

POLICY BRIEF

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THE 2012 NATIONAL ELECTIONS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: AVERTING VIOLENCE

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The 2012 general elections in Papua New Guinea are likely to be marred by violence. The increased financial bounty at stake, the enhanced value of political office, the proliferation of weapons, and pressures on PNG's Electoral Commission, Defence Force and police combine to highlight security concerns around the elections, particularly in the Highlands provinces. Coming soon after the complex constitutional crisis of December 2011, flawed elections will further dent public confidence in the government's ability to uphold Westminster democratic principles. They may also serve to erode international confidence in the quality of PNG's democratic processes, which has already been affected by previous problems with elections in PNG.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

The PNG Government will need foreign support in the areas of administration, security and logistics. Critical types of immediate support that should be offered as part of a wider package of assistance include:

- *Provision of sufficient helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft and crews to support timely delivery, collection and security of ballot boxes*
- *Support for an independently run pre-election weapons amnesty and buy-back*
- *Financial and training support for a domestic electoral observer group supported by a team of international observers.*

Longer-term support on an ongoing basis should also be negotiated between the PNG Government and international community to avoid a perennial cycle of crisis management of PNG elections.



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Introduction

This paper draws on fieldwork undertaken by the authors between January 2011 and January 2012 among local communities in Port Moresby and three of the more unstable highlands provinces of PNG (Southern Highlands, Western Highlands and Enga).

As it approaches national elections in June, Papua New Guinea is at a turning point in its history. Despite ten unbroken years of economic growth, rates of poverty, disease, illiteracy and crime are increasing. The bounty on offer from the current resources boom has the potential to increase the stakes of political and electoral competition. The government also stands at a point of generational change. Public expectations of improved government performance and effectiveness in delivering essential services are rising. The government that assumes power after the elections will be under more pressure to deliver on the ‘social contract’ with the people.

The 2012 elections are also overshadowed by the unresolved political dispute between Prime Minister Peter O’Neill and former Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare. This was triggered by a decision of the Supreme Court on 12 December that Somare was the legitimate Prime Minister of PNG because there was no vacancy in the office of Prime Minister when Peter O’Neill was elected to the position in parliament on 2 August 2011.

The political dispute between O’Neill and Somare and the predictions of instability and violence in parts of the Highlands provinces harm PNG’s democracy and international

reputation. It is important, therefore, that public trust in PNG’s democracy is maintained and in some respects restored. Peaceful elections that deliver a strong effective coalition government capable of converting resources wealth into better services would assist in rebuilding that trust. The lack of resolution to the political impasse and the 26 January 2012 attempted mutiny within the PNG Defence Force supported by the Somare camp further reflects the immense value of holding political office in PNG.

An Australian journalist monitoring the approaching national elections recently described PNG as ‘teetering on a wide political fault line,’¹ whilst some PNG academics argue that their country is ‘facing a political cyclone in the 2012 elections.’² Such analogies fatalistically accept and imply that the 2012 election will be violent and corrupt as if such an outcome were an axiomatic law of nature. A more rational approach is to properly understand the likely contributors to electoral irregularities and violence in PNG, and to design responses to mitigating these factors on this analysis.

Drivers of violence in PNG’s elections

The 2012 national elections in PNG will take place in an environment of significant social change that is the result of an ongoing disruptive transition from traditional societies to hybrid modernity. In this environment, Westminster institutions, new technologies and a cash economy exist alongside the cultural mores of diverse subsistence societies, only relatively recently united as the nation state of Papua New Guinea. While many issues

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relevant at the last election in 2007 remain, four factors have the potential to increase electoral irregularities and violence.

Shifting patterns of violence: from traditional conflict to modern electoral violence

Traditional customary disputes over land, women and pigs are the major sources of competition and violence in PNG.³ In very simple terms, political success has historically centred on men securing more land, wives and children to expand production and exchange as a means to enhance power. This system and its related forms of social and political conflict were strictly conducted within agreed ‘rules of the game’ that demarcated acceptable levels of violence.

Traditional forms of competition and status are giving way to competition for political power and money within the modern national parliamentary system. This change is transforming what were previously deemed to be acceptable forms of violence. Political Scientist Joe Ketan has detailed this change in conflict behaviour and shown that whilst traditional forms of political activity still occur (gift exchange and retributive violence), such activities are now almost purely directed at securing access to the political opportunities that flow from becoming a Member of Parliament. Such a position is coveted on the grounds that material opportunities available through the State are far greater than those available locally.⁴ Traditional competitive exchange is not exclusively focused on the national political scene but the increasing value placed on the prize of political office is reflected in the significant sums of cash spent on election campaigns – which can be more than successful

candidates have access to recovering once elected.

A recent spike in politically motivated kidnappings,⁵ and attacks (including assassination attempts)⁶ on candidates and electoral officials – is of concern. Such incidents – though not uncommon prior to elections – do not help to build public confidence in security around elections.

One of the most obvious impacts of intensified political competition is the increased demand for cash that voters make of prospective or successful candidates. This form of political behaviour and electoral competition is driven by the local political culture of ‘gift exchange.’ To describe the political culture simply, the majority of people living at the village level tend to see national elections as *taim bilong kai kai* (Tok Pisin for ‘time of food’). As one interviewee said, ‘elections are like a fruit that comes in its season.’ Elections for many local people therefore represent their biggest opportunity in the political cycle to extract material benefits, with the quid pro quo being that the elected candidate can then do what they want for the next five years. Traditionally, this presentation of gifts for electoral returns has been in the form of pigs, food and other basic goods, which have been given in village group settings. In recent years this has morphed in many areas into demand for cash gifts, which are often delivered privately and thereby bypass traditional mechanisms of accountability, implying corruption.

Fieldwork conducted in the Highlands suggests that the ‘cash for votes’ dimension of elections has been inadvertently exacerbated by the

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limited preferential voting (LPV) system implemented in 2002. The data collected during interviews conducted in 2011 suggests that LPV is seen by many voters as providing ‘more bites of the cherry’, with many interviewees claiming that LPV enabled them to sell extra votes (preferences). Average payment figures described by those interviewed priced the sale of a first preference vote at 50 kina, a second preference vote at 30 kina and a third preference vote at 10 kina. These have resulted in a heightened expectation of cash distribution to constituents, which is particularly widespread in the Highlands region. One negative consequence of this evolution is an acceptance of corrupt practices as part of the electoral process in these areas.

Interest in obtaining larger sums of cash may stimulate an increase in criminal activities and corruption. However, a more likely problem that has implications for post-election violence is that candidates will make larger commitments prior to the election, taking on more debt in the form of cash and pigs from more distant sources such as other clans/tribes and businessmen. Unsuccessful candidates must ‘pay back’ these debt obligations; something which is likely to prove difficult if not impossible without access to the spoils of elected office. If repayment of election debts does not occur the result may be widespread violent clan and tribal conflict, based on the alliances that are formed between whole clans and candidates.

Another complicating factor involving money is the growing phenomenon of candidates funding and coordinating ‘spoiler’ candidates to split voting blocs that emerge during the build-up to the election. The evolution of this form of

competition was one of the interesting but least discussed aspects of the 2007 election. Recent fieldwork data for Enga in particular suggests that candidates are already paying off senior clan leaders to stand against a genuine candidate in order to divide voting results in a way that favours their own position. This ‘divide and conquer’ tactic is most evident in the Kompiam-Ambum electorate of Enga and is a trend likely to be evident in other Highlands electorates.

Weapons demand and proliferation

The ongoing proliferation of small arms in PNG presents one of the greatest threats to peaceful and free elections. Weapons are essentially linked to the physical security needs of clans and tribes. The acquisition of light weapons by traditional clan or tribal enemies and criminals has led to a generalised need to acquire weapons to protect land, families and interests. This threat perception is reinforced by the glaring ineffectiveness of law and order agencies across the country to protect people and property.

The main driver of gun proliferation in PNG is effectively a smaller version of the realist ‘security dilemma’ faced by nation states in international relations. ‘You count your sons I’ll count my bullets’ is one of the colloquial phrases mentioned by locals to describe this realist balance of power perspective. The most significant insight from the recent data collected suggests that since the 2007 election there has been a significant spike in the demand for factory-made guns with weapons prices outstripping general inflation in PNG, which over the same period has averaged six per cent per year. The positive news regarding the spike in weapons prices is that supply of weapons

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remains tight, lagging demand. There has not been a significant influx of factory-made weapons, and whilst homemade shotguns have proliferated, the limited availability of ammunition appears to act as a constraint on violence.

A Sign of Increasing Demand for Weapons: Price Inflation 2005-2011

<i>Weapon Type</i>	<i>Average Price, 2005</i>	<i>Average Price, 2011</i>
SLR (7.62mm)	12,150 kina*	25,000-30,000 kina
M16 (5.56mm)	9,000 kina*	21,000-26,000 kina

*Source: (Alpers 2005)

‘The Digicel Effect’: considering the impact of mobile phones

Mobile telephone ownership in PNG has dramatically increased as a result of the arrival of telecommunications company Digicel in 2007. Digicel’s network now includes voice, SMS and internet, and is available to more than 4.5 million Papua New Guineans out of a total population of nearly 7 million.⁷ Although a mobile phone network was available in the Highlands during the 2007 elections, coverage and the number of phone subscribers were limited. Almost the entire Highlands region now has mobile coverage, and this could create a new security challenge in what is the most politically volatile part of PNG.

The 2012 election will be the first in PNG where a large number of citizens have access to instantaneous communications. This technological change has transformed PNG society in a number of positive ways, including enabling greater scrutiny of national politicians

and civic engagement in politics, as demonstrated by the debate conducted on mobile-enabled social media forums during the December 2011 constitutional crisis. Nonetheless, the spread of mobile communications may also have major negative effects on political behaviour and politically motivated violence during the typically tense build-up to the election, and may also exacerbate post-election payback violence.

The recent wave of civil uprisings in the Middle East referred to as ‘the Arab Spring’ clearly demonstrates how technology, including the use of mobile and smart phones, can facilitate the coordination of large groups, provide timely dissemination of information, and can be used to report violence which can have an escalating effect.

In PNG’s unique cultural context, mobiles are now being used to better coordinate swift retribution (referred to as ‘payback’ in PNG customary parlance) against opponents. During the 2007 elections, mobile phones were used to send threats to intimidate opponents and voters, or advise the location and arrival times of ballot boxes. This is likely to occur again in 2012.

There is already some evidence that mobile technologies are exacerbating and complicating traditional forms of payback violence in the highlands, and this evidence has implications for violence around elections. An example of such complications occurred in March 2011, when two women walking beside the Nogoli-Komo road in the Southern Highlands province were killed after being struck by a drunk driver. Fearing payback, the driver fled home to his people in Enga province. Locals initially and

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incorrectly believed, thanks to misinformation passed on by mobile phone, that the driver who had killed the women was from Mt Hagen in the Western Highlands. To satisfy customary desire for immediate payback, locals killed a man from Mt Hagen who was living in the local area. Only later the same day did they realise that the individual who had killed the women was actually from Wabag, Enga province. Situations such as this can often trigger a cycle of reciprocal violence.

There are however, many more positive benefits from mobile phone communications. Voters could be encouraged to use their mobile phones to communicate reports on any problems with elections to relevant authorities. Security forces of course also have access to much better communications than in previous elections, which should enable quicker responses, if they have sufficient resources to do so.

Law and order: police and the military

The security forces face several challenges in ensuring free and peaceful elections. The Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary (RPNGC), or police, and the Royal Papua New Guinea Defence Force have long contended with well-documented financial and logistical deficiencies, and these have been exacerbated by increased demand for services that has resulted as population growth and foreign investment in the resources sector has outstripped growth in police numbers.

A major strain on existing police capability has occurred as a result of police being diverted to work in areas where resources projects operate. The Exxon Mobil PNG LNG project in particular is reducing the capacity of the police

to manage crime outside of a small part of the Southern Highlands where Exxon's project is focused. Numerous other resource projects also underway in the country further increase the corporate demand for state security forces, which is reducing the number of police available for community policing and election-related tasks. Resources projects also tend to dominate the availability of commercial assets like helicopter charters, raising doubts about the capacity of the government to charter additional helicopters for the period of the elections.

While PNG police command claims that it is well prepared to ensure that the country's 2012 election is safe and trouble free,⁸ recent events within the force make such claims appear dubious. Despite recent wage increases⁹ discussions with police and media reports suggest that a significant percentage of frontline police have low morale as a result of chronically poor access to adequate housing and health services, which contributes to police corruption. Tony Wagambie (former police commissioner) specifically made a public appeal to police requesting them not to engage in bribery during the election period.¹⁰

The higher levels of police command are also factionalised and increasingly politicised, as exemplified by the dismissal of previous police commissioner Gary Baki,¹¹ and a split between the Special Services Division (SSD) and a new task force established by Wagambie to handle police operations in the Highlands mining and petroleum sites.¹² Police Commissioner Tom Kulunga has denied that the Police are divided.¹³

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The lack and quality of police resources means that the PNGDF should be more proactively deployed to support the 2012 election. The army in PNG is relatively well respected by the public. To execute effective security operations the PNGDF will require increased financial, training and logistical support. A mutiny within the PNGDF in January 2012 highlights that the risk that politicians may seek to politicise the military for their own advantage in the lead up to the elections.

An opportunity for greater regional cooperation

PNG is a vibrant democracy which has long been marred by weak governance, poor service delivery and corruption. The electoral process itself, however, has been a strength of PNG's democracy, with elections consistently drawing popular participation. International efforts to address the other frailties of PNG's democracy have proved extraordinarily complex and have a patchy record of success. Assistance for the electoral process, however, is comparatively much simpler.

The 2012 PNG elections provide a new opportunity for friends of PNG to increase levels of support and cooperation – both in the short term and the long term. In the short term, foreign assistance could help minimise the likelihood of loss of life and injury caused by violence around the elections. In the long term, foreign assistance is required to strengthen PNG's planning and readiness for elections.

The Australian government has announced Australian 'support for the PNG Electoral Commission (PNGEC) – including in logistics,

operations support, voter awareness and twinning between the PNG Commission and the Australian Electoral Commission' as well as a positive response to a 'PNG Government request for additional operational and logistical support. Australian police are supporting the role of PNG police in election security with communications, training and additional recruits. Defence is funding the commercial lease of two helicopters for the PNGDF to support the elections'.¹⁴

Though seemingly extensive, the actual level of Australia's commitment to the elections is modest relative to the scale and range of risks in these elections. Peaceful and fair elections will require more people to provide 'in-line' advice and support and many more helicopters/aircraft than Australia or the PNG charter companies can provide.

Australia could help by encouraging other partners of PNG to offer assistance. A joint effort by key partners of PNG could mobilise the assistance required and send an important message to PNG about the value the international community places on the integrity of PNG's democracy. In addition to Australia, other countries such as New Zealand and South Korea are providing assistance to the Electoral Commission.¹⁵ India has also offered some technical assistance. The Commonwealth Secretariat is involved in observation of the elections.

The Obama Administration has indicated its strong interest in re-engaging in the Pacific region, with both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell having spoken of the need to demonstrate a

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stronger US interest in the Pacific and in PNG, where the US has a major economic interest in the form of the Exxon Mobil LNG investment. The United States Administration, however, has yet to make a significant gesture that would make a big impact on PNG.

While Australia has the capacity to provide most of the assistance required by PNG, there is a greater value in coordinated plurilateral assistance. Already well versed in the traditions of Australian electoral experience, PNG could benefit from learning from the experience of a variety of democracies in running elections. As recent controversial comments by new Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr demonstrated, Australia can often be perceived as arrogant in its dealings with PNG. A more hands-off approach, facilitated by a wider group of countries and international organisations providing assistance to PNG, would reduce the dominance of Australia and give PNG a greater sense of ownership over the elections.

In addition to the assistance already provided by Canberra, the Australian government could help PNG with securing more assistance from the international community and encouraging effective coordination of that assistance. This should encompass assistance for the Electoral Commission, as well as logistical support for the PNGDF and RPNGC. Discussions with PNG civil society groups and interviews with members of the public suggests there is grassroots support for greater, more comprehensive foreign assistance to help the country address its current political and institutional challenges as long as they are of a limited duration. For the period of the election the general public is likely to support the

deployment of foreign personnel on the ground if they assisting with the logistics of the elections rather than taking a lead on security operations.

Administration of elections

In addition to concerns about violence, the administration of elections in PNG continues to face considerable challenges. Effective management of the common roll and voter identification is a core problem in the administration of elections in PNG. Until there is an effective system and adequate funding for updating the common roll and a system in place to identify genuine voters, there will still be problems with election administration. Foreign support for the Electoral Commission is valuable but needs to be combined with a much greater commitment from the PNG Government to make more appropriate budget allocations on an annual basis to the Commission.

Australia and the international community could assist by engaging the PNG government in discussions about a long-term and ongoing program of electoral assistance that places firm obligations on the PNG government. This could help ensure the Electoral Commission is not battling with the same administrative and logistical obstacles at the next elections.

Policy considerations and actions

The following key areas represent investments that the current PNG government and the country's friends and supporters can

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immediately focus on to manage the security of the election period.

Priorities for foreign government sponsored support

Establishing the legal arrangements to facilitate the short-term presence of foreign police and military contingents during the election period is a difficult policy issue for PNG and friends and supporters of the country. A pre-condition of involvement from external governments in the past has been agreement to a level of immunity or protection of personnel deployed to minimise the risk of miscarriages of justice or poor treatment of personnel.

The Australian Government's Enhanced Co-operation Package (1 and 2), designed to bolster PNG's policing and courts system, previously failed due to the lack of an agreed framework regarding immunity and prosecution.¹⁶

Restricting foreign security support to the provision of logistical assistance would be the best way of avoiding potential conflicts over the activities of foreign personnel.

If temporary minimum legal protection for personnel during the election period is required, PNG could consider establishing a tribunal comprised of local and foreign judges similar to that used to adjudicate Sir Michael Somare's financial affairs in early 2011.

Security programs, education and training

The following areas represent immediate and long-term actions that could be taken to increase the likelihood of peaceful and free elections:

- Education of security forces on the electoral process and the importance of remaining apolitical whilst supporting elections in accordance with the rule of law;
- Technical support to monitor and proactively respond to election-related bribery and corruption by establishing a toll-free telephone hotline that voters can use to call or text message with advice on suspected corruption and/or violent incidents;
- Support the capacity of the PNG Defence force and police to effectively manage stability operations and crowd control utilising current best practice and technologies;
- Weapons buy-back and amnesty in the five most troublesome highlands provinces (Enga, Chimbu, and Eastern, Western and Southern Highlands) to achieve a short-term disruption to local arms markets. The program should be publicly supported by all candidates, linked to district development incentives, and have a moral public-relations element that names and shames individuals involved in weapons trading. A gun and ammunition buy-back scheme that is managed along the lines of the New Zealand-led approach in Bougainville (which contributed to a cessation of hostilities) could have a very positive effect on the elections. In the four to six weeks prior to polling day a significantly higher price could be offered to genuine owners of weapons so that the advantage of handing in weapons is greater than holding on to them. The short buying period would limit the potential for weapons trafficking from Australia and Indonesia to replace the weapons sold between the pre- and post-election periods.

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- Technical support provided after the elections to the police and legal system for effective prosecution of electoral fraud would help deter abuses and strengthen confidence in the state's ability to manage elections.

Electoral support

- An internationally-funded domestic electoral observer capability drawn from PNG's civil society. This will help deter possible violations of the electoral process and enhance the ability to prosecute misconduct by providing witnesses and independent oversight of the elections;
- An additional international observer capability staffed by international organisations and NGOs deployed to the most problematic polling booths in the highlands who can support the domestic observer teams through mentoring and logistical support;
- Further technical and logistical support (particularly helicopter support) to PNG Electoral Commission staff to undertake 'rolling polls.' This would reduce the burden of having to provide security across the whole country at one time;
- Recall police from resource projects to enhance coverage and ensure the security and integrity of electoral commission staff at polling booths.

Conclusion

PNG attracts more than its fair share of negative press regarding safety, security and crime, yet the assertion in the media that elections will be violent and corrupt, even in the Highlands provinces, denies the aspirations

and desires of many citizens for a fair and functional democracy. It also belittles the agency of PNG politicians and policymakers from friendly foreign governments who share an interest in improving stability over the electoral period.

Policymakers in the region have the ability to positively influence and support stability and security during the coming election period in Papua New Guinea.

Election-related violence on its own does not necessarily have an impact on the quality and stability of the government that takes power after the elections. But it has the potential to affect confidence in the ability of the PNG government to deliver free and fair elections in the longer term, which has wider consequences for public trust in PNG's democracy. It also sends negative signals to the international community at a time when PNG should be taking advantage of the resources boom and attracting broader-based foreign investment.

In the months before every election in PNG, there are reports that the Electoral Commission is underprepared to hold elections, that there are problems with the roll and with voter identification, that there will be violence, that security forces are under-resourced to deal with violence and that there will be significant corruption associated with various seats. The 2012 elections are no different.

The obvious negative consequences of these flaws in PNG's electoral processes are that voters who should be on the roll are denied the right to vote, that a number of voters vote more than once, that there is loss or damage to lives and property. There should therefore be

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doubts about the legitimacy of the election of individual candidates who win by small majorities in seats affected significantly by these flaws.

Although none of these has yet affected the legitimacy of the government coalition that forms after elections or that government's capacity to govern, they undermine the quality and reputation of PNG's democracy.

While violence in PNG's elections is usually limited to the Highlands provinces, it should be noted that over 50 per cent of PNG's 109-seat Parliament are Highlands seats. Members of parliament from Highlands provinces are exercising more influence in PNG politics and are increasingly dominant players. If violence continues to be a factor in elections in these provinces and is an accepted norm for candidates from the Highlands, there is a risk that it will become an entrenched factor of future elections.

Countries which share PNG's Westminster democratic system should be concerned about the continual problems with PNG's electoral processes. As long as elections in PNG are flawed, high-quality candidates will think carefully about whether to nominate. An election process that is perceived to be corrupt or unwinnable because of the high personal costs and risks associated with running a campaign will deter many potentially good candidates, and particularly women candidates, from nominating. This eventually has an impact on the quality of a government and its ministers.

Countries which have large trade and investment interests in PNG, or, in the case of

Australia, have invested much in development assistance, have a stake in seeing good leadership in PNG. Investing in long-term assistance to building sound electoral processes will ultimately draw a bigger and possibly more talented field of candidates.

The management of elections in PNG, although arguably improving with each election, has the appearance of perennial crisis management. The experience and lessons learned at each poll should now be used by the PNG government and its friends to prepare adequately for and normalise election management, rather than deal with a 'crisis' every five years.

PNG, thanks to its size, wealth and influence, has the potential to set the benchmark for democracy in the Pacific and more particularly in Melanesia. Free, fair, well-resourced and peaceful elections in PNG would establish a higher standard for other countries facing similar challenges (like Solomon Islands and Vanuatu) to follow. This would help advance the cause of democratic traditions in the region and ultimately contribute to public demands for better governments.

NOTES

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⁴ Ketan, J., *The name must not go down: political competition and state-society relations in Mt Hagen, Papua New Guinea*, Institute of Pacific Studies, Suva, 2004.

⁵ On 26 August, Elijah Nenae (a recently sacked PNG electoral officer for Mul-Baiyer electorate who is seeking reappointment through the courts) was allegedly kidnapped by seven men in the village of Tega outside Mt Hagen. Nenae claims the men threatened to murder him unless he withdraws his legal case seeking reappointment as the Mul-Baiyer electorate official. The kidnapping of another PNG electoral officer (Tiane Openakali) from Enga also occurred in March 2011, it is unclear at this stage if the two events are linked; see Poiya, J., Election troubles brewing in Highlands, *PNG Post Courier*, 30 August 2011.

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Jim Leahy grew up in the Nebilyer Valley of Western Highlands province of Papua New Guinea. Jim is a grandson of Mick Leahy, one of the three Australian Leahy brothers who made first contact with PNG Highlands tribes in the 1930s. After high-schooling in Australia Jim studied a Bachelor of Commerce and Agriculture at Lincoln University, New Zealand. Jim has spent the last twelve years working in security risk management in PNG for private companies and is currently a senior manager at Oilmin in Mt Hagen. Jim is running as a candidate in the Western Highlands Regional seat in the 2012 PNG national elections.

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