

Book review: R. J. May: State and Society in Papua New Guinea, 2001-2021

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R. J. MAY, *State and Society in Papua New Guinea, 2001–2021*. (Pacific Affairs Series). Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2022. 321 pages, \$ 60.00. ISBN 9-781-7604-6520-9 (print on demand), ISBN 9-781-7604-6521-6 (e-book, open access)

The present volume – a collection of 14 papers written between 2001 and 2021, most published previously – addresses the political and social development of the South Pacific island state of Papua New Guinea since the turn of the millennium. Author Ron James May is emeritus fellow of Australian National University in Canberra and one of the most renowned experts on the country. The book is an update of May's volume *State and Society in Papua New Guinea. The First Twenty-Five Years*, published in 2001 and reprinted in 2004, which brings together 18 papers from 1971 to 2000; it was reviewed by this author in this journal in 2002.

The foreword by Sir Julius Chan, one of Papua New Guinea's longest-serving parliamentarians, who was twice prime minister and is currently the governor of the province New Ireland, is followed by an introduction that summarises the country's challenges. Whereas political-parliamentary continuity and the integrity of the justice system are viewed favourably, progress in terms of the country's development is found to be lacking. The Human Development Index has been in decline since 2000. The state's revenues are falling and its debt is growing. Numerous major mining projects notwithstanding, corresponding improvements in public services, especially the health sector, are not discernible. The country's infrastructure is deteriorating.

The divide between a small class of rich entrepreneurs and the majority of the mostly rural population has become more pronounced, which will continue to promote crime. Inter-ethnic and domestic violence, as well as violence associated with accusations of sorcery, remain high. The integrity of the national parliamentary elections is in doubt because of irregularities in electoral administration, vote-buying and ethnic violence, especially in the highlands. Politics is dominated by the lawmakers' short-term business interests. May considers the greatest challenge to be the way parliament is handling the successful independence referendum on the island of Bougainville, which was previously wracked by civil war. Overall, processes of forming a national identity are still in their infancy.

Several papers in the volume address the brief attempt to re-establish state institutions with a view to enhancing political stability and integrity from 1999 on, which was closely linked to the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates and the shift from the first-past-the-post electoral system to one of limited preferential voting. The changes to the law, some of which the Supreme Court overruled, were intended to strengthen the otherwise meaningless political parties, thwart MPs' repeated "party hopping", and reduce the

continuously increasing number of candidates for parliament, but were ultimately unsuccessful. To this day, women are massively underrepresented in the political sphere. Other articles look back at the discussion about weak states and analyse the political developments up to the “political coup”, the 2011 election in which longstanding prime minister Sir Michael Somare was ousted. Two other papers outline the policies of his successors Peter O’Neill and James Marape through 2021.

Further topics discussed include “clan voting” in the parliamentary elections in a constituency in East Sepik Province, language policy (with more than 850 separate languages, Papua New Guinea is the most linguistically diverse country on Earth), strategies for researching endemic corruption, foreign policy as well as external and internal security, religious fundamentalism (which resulted in the establishment of an embassy in Jerusalem in September 2023) and the sustainability of economic growth. The volume concludes with a bibliography and an index. Papua New Guinea will celebrate its golden anniversary as a sovereign state in September 2025. May’s two publications provide an excellent overview of the developments and problems that have faced the young state for the almost five decades of its independence. Papua New Guinea still remains a weakly established state confronted by strong local ethnic societies. As far as reforms in the political sphere and public administration are concerned, May’s assessment from 2001 still applies: What is needed “is less institutional reform than a fundamental shift in patterns of political behaviour” (p. 16).

Roland Seib