

## **What worked and what has not in PNG for the last 50 years? By Joseph Ketan**

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THE Year 2025 marks the 50 Anniversary of Constitutional Independence for Papua New Guinea. No doubt, many of you are thinking of ways to celebrate this significant milestone in the history of our country.

Some public sector organisations will be paying tribute to the nation by publishing their corporate achievements, in relation to their mission statements, over the last 50 years. Others will place newspaper advertisements – highlighting successes, making excuses for failures, and perhaps promising to learn from the mistakes.

My contribution is in the form of an analysis of what has worked – and what has not worked – in the last fifty years.

Overall, there is not much to rejoice about our recent past; indeed, five decades of consistent mismanagement of the public resources by scoundrels has left the country bankrupt.

The politics of the belly, coupled with the preoccupation with bringing home the metaphorical bacon in the form of “slush” funds, has transferred nearly all development funds into private accounts. The District Services Improvement Program (DSIP) and the Provincial Services Improvement Program (PSIP) funds have been regularly used in pork-barrel politics and have thus become an effective vehicle for corruption. Public Investment Program (PIP) funds from National Planning Department have also been misused, misappropriated, or stolen outright by crooked politicians and their corrupt cronies.

Politicians all over the world have a terrible habit of planting their snouts in the public trough, but PNG politicians have taken it to another level by depleting district accounts as soon as Finance Department releases funds.

The obvious reason for us to celebrate 50 years of Independence would be that we are still here, as a nation, in spite of early doomsday predictions of black chaos; in spite of recent state failure claims; and, in spite of the widespread systematic looting of natural resources. The willful destruction of state institutions, the theft of public funds, and the plunder of natural resources could have destroyed this country.

Notwithstanding the massive blows, Papua New Guinea is still standing tall among the global community of free countries! PNG has avoided “state failure” in what one ANU academic described as the “Pacific arch of instability”.

Thankfully, our country has not suffered bloodshed at the hands of tyrants and dictators.

The military coup culture of black Africa has not taken roots here, even though our Pacific friends over in Fiji have gone through two coups d'états in 1987, another in 2000, and more recently in 2006. We can thank our first Prime Minister Michael Somare for stepping aside, thereby allowing a peaceful transition of power, following a successful vote of no confidence against him in 1980. Somare, who led the country to Independence in 1975, could have refused to hand over the reins to Julius Chan, by getting PNGDF Commander Brig Gen Ted Diro to support him. Such an action would have led us down the coup path that our African brethren have taken – with awful consequences!

Government systems and processes worked well in the first decade after Independence from Australia. Despite criticisms from the United Nations, the Australian Colonial Administration built roads through rugged terrain to connect the interior of the country to the coastal port towns of Lae and Madang for coffee to be hauled out and supplies brought in for development projects. The Administration established transport infrastructure and basic government systems for development. Roads were kept open. Services were delivered evenly across the country. Order was maintained. Tribal fighting in the Highlands was stopped. Crime was low.

Corruption was not present. Plantations were running efficiently. The wheels of the economy were spinning. It was a time of hope. Great hope for the future.

Hope turned to despair only after a decade of Independence.

The next two decades of experimentation in governance, with young parliamentarians learning about running a country while on the job, led to mismanagement of the country and the looting of state resources.

The rot set in soon after the Public Service Commission was marginalised, enabling politicians to appoint relatives from the village to head government departments and to sit on boards of SOEs. As a result, the public service became inefficient and was unable to deliver services. The PNGBC and other state-owned enterprises began losing money. State regulatory authorities were compromised by corrupt foreign companies. The logging industry in particular suffered significantly from transfer pricing and corruption, with government ministers and public servants implicated in shady deals with foreign companies.

The Ombudsman Commission, then at its peak performance, along with the Public Prosecutor, ensured that corrupt leaders were investigated, referred for prosecution under Leadership Code, and consequently dismissed from public office, though in hindsight, it seems more of the culprits should have been prosecuted under the Criminal Code and jailed. At the sub-national level, the abolition of the provincial government system in 1995 saw the decline of service delivery. Politicians took development funds away from the public service and used them on pet projects and to feather retirement nests. Initially through the Joint District Planning and Budget Priorities Committees (JDPBPC) and later via the District Development Authorities (DDA), parliamentarians effectively control development funds. Governors wield enormous power at the provincial level, though regularly suffer the indignity of waiting for annual appropriations from the National Government that comes in dribs and drabs.

Much of the harm done to this country is self-inflicted. Ordinary people dig up telephone lines to build fences, burn down power poles, and raze school buildings to the ground. MPs abuse electoral development funds. Public servants serve no one but themselves. Governments sign away billions of dollars in tax breaks for mega extractive mineral and petroleum projects.

In pursuing self-interest, we have strayed from the path towards our National Goals and Directive Principles enshrined in the Preamble of the PNG Constitution.

Of course, it would not be fair to say that Papua New Guineans are entirely responsible for the current situation.

Only a handful of Papua New Guineans were at the helm. You can count the prime ministers in one hand (Micheal Somare, Julius Chan, Paias Wingti, Rabbie Namaliu, Bill Skate, Mekere Morauta, Peter O'Neill and James Marape). You could do the same with the principal bureaucrats. The famed razor gang of four (Charles Lepani, Mekere Morauta, Rabbie Namaliu and Anthony Siaguru) were influential young public servants who played an important role in planning after independence. The Chief Secretaries (Robert Igara, Joshua Kalinoe, Manasupe Zurenuoc, Isaac Lupari and Ivan Pomaleu) advise the PM and the NEC on public policy.

Apart from these people, and perhaps a few other politicians and public servants, an overwhelming majority of Papua New Guineans have had no direct input in the management of this country.

Outsiders who have had the greatest influence on our leaders include advisers from Canberra. Some academics from Australian universities are genuine friends – Ted Wolfers, Bill Standish and Ron May come to mind.

Others, however, had more sinister motives. Here, I am thinking of the consultants from the World Bank who piggyback structural adjustment program loans.

After the implosion of the Skate Government in 1999, Sir Mekere became Prime Minister and implemented several public sector reforms in quick succession. The reforms included OLLIPAC aimed at promoting stability in government, LPV to increase the mandate of MPs, privatisation of SOEs, and financial reforms to give greater autonomy to the Bank of PNG and to stabilise monetary policy. These reforms were needed.

Other reforms, however, were not needed. We have been hoodwinked by fly-by-night consultants into implementing public sector reforms that were not needed.

Most of the reforms were aimed at fixing systems that were NOT broken in the first place.

The reforms in provincial government destroyed good governance systems and processes. The establishment of parliamentary discretionary funds, presently maintained at K20 million kina per MP, annually, under the DSIP, destroyed both the electoral process and the political system. The creation of the District Development Authority has empowered Open MPs with huge amounts of money, starving off local level government councillors.

One such example is the 1995 Provincial and Local level Government Act that replaced the 1977 Provincial Government Act. The provincial government system was working. Paias Wingti and Sir Julius Chan got rid of provincial government and brought in governors to run provinces. Provincial Governors have brought in their own staff to disburse development funds, thus undermining the role of public servants in the provinces. Only a few Governors understand national issues and actively participate in parliamentary debates, while most of them are overwhelmed with parochial struggles in the provinces.

Another example of a reform aimed at fixing a system that was not broken was the outcome-based education (OBE) curriculum. In 1993, OBE was brought in to replace the standard-based education (SBE) curriculum. After 20 years of experimenting with OBE, we have now gone back to the old SBE system, based on core subjects for all students, rather than clinging onto an educational theory that bases each part of an educational system around goals or outcomes.

The punishing IMF structural adjustment programs imposed on PNG, as a condition for WB loans, combined with the unnecessary public sector reforms, and systematic corruption, have set us back some 40 years.

Consequently, our education system was almost destroyed, thus harrowingly resonating Nelson Mandela's words that you do not need an atomic bomb to destroy a country – all you need to do is destroy its education system.

Our health system has collapsed, owing to the combined forces of underfunding and corruption in procurement processes, resulting in deaths from curable diseases.

Our electoral process has been corrupted at all stages, from voter registration to the scrutiny of the ballot, by candidates, supporters, voters, polling officials, returning officers, security officers, and by politicians.

Our political system has been corrupted by money politics, which, in turn, questions the credibility of parliament and government.

Our coffee plantations have shut down. Our rural roads are rutted, impassable at some sections, making it hard for crops to be taken out to markets and school and health supplies to be brought into local communities. Our economy has been destroyed by gross mismanagement.

Papua New Guinea ranks among the lowest in social indicators. Conversely, PNG ranks among the highest in corruption perception index, with its cities ranked among the most dangerous places to live in the world.

Yet, our country is still running. The wheels of the economy are still spinning. Farmers in rural Papua New Guinea depend on their land for survival. The government – and state institutions – might collapse, but Papua New Guineans will continue to survive on their own! What is working? Traditional Melanesian good governance practices in decision-making via consensus, transparent and accountable distribution of wealth in ceremonial exchanges, environmental protection and conservation of plant and animal species by harvesting only what is needed for sustenance, the kinship social welfare system that protects the old and frail, conflict resolution processes that have now indigenized the village court system, and the land tenure system that ensures egalitarianism and a meritocracy of leadership through the classic New Guinea big-man model.

These are essentially traditional Melanesian cultural glues that bind society. For Papua New Guinea to achieve its development goals and become prosperous, policy-makers need go back to our shared past to retrieve the basic elements of society that we have recklessly discarded along the road of development, as started by the Constitutional Planning Committee, and combine these with the Judeo-Christian principles of good governance.

Papua New Guinea is the home of pure democracy. All the principles of good governance were practiced here – well before the World Bank made it popular in 1989!

Papua New Guinea is the birthplace of global agriculture. Our people were planting crops and living in houses 10,000 years ago, when Europeans were still living in caves, depending on hunting and gathering for survival. We gave the world sugarcane, bananas, yams, taro, and winged bean.

Our food gardens produce organic food with medicinal properties that protect us from diseases and, probably, global pandemics.

Our rainforests contain a rich source of pharmaceutical products yet to be harvested in our global efforts to find a cure for cancer and other diseases that have tormented humanity for centuries.

Our extended family system provides our children and elders with love and care that cannot be found in the nursing homes of industrialised countries.

Our kinship system provides a social safety net for students, fresh graduates seeking employment, and others facing hardships in towns and cities.

Our strength lies in our contributions to world history. We have demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of globalisation.

This kind of strength is rare and, therefore, worth celebrating at our fiftieth anniversary of Independence!