

Book Review

Challenging the State: The Sandline Affair in Papua New Guinea:

Edited by Sinclair Dinnen, Ron May and Anthony J. Regan.

Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian

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In March 1997, Papua New Guinea faced the most serious political crisis since independence 22 years ago. Three weeks after media exposure of the contract between the London mercenary company Sandline International and the PNG Government to neutralise the leadership of the rebel separatist Bougainville Revolutionary Army and reconquer the Panguna mine, the commander of the PNG Defence Force, Brigadier-General Jerry Singirok, put an end to PNGDF involvement and cooperation with Sandline. On 17th March, he publicly rejected the US\$36 million contract, announced the detention and deportation of the Sandline personnel (Operation Rausim Kwik) and demanded the resignation of the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Defence Minister.

The following public turbulences, namely, the heavy tensions within and between the military and police, the march of the soldiers and protesters to the national parliament and the non-political unrest in the streets forced the three ministers to step-aside and the introduction of the first Sandline inquiry. The crisis ultimately resulted in the loss of the parliamentary seat of Prime Minister Julius Chan and Defence Minister Mathias Ijape in the June-July election, the formation of a new government consisting of leading critics of the Sandline contract, and the introduction of the second inquiry still in progress.

The present book is a joint publication of the National Centre for Development Studies, the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia project, and the Department of Social and Political Change at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National

University. It aims to discuss the Sandline related events and its implications. Most of the papers presented in the book are (partly updated) results of a seminar held at the Research School on 17 April, 1997. The authors, Ron May, Sinclair Dinnen, Bill Standish, Anthony Regan and Hank Nelson, are all long-term observers of PNG politics with research experience in the country. Angela Mandie-Filer and Ruth Saovana-Spriggs both from PNG as well as Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka from Solomon Islands, are all scholars at the ANU.

After the presentation of a detailed chronology of significant Sandline related events since August 1994, the time Sir Julius Chan became Prime Minister, Regan starts with a paper exploring aspects of the connections between the Bougainville conflict and the events surrounding and following the decision of the PNG government to engage Sandline. He discusses the different strategies of the Chan government, which saw the solution of the Bougainville problem as a top priority. He explains the frustration over the lack of progress either through reliance on the military force (Operation High Speed II), the creation of the Bougainville Transitional Government (seen as a 'Trojan horse' for the BRA) or the failure of direct negotiations. Especially the hardliners in the government and the security force were deeply suspicious of the BTG contacts with the BRA, which were seeking to build trust as a precondition for peaceful negotiations. Even more, the Kangu Beach massacre, the murdering of Premier Miriung (both involving PNGDF members and resistance fighters) and the taking of hostages, had deeply adverse effects on the morale and credibility of the PNGDF. At the end of 1996, lack of progress, diminishing (military) options, reduced control over developments, and Chan's strategy to project himself as the leader of the nation for the up-coming election, pressured him and his government to find the earliest possible solution resulting in his acceptance of the Sandline proposal.

The next section of Regan's paper investigates the history of the relationship between PNG government ministers and Sandline until the

final proposal "Project Contravene" was accepted. Interesting is the argumentation of Spicer in identifying a supposed conspiracy of external players involving at least Australia and New Zealand "in order to slow down PNG's economic potential", calculated to have a strong emotive appeal to PNG decision makers. Even more strange is the fact that no government member made any critical evaluation of the project until its endorsement by the Cabinet in January. It is more than obvious that the death of key BRA leaders and many civilians would have clearly resulted in the very opposite of resolving the conflict.

The serious preparation for war, never before considered in PNG, led to the paradox of closing off the military option. The Defence Force, so demonised by the BRA and seen as the source of the abuse of human rights on the island and therefore the main obstacle towards peace, stopped Sandline and contributed to wider progress towards peace. It seems likely that the PNGDF action encouraged the widespread desires for peace and normalcy in living conditions and helped the emergence of a moderate BRA/BTG leadership to go the road towards peace.

In his second contribution to the book, Regan discusses the policy environment which allowed a small group of cabinet ministers to surreptitiously decide to hire Sandline. He discusses the reasons underlying the lack of responsiveness of policy makers to popular concerns and related issues of government accountability. He highlights a segmented society, which allows politicians a high degree of personal power and autonomy and reduces the pressure for a more responsible policy. Locally strong societies are encouraged to compete for access to resources from a relatively weak state. The strength of the "semi-traditional" societies weakens the recognition of common interests which cut across traditional groupings, resulting in weak political parties and an embryonal civil society.

Summarising the affair, the author states that the active opposition of PNGDF members and the widespread demonstrations as a result of

growing popular frustrations with the way politicians use the state and its resources, could result in the emergence of a more vibrant society capable of limiting state action and redirecting the society in a new direction. But it is also possible that the events are the beginning of fundamental instability in the PNG political and constitutional framework.

Standish's article, "Paradoxes in PNG" tries to probe the question that Singirok's engagement was a 'de facto' coup but without guns, because there were enough calm heads to prevent the political confrontation slipping into chaos. In his conclusions he argues, that the resolved crisis changed the country's politics forever through the emergence of new political forces such as the nascent civil society and the Defence Force. More than that, he sees the Sandline affair as a major event in the making of Papua New Guinea as a nation. Bearing in mind the turmoils and so-called political solutions around the Sefa-tape-crisis at the end of 1997, such comments appear as highly questionable and premature.

The condition of the PNGDF and its relations to the state are discussed by May. He points out the diminishing reputation of a previously well-resourced and well-disciplined force as a result of indecision of the political leadership, declining levels of training and standards of discipline, deteriorating equipment and slipping of morale. Even more, politicizing of positions and factionalism at senior officer levels, misuse of funds, inadequate logistic capacity, and a questionable strategy, limited the capacity of the force to contain or solve the conflict on Bougainville, despite several (never implemented) planning papers for improvement of the force.

Dinnen's paper analyses the background of new so-called security companies such as Sandline that bear little resemblance to the caricature of old-style mercenaries troupes. Executive Outcomes, the subcontractor of Sandline International to supply the mercenaries and the military equipment to PNG, is the best-known of the new kind of transformed mercenary organisations involved in the post-Cold War era. The substantial scaling down in the military establishment of most Western

countries combined with weak or collapsed states beset by political corruption, poverty, violence and environmental degradation, created a vacuum which leads to the establishment of private companies selling security services with the overt sanctioning of governments. Their interests extend well beyond matters of security. They tend to have connections with mining interests and often seek payment from their client governments in the form of mining or other commercial concessions. Regarding PNG, the alleged interest of Sandline in the large Panguna mine, provided an important focus for opposition to the contract.

The papers of Mandie-Filer and Saovana-Spriggs are some personal reflections of PNG citizens. They provide first-hand impressions of popular reactions such as the high expectations regarding the possibility "to weed out corruption" and corrupt politicians and move towards an improvement of the distribution of the resources for the benefit of all the people. Interesting to see, that even Singirok's receipt of money through a London based arms dealer did not change the positive impression of his action. Kabutaulaka's contribution discusses the role of the military in Melanesia. The author talks about an increasing military intervention in politics and the escalating militarization of the societies in that area. This might be correct in the case of Fiji, but does not correspond with the dynamic of conflicts in PNG. An appendix comprising several documents central to the Sandline events rounds off the collection.

In conclusion the book covers a wide range of contemporary reflections rather than a full examination of the Sandline events. While some articles such as Regan's papers and May's analysis of the history of the PNG Defence Force contribute a lot to the understanding of the Sandline crisis and present politics in PNG, others provide weaker (Standish) or - in relation to PNG - simply unfounded (Kabutaulaka) arguments. It is also difficult to follow how Nelson's paper, without question interesting while analysing the characteristics of the PNG elections as mainly local related issues, corresponds with the subject of the book. However, especially Regan's excellent articles, the detailed chronology and the documents attached, make the book well worth reading.

by Roland Seib

Contributors

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