

R. J. May and A. J. Regan with Allison Ley, eds., *Political Decentralisation in a New State: The Experience of Provincial Government in Papua New Guinea*. Bathurst, N.S.W.: Crawford House Press, 1997. Pp. 431, xi, maps. A\$40 (available by E-mail: <frontdesk@chp.com.au>)

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Since 1973 the on-off-on-again saga of political decentralization in Papua New Guinea has acutely affected that country's domestic governance. Against the advice of some Australian officials and observers wary of federal and state problems, Papua New Guinea's constitutional designers thought elected governments for the nineteen provinces were necessary for democratic decolonization. Decentralization was halted in July 1975 because of the first Bougainville attempt to secede, then revived in February 1976 to placate that province.

The complex sharing of powers that resulted initially led to administrative upheaval, and the desired participatory democracy did not develop in many provinces. In political and administrative terms the system worked fairly well in some island provinces, but not on the mainland. Bougainville had innovative officials, but even there political capacities were limited and tensions between local and national politicians contributed to the crises over the mine and renewed secessionism from 1988. As a rule, provincial premiers were resented by the national parliamentarians because they controlled most state resources in their electorates. In response, from 1980 national parliamentarians grabbed pork-barrel slush funds, which usually were dispersed for

political or personal gain with little lasting benefit. Meanwhile provinces were starved of both operational and capital investment funds.

By 1994, fourteen provinces had been suspended for some length of time (a total of eighteen suspensions)—usually for mismanagement, especially misappropriation—and in a series of self-serving reports by national parliamentarians the entire system was scapegoated as the cause of state weakness in rural areas. Eventually, emboldened by the second Bougainville secession attempt, the system was “reformed” in 1995 by the national MPs seeking to grab power. This “reform” was presented as a further decentralization to local-level governments, although it was known that local councils were moribund, undermined by the provincial government ministers in the same way the national MPs had weakened the provinces. Repeated restructuring of Papua New Guinea’s bureaucracy on political whim or at the urging of international lenders has ignored the need to nurture institutions over time.

The first section of this book, primarily by Anthony Regan, provides essential legal and political background on the system as a whole. In the second section thirteen authors (only two of whom are from Papua New Guinea) present histories of eleven provinces. There is a brief conclusion by Ron May and a postscript sketching the 1995 reforms.

The national media report few of the provinces well, so Papua New Guineans quickly lose their own local history. The authors know their research areas well, yet most give the impression of rather limited close observation or else a failure to probe the outcomes and significance of the events described, tending to see issues in terms of personalities rather than systemic problems. The best chapters are the multilayered analyses of Bougainville by James Griffin and Melchior Togolo and of East New Britain by Anthony Regan, which show how much their relative success relied on factors that are not replicated elsewhere. The most vivid study is that by Harry Derkley on the rough and tough politics of Enga, one of three provinces where the provincial headquarters buildings have been burned down.

To an extent this volume is a tombstone for the old provincial system, but not a detailed obituary. It contains important if implied lessons for Papua New Guinea’s constitutional engineers and also aid donors. Ron May, in his low-key three-page conclusion, mentions the limited capacities of the provinces and especially their weak fiscal management, political intervention in provincial business corporations, and the damaging effects of internal conflicts within provinces. He notes the lack of commitment to the system among national leaders and their unwillingness to intervene when problems arise, asserting that problems of corruption and inefficiency are shared by the national government as well as the provinces. That problems of governance will not be solved by recentralization may be his implication, but such profound conclusions justify a more-extensive concluding essay.

Confusion remains in Papua New Guinea at all levels from the hastily initiated 1995 changes. Merely supplanting local politicians and relocating officials will not remove systemic weaknesses. One problem that has emerged recently is the virtually unmonitored use of tens of millions of kina of petroleum and minerals revenues in several provinces. Undoubtedly the provincial saga will have further episodes, if only because any lasting resolution of the Bougainville conflict will require further changes.

With most chapters completed in 1994 or earlier, this book demonstrates the editors' opening statement that contemporary political analysis risks being overtaken by events. Yet, there is so little sustained political research on Papua New Guinea that this collection is the main study of that country's internal government and will long be essential reading for those working in and on the provinces.