

The Paradox of Decentralization and Civic Culture: An Exploratory Study Applied to Local Governments in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract : Since gaining independence in 1975, Papua New Guinea's core challenge has been the consolidation of democracy against a backdrop of enormous social, political and territorial diversity. Consequently, the government has implemented several political reforms including decentralization. Constitutional planners believed that national unity, would be better achieved by sharing state power over centralization. They anticipated that this would institutionalize a democratic civic culture by providing opportunities to groups and individuals to make political decisions within their jurisdiction. This would then eventually lead to confidence and participation in the larger entity of the state. In retrospect, civil society and community based groups are largely underrated and have had minimal influence on decisions at the local level, consequently contributing to nepotism, patronism and cynicism. By applying an elitist approach to analyze how national political leaders exert their influence and power within the local government system and local communities, this paper argues that decentralization has fragmented local communities. With an absence of political party roots and deeply divided ethnic groups, national political leaders have used divide and rule tactics resulting in mistrust among citizens. Through their influence and power within local governments to dictate projects and services to certain areas, this has resulted in skepticism and divisions among civil society along different cultural cleavages. This has been a contributing factor to anomalies in democratic consolidation and democratic political culture in Papua New Guinea.

Keywords : civic culture, cultural cleavages, decentralization, democratic consolidation

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