had stabilized and consolidated their strength, and persisted into the 1977 period. The election results of 1977, in terms of their party power, are given in Table 1.

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TABLE 1: 1977 Election Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTIES</th>
<th>SEATS 1977</th>
<th>SEATS 1972</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PANGU</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNITED</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATIONAL</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COUNTRY</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAUTAUNGANS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAPUA BESENA</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDEPENDENTS</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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No single party commands on absolute majority in the Parliament, making a coalition arrangement necessary. The governing coalition, led by Michael Somare, now has the following support base: Pangu—40; PPP—20; Bougainville bloc—4; and Independent—5—or a total of 69. The combined opposition elements are as follows: United Party—24; Papua Besan—6; and Independents—6—or a total of 36. Sir Tei Abal leads the official opposition, but he is likely to be replaced by Sir John Guise, the ex-Governor General. Perhaps the most significant pattern from the 1977 elections is found in the sources of support for the respective parties. The Pangu and PPP, previously accused of being coastal coalition groups, have not only confirmed in most cases their traditional sources of support but also extended their bases to other areas, particularly the Highlands, the traditional bastion of United Party strength. In the case of Pangu, it retained its support in the East and West Sepik provinces and Morobe. While it lost in Bougainville and the Capital District and Central Provinces, it picked up significant gains in the Eastern Highlands and Chimbu provinces. In the case of the PPP, it confirmed its support in New Ireland, West New Britain, and Madang and extended its support to Milne Bay, Western, and Southern Highlands Province. The United Party on the other hand lost heavily in the Highlands particularly in Chimbu, the Eastern Highlands, and Southern Highlands. It retained its support in concentrated form in Enga and Western Provinces and in dispersed numbers over other provinces. How are these results explained? I believe three variables are salient: regional ethno-nationalism, party organization, and issues.

Regional Ethnonationalism: Over the past four years in particular, PNG has witnessed a proliferation of regional and village-based development groups.³ The one feature they seem to have in common is the proposition that the central government is irrelevant to their needs, if not downright harmful, and that, if left alone or given the type of help they specify, they can “develop” through mobilizing village re-

sources. The earlier examples of these movements are the New Guinea Development Corporation (Gazelle), the Kabisawali Movement (Tro-briands), and Napidokoe Navitu (Central Bougainville). They all tend to be based around some specific ethnic or regional boundary.

The impact on policy that these groups have had is in the area of government allocation of more resources and attention to rural development. The groups continue as a virulent and effective source of criticism against a government that allegedly has abandoned self-reliance while importing nearly half of PNG food needs in the monetary sector. The government parties, particularly Pangu, have tended to lose ground in the elections in the areas where the regional groups have gained. Nevertheless, the numerical gains in parliament of the regional groups understate their contemporary influence and impact on government decision-making.

Party Organization: In spite of the persistence of large numbers of independent candidates, the 1977 elections could be accurately described as a contest between the major parties. Pangu endorsed 125 candidates, a number of whom were covert sympathizers; PPP 75; United Party 145; and the very small National and Country parties about 30. In effect, over half of all the candidates were either endorsed by a party or were openly or covertly affiliated to a party. The results clearly demonstrated the superior impact that the party-endorsed and party-affiliated candidates had. Of the 109 elected Parliamentarians, all but ten had party connections. The message must be clear that, partly because they command more resources, parties can support and sustain a candidate in more systematic and professional form than independent candidates or ad hoc groups. During the elections each of the major parties—Pangu, PPP, and United Party—maintained a permanent staff of activists including campaign managers who distributed posters, T-Shirts, buttons, tape recorders, cassettes, and other campaign paraphernalia to their candidates. In addition, they were allocated, unlike independent candidates, free advertising on the only radio station (owned by the government) and each bought newspaper advertisements which appeared in the Post-Courier, Wantok, and Lae News. Party vehicles and speakers were deployed in practically all the electorates.

The atmosphere was unequivocally that of a battle between party giants, with the interstices filled in by regional groups and independent candidates. It is difficult to pinpoint accurately how much each party spent. The Organic Laws on Elections failed to provide for reporting sources of funds. However, it was clear from the large numbers of posters, vehicles, T-Shirts, and public advertisements that the Pangu Pati and PPP, by comparison with the United Party (in 1972, the rich man’s party), were very well financed. Many charges were made that the Pangu-PPP parties bought candidates and votes, but no evidence to substantiate this has yet been given. What is clear, however, is that in so
far as the party organization made a difference in the outcome of the elections, Pangu and PPP by virtue of their larger, well-staffed and well-financed organizations, profited greatly.

It is easy to overstate the role played by the parties in the final election outcome, however, as it is probably wrong to attribute more than 10–20% margin to the party organizational factor, especially in urban and coastal electorates. The evidence that has come in from the electorates show, on a polling booth to polling booth basis, that the primary determinant of voter preference was ethnic primordial sentiment. It is clear from the results that the party contribution to electoral victory must be interpreted in terms of the party strategy in nominating candidates. Generally, the parties have chosen candidates who in the first instance had a strong ethnic base, as well as being “well-known” and “well-connected” to community organizations such as the Church. When the party added its support to the total of these “resident” factors, the difference in outcome occurred.

The “performance” and “record” factors must also not be deemphasized when the final determinants of a victory margin are evaluated. The high turnover of parliamentarians in general elections in PNG is now a fairly well known pattern. In 1968, 1972, and 1977 only about half of the members of Parliament who contested again were reelected. The United Party lost over 50% of its incumbent members who sought reelection.

The high turnover seems to have two plausible explanations. The first one suggests that rapid changes in the social and economic structure in PNG throw up new leadership needs. Hence, in each election since 1964, one notes the progressive upgrading of candidates’ education and qualification, with an emphatic departure from traditional and subsistence oriented factors and a move toward modernizing characteristics such as formal education and skills.4 The second explanation refers to the failure of most MHA’s to visit their electorates during their term in office to inform their constituents of issues, etc., and just as significantly, their failure to bring such things as roads, schools, and business to their provinces and electorates. The promises of the past were not fulfilled, hence the electorate turns to new promise-makers.

Issues: Finally, what role have issues and programs played in the final outcome of the elections? At a national level, the coalition parties emphasized their accomplishments, especially in the areas of self-government and independence, and in establishing a network of indigenous infrastructure such as a new national currency, airlines, and banks for Papua New Guinean use. Early in the campaign, it was clear that the United Party was scoring decisively as several Pangu candidates in particular found it difficult to defend the levels of unemployment, school

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dropouts, and bureaucratic inefficiency. Then in the middle of the campaign came a change in issue strategy. Pangu knew that Michael Somare was the most widely known and liked politician in PNG. However, voters did not connect Pangu performance with Somare's positive image. They seemed to have perceived them separately. It was then left to the Pangu campaign strategists to find a way to link the two. This they did by adopting the following words, which thereafter became Pangu's main banner throughout the remaining part of the campaign: "If you want Somare to be your Prime Minister, support your Pangu candidate." The Opposition had no answer for this strategy and it seemed that this line, repeatedly invoked and saturating the media, adequately covered up Pangu and the PPP's past failures to which the Opposition pointed successfully during the earlier part of campaign.

At the local level, issues were diverse, depending upon the area of the country one is talking about. Issues were substantially locally derived, but played a secondary role to a candidate's primordial affiliation, his record and performance, and his party support. Generally, however, the sort of issue that seemed to be most commonly raised was economic development. Candidates promised to bring varied brands of short- and long-term "cargo" to their electorates. In only a few cases, "cargo cults" and cargo leaders literally played significant roles, such as in the Pomio area of East New Britain and in the Sepik (Peli Association.) But, by and large, the 1977 issues were about long-term "cargo"—rural development projects, schools, the price of coffee, school dropouts, jobs.

Irian Jaya Policy

On the eve of the 1977 general elections, the small trickle of refugees from Irian Jaya to Papua New Guinea dramatically expanded to a flood. Over 1,500 persons fled across the border from Indonesia's most easterly province. Under the agreement between the PNG government and Indonesia, these refugees were illegal immigrants who should be returned to the Indonesian border authorities. Widespread popular sentiment in PNG however, was, against this procedure. The PNG government refused reporters access to the border area, claiming that the refugees wanted to return to Irian Jaya. When, on demand, a United Nations refugee representative was finally allowed to inspect the refugee area, he reported that the people were badly frightened and did not wish to go back.

This affair became further inflamed when it was revealed that Indonesian troops had crossed the border several miles into PNG and had

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killed at least one PNG citizen in the process. The Somare government clearly was struggling to cope with two equally vicious forces at a time when its political life was on the line. First, the Pangu-IPPP coalition campaigned partly on the platform that they had successfully maintained stability in the country over the last five years. However, should the populace perceive that Somare was flagrantly collaborating with the Indonesians in the suppression of their “Melanesian brothers,” then the political gains from the stability theme might have been destroyed. Second, the PNG Prime Minister was bound by the imposition of the unequal power distribution between PNG and Indonesia to abide with the terms of the border agreement. To the Somare government, it was of primary importance to maintain friendly relations with Indonesia. Recent events in East Timor had served as a stern reminder that its bigger neighbor can be brutal.

The border difficulties fall into a larger category of events in which Indonesia’s hold on Irian Jaya is very much at stake. An increasingly virulent anti-Indonesian guerilla movement based along the PNG border continues to harass and embarrass an Indonesian force of some 3,000 soldiers. Called the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM) or West Papuan Freedom Fighters, it was formed as a result of the massive Indonesian entry into West Irian after 1963 and kept alive by the steady infusion of Indonesian migrants who now constitute about 250,000 of the population. The OPM was formed by West Papuan dissidents about 1965 with the objective of promoting West Irian self-determination. Coming not long after the Dutch effort to retain control over the area, it was viewed as an alien-inspired remnant that sought to continue the Dutch struggle against Indonesia’s acquisition of West Irian. However, its persistence has eliminated this image, especially after 1970 when it obtained the services of Brigadier General Seth Jafet Rumkorem, an Indonesian trained intelligence officer from Biak, Irian Jaya. Rumkorem defected from the Indonesian armed forces to lead the OPM.

The OPM has an overseas political branch in Holland and an information center in Dakar, Senegal. However, a major source of its external strength is located among the 10,000 refugees in Papua New Guinea. In July 1970, the OPM proclaimed the formation of a Provisioinal Revolutionary Government. Much of its sympathy and support are confined to the area in and around the Irian Jaya capital, Jayapura, and in the Eastern Highlands. Evidence on their size, military capability, and successes vary considerably. The Indonesians seem to concede that there about 2,000 of them, while the OPM claims that it has over 20,000 trained guerillas. Within the OPM’s military field force, an important leadership split between “conservatives” and “radicals” has just occurred. The Rumkorem group is pro-West and capitalist; the

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Jacob Prai group is anti-West and socialist. Rumkorem was deposed as leader of the OPM and Prai named the new leader. The implications thus far have been that the OPM become more activist and better equipped with modern weapons under Prai, a young ex-university student leader.  

Indonesia's main fear of the OPM is not so much in its military capability as in its growing popularity in PNG. The persistence and alleged successes of the Freedom Fighters have brought forth open admiration from many influential Papua New Guineans. University students in Port Moresby, in particular, have on more than one occasion mounted demonstrations on their behalf. During 1973 and 1974, General Rumkorem was invited to Port Moresby to hold discussions with PNG's Foreign Minister to find a solution to the border issue. Under pressure by the Indonesian government, PNG officials sought to persuade the OPM to lay down its arms and accept permanent residence in PNG, conceding Irian Jaya to the Indonesians. The OPM refused this offer, whereupon the PNG government decided to implement a firm policy of policing the border to prevent the OPM from using PNG territory as a place of escape and respite for the guerillas. In addition, the PNG government decided to cooperate fully with the Indonesian authorities in returning refugees.

It is these events that, quietly handled in the past, are now being fed into PNG's domestic politics creating much controversy and turmoil. The newly elected Parliamentarians are more nationalistic as pointed out earlier. When Somare at the United Nations recently castigated South Africa and Uganda's Amin for their denial of human rights to their citizens, a member of the PNG Parliament, and of Somare's own party, said: "How can he talk about human rights when he condones the oppressive Indonesian regime in Irian Jaya? I believe we have the moral obligation to help West Papua. They are our people." Another Parliamentarian openly commented: "Can we refuse to support the struggle by our blood brothers in West Papua against Indonesian oppression? Can we continue to refuse to harbor the refugees and keep sending them back only to be herded into prison camps to “disappear” under Indonesian hands?"  

Clearly, the border issue has the potential to transcend party loyalty and discipline. It is because of this fear and the real possibility that

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10 "Bais: Clean up Own Background First," *Post-Courier*, October 4, 1977, p. 3.

local politicians would exploit the widespread PNG distrust of Indonesia for political ends that the Indonesians react very sensitively to the border. The election victory of the Pangu-PPP coalition, then, could very well have created its own problems for the continued stability of the government. The insistence by Indonesia that the refugees be returned is now matched much more vocally by the growing demand that PNG's Melanesian brothers across the border be accorded official support. This is no small matter. Already it has embroiled the Commander of the PNG Defence Force, Brig. General Ted Diro, in an open conflict with the civilian government. General Diro was severely reprimanded by the Cabinet in September for secretly visiting and consulting with General Rumkorem. In turn, the PNG defense boss publicly warned the politicians to stay out of military matters. For two successive weeks fears were openly expressed that the PNG military, staunchly supportive of General Diro, might be tempted to intervene in civilian politics. At one point the government reacted by placing several key civil servants under special security guard. This is the measure of the possible implications that the border issue can have on the future of PNG's domestic politics as well as for relations between PNG and Indonesia.