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The Politics of Papua New Guinea

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Introduction

Papua New Guinea commands global attention not only for its astonishing linguistic and cultural diversity, but also for the complexity and vibrance of its political system. Since achieving independence from Australia in 1975, PNG has charted a distinctive course as a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy, blending inherited Westminster traditions with unique local adaptations. The path it has followed—marked by resilience, ingenuity, and at times, significant struggles—offers an illuminating study in how democracy can flourish in diverse and challenging social contexts.

The political system of PNG is defined by the interplay between inherited institutions and deeply rooted indigenous practices. The Constitution, adopted at independence and evolved through numerous amendments, lays down the foundations of government, the rights of citizens, and the responsibilities of elected leaders. However, the real-life workings of governance are shaped by the intersections of the formal structures with cultural phenomena such as the wantok system, traditional authority figures, and the enduring strength of clan and kinship bonds. These unique elements infuse PNG politics with both dynamism and complexity, creating a political environment unlike any other.

Central to understanding PNG politics is recognition of the three-tiered system of government—national, provincial, and local—along with an independent judiciary and a fluid, constantly evolving party landscape. While Papua New Guinea's political institutions have generally succeeded in upholding regular elections and democratic competition, they have also weathered frequent allegations of corruption, political instability, and sporadic outbursts of election-related violence. The challenges are formidable, and yet the resilience of PNG's democratic framework has been repeatedly demonstrated by its ability to navigate changes in leadership and address political crises within constitutional boundaries.

This book aims to serve as a comprehensive guide and resource for readers seeking to understand the intricacies of politics and the political system in Papua New Guinea. Through twenty-five in-depth chapters, it will explore the history, structure, processes, actors, and cultures that shape governance at every level. From the constitutional adoption and subsequent amendments, to elections characterized by energetic competition and frequent irregularities, each aspect of the political system will be explored in detail, with attention given to current debates and future prospects.

Throughout, particular focus is placed on the challenges of governing such a diverse nation. Issues such as the fluid nature of party allegiances, corruption, the impacts of

customary practices, gender participation, and Bougainville's aspirations for greater autonomy or even independence are given comprehensive attention. In doing so, the book seeks not only to present an inventory of facts but also to provide context and insight into what these realities mean for PNG's democracy and its prospects for stable, equitable, and participatory governance.

Ultimately, *The Politics of Papua New Guinea* hopes to offer scholars, students, analysts, and all interested readers a clear and nuanced introduction to the forces driving PNG's political evolution. By unpacking the historical legacies, contemporary challenges, and potential pathways ahead, it strives to deepen appreciation for the achievements and complexities of governance in one of the world's most unique and vibrant democracies.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Context: Papua New Guinea Before Independence

To truly grasp the intricate tapestry of Papua New Guinea's political system today, we must first journey back in time, long before the formal structures of government took root. This land, with its rugged landscapes and astonishing human diversity, has a history stretching back tens of thousands of years, a history shaped by migration, adaptation, and the development of complex, localized societies. Understanding this pre-colonial past is crucial because it laid the groundwork for the social and cultural dynamics that continue to influence politics in PNG.

Human inhabitants are thought to have arrived in what is now Papua New Guinea approximately 50,000 to 60,000 years ago, migrating from Southeast Asia. This makes the indigenous cultures of New Guinea among the oldest continuous cultures on the planet, a fact that underscores the depth of their traditions and social structures. These early peoples were primarily hunter-gatherers, adept at surviving in the varied environments of the island.

Around 7,000 BC, a significant development occurred in the Highlands: the independent development of agriculture. This was a momentous step, transforming societies from nomadic groups to more settled communities tied to the land. The cultivation of crops, particularly taro, and later the introduction of the sweet potato around 300 years ago, led to increased food production and supported larger populations, especially in the fertile valleys of the Highlands. This agricultural revolution fostered the growth of more complex social organizations and likely contributed to the development of distinct cultural groups.

Another wave of migration, around 2,500 years ago, saw the arrival of Austronesian-speaking peoples along the coastal regions. These migrants brought with them new technologies and practices, including pottery, pigs, and different fishing techniques. Their arrival led to interactions, and in some cases integration, with the existing populations, adding further layers to the already diverse cultural landscape. These coastal communities also became part of larger trade networks.

These pre-colonial societies were characterized by their small scale and localized nature. Loyalty and identity were primarily tied to clan and kinship groups, forming what is now often referred to as the "wantok system." This system of reciprocal obligations and support remains a powerful force in contemporary PNG society and politics. Within these groups, leadership often revolved around "big men" – individuals who gained influence and status through their achievements, generosity, and ability to

mobilize resources and people, rather than through hereditary titles in many areas.

While some societies did have hereditary chieftaincies, the "big man" model of leadership was prevalent in many areas. This emphasis on achieved status through competition and the need to maintain social networks and obligations created a political dynamic based on personal influence and negotiation, a pattern that can still be observed in modern PNG politics. Decision-making in these societies was often a consensual process, involving consultation and agreement among community members.

The island's rugged terrain and dense forests contributed to the isolation of many communities, leading to the development of an astonishing number of distinct languages and cultures. With over 800 known languages, PNG is one of the most linguistically diverse nations in the world. This fragmentation meant that there was no single, unifying political entity across the entire island before European arrival.

European contact with New Guinea began in the early 16th century, with Portuguese and Spanish navigators likely being the first to sight the island. Jorge de Meneses, a Portuguese explorer, is credited with the European discovery of the principal island around 1526-27, and he is said to have given it the name "Papua," derived from a Malay term possibly referring to the frizziness of Melanesian hair. Later, in 1545, another Spaniard, Yñigo Ortiz de Retes, used the name "New Guinea" due to a perceived resemblance between the local inhabitants and the people of the Guinea coast in West Africa.

For centuries following these initial sightings, European interaction remained largely limited to coastal areas and brief visits by traders, whalers, and explorers. Attempts at colonization were infrequent and largely unsuccessful in these early years. The Dutch claimed the western half of the island in 1828, but their control remained mostly nominal for many decades.

It wasn't until the late 19th century that European powers began to assert more significant control over the island. Driven by commercial interests, particularly in resources like copra, and strategic considerations, a scramble for territory in the Pacific ensued. German trading firms established a presence in the northern part of the island and the Bismarck Archipelago in the 1870s and 1880s.

In 1884, Germany formally annexed the northeastern quarter of the island and several adjacent islands, establishing German New Guinea. Administration was initially entrusted to the German New Guinea Company, a chartered company, before the German imperial government assumed direct control in 1899. This period saw attempts to establish plantations and exploit resources, often relying on introduced labor.

Around the same time, in 1884, a British protectorate was declared over the southern coast of New Guinea, the area that would become known as Papua. This move was partly influenced by the colony of Queensland's concerns about German expansion and its own brief, unauthorized annexation attempt the previous year. The British protectorate was formally annexed in 1888, becoming British New Guinea.

In 1902, British New Guinea was effectively transferred to the authority of the newly formed Commonwealth of Australia. This transfer was formalized in 1906 with the passage of the Papua Act, officially renaming the territory the Territory of Papua and placing it under formal Australian administration. Papua remained a British possession in a legal sense, administered by Australia, which would have implications for its legal system after independence.

The two territories, German New Guinea in the north and the Territory of Papua in the south, were administered separately by their respective colonial powers. This created a historical divergence in their administrative experiences and development trajectories that would persist even after they were brought under a single administration later on.

World War I brought an end to German rule in New Guinea. Australian troops occupied German New Guinea in 1914. Following the war, under the Treaty of Versailles, Germany lost its colonial possessions. The League of Nations issued

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