

State Formation and Failure: PNG as an Incipient State

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Introduction

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is entering an era of change as significant as those it experienced during consolidation following World War I and after gaining independence from Australia in 1975. Vast tracts of copper, nickel, gas and gold have the potential to fundamentally transform her economy and provide the economic maturity necessary to wean her off relative subsistence on foreign aid. It could be a Golden Era of economic prosperity (1), but these riches could also act as a catalyst for widespread violence and unrest, plunging the nation into civil war.

Many have forecast PNG's demise from one of 'fractured' or 'faltering' state to one of failure (2). It has also been described as 'weak' or 'failing', referring to its domestic security challenges and its inability to provide the essential mechanisms of state. None of these terms provide an adequate characterization of the development of the modern state and have little utility beyond the headlines. Another conceptualization is necessary and a discussion of alternative paths follows the historical context portion of this paper.

I then argue that there are two factors within PNG that will protect it from such failure and allow it to enjoy the economic prosperity its hopes for. Each of these forces provides a unique counterbalance to the challenges often faced by underdeveloped nations when dealing with issues for which the formal mechanisms of state are underprepared. The first force relates to the people of PNG themselves. PNG society has a complex system of tribal loyalties, patriarchal lineages and wontokism(3) that limit the ability of non-state actors to rally the support necessary to initiate a co-ordinated destabilization, uprising or insurgency. While this disjointed nature of politics and social arrangement makes for a less-than-optimal form of governance and distribution, it is inefficient only to a point beyond which it cannot quickly progress.

The second force is the impending transformation of the PNG economy. Tax receipts and economic stimulus will provide previously unimaginable resources from which the government of PNG can draw to provide security and governance mechanisms – critical for the stability of the state. While this federal resource base will present challenges (not the least of which is its efficient allocation by often-corrupt politicians), it will gradually reduce PNG's reliance on Overseas Development Assistance (ODA or *foreign aid*). Societal and governmental norms in PNG are the result of a modern form of government overlaid on established cultural foundations. To understand the forces introduced above, a brief examination of its developmental history is necessary.

Historical Context

Papua New Guinea is less a state and more a haphazard collection of tribes aggregated through a series of colonial consolidations of power. The area we now know as Papua New Guinea was originally two imperial outposts, with Germany occupying the northern portion of the landmass with Britain (and subsequently Australia) responsible for the South. Following the 'redrawing of the maps' at the conclusion of World War I, Australia assumed administrative responsibility for the entire Eastern-most portion of the island, with the landmass West of 141°E

remaining a Dutch and then Indonesian territory. While initially a disjointed combination of 'Papua' and 'New Guinea' the 800+ tribes speaking distinctly different languages were placed under the title of 'Papua and New Guinea' in 1949. The nation was then renamed Papua New Guinea in 1972, in preparation for their subsequent independence in 1975. At the time, many felt the nation was not fully prepared for self-governance,(4) but the tide of former colonial independence had been flowing strongly and the United Nations felt that independence could not come too early.(5) There was a view that the longer Australia delayed in facilitating independence for PNG, the harder PNG would find the path to statehood, and that somehow, independence would provide an overarching framework for these fears to dissipate.(6)



Figure 1. Map of Papua New Guinea (7)

PNG thus became independent from Australia without sufficiently developed mechanisms or institutions for governance. For the first ten years, PNG was relatively stable,(8) but the mid-1980's saw the commencement of a downward spiral of neglect, with the government relying on foreign aid, amidst a deteriorating domestic security environment. The reality of its geographically challenging terrain, and the subsequent effect on the maintenance of a significant service delivery construct, has caused villages to continue to exist with little outside influence, relying on the concepts of wontokism within a fragile framework of centralised government from Port Moresby, distilled through the provinces.

This reliance on the tribe and the lack of significant national-level mechanisms, such as the military and police, have caused a number of traditional methods of dispute resolution to endure well beyond their period of generalized acceptability within a democratic state. But what is acceptable in the current world order and how far can states defer their security responsibilities before they cease to function and 'fail'? These questions require a discussion of state formation theory(9) and the etymology of 'failed states'. The discussion will lead to a synthesis in which the future path of states like PNG can be situated.

Failed State Etymology

The concept of a failed state seems relatively straightforward. It conjures images of lawlessness amidst ungoverned spaces and is oft associated with tracts of earth that are not in high demand by other peoples or states. Due to this lack of demand, there is often a perception that some states (or areas previously governed by states) exist beyond the sphere of concern for the international community; being left to fend for themselves without impinging upon other nations. Modern international society will not allow this for two reasons.

Firstly, liberal internationalist ideals and transnational NGOs ensure that the humanitarian disasters often associated with disassembled states are projected to a world audience, prompting multilateral government action, focusing on aid distribution and the security required to coordinate its distribution. Even if their messages go unheard, the sheer shock value of humanitarian suffering provides a gripping drama for media outlets, which can exploit modern technology to transmit images of such disasters around the world. This often provides the catalyst for government and private action – as seen in the Ethiopian famine of 1984.(10) While this may be viewed as an indictment on NGOs and their influence, it reinforces the power of messages that now flow freely from failed or failing states.

Secondly, such states provide the freedom of action to groups who seek opportunity or anonymity. The proliferation of transnational crime and terrorism, aided by technological advance, has exacerbated this. This was the case from 1996-2001, when a failed state provided the safe haven for Al Qaeda to establish a network of training and funding that is yet to be dismantled. This begs the question of what indicators exist to alert others of the impending decline of a state? How do we categorize states that fail to live up to expectations so that modern liberal institutions can mobilize and limit their negative effects both within and outside their borders?

Various writings on the subject of 'state decline' interchangeably use the terms 'weak', 'fragile', 'failing' or 'collapsed',(11) yet a common definition in academic discourse is lacking. Simple terms such as these are useful for political rhetoric(12) because of their "self-evident appeal",(13) but do little to typify the capacity for a state to cope with matters of sovereignty. Rotberg (2004) offered a definition of a failed state as "consumed by internal violence and ceasing delivery of positive political goods to their inhabitants."(14) This definition is useful but fails to acknowledge the central role of economic correlates in state decline.(15) 'Quasi-state'(16) was offered as an alternate title, yet the term's analogues with states that are yet to be accepted within the international community make it less than useful for typifying established nations such as PNG.(17) Additionally, the terms 'fragile', 'failing', or 'weak' suggest a downward trajectory and offer a sense of the inevitability of decline over the possibility of recovery and robust nationhood.

Perhaps the best approach is to first focus on the definition of a state and then situate such terms in the trajectory of state formation, consolidation and decline. If a recognized state fails to exhibit the qualities described in the definition, then it is at risk of losing its legitimacy. Alternatively, if subgroups or sub-states exhibit such attributes, then their claims for statehood are presumably enhanced.

The state is the authoritative political institution that possesses sovereignty over a defined portion of territory.(18) A state is expected to maintain law and security within its territory and interact appropriately with other international actors both within and outside the formal structure of the United Nations.(19) Beyond this lies the concept of Responsibility to Protect (RtoP). Yet to be endorsed formally by the United Nations,(20) RtoP is a principle of collective action against genocide and mass atrocities, recognizing the responsibility of the state to protect its population, and the role of the international community to intervene should they fail to fulfil their responsibilities.(21) Yet the capacity of a nation to achieve these goals (and thus remain functional as a 'state') is difficult to ascertain.

The *Failed States Index* (22) attempts to classify the degree to which a nation is failing based on 12 criteria (such as demographic pressures, security apparatus etc.) and is perhaps the most comprehensive rating system available. Yet it stops short of rating states as 'failed' or otherwise, preferring a watch system with 'critical', 'in danger' and 'borderline' chosen as descriptors.

An alternate and simpler methodology would be to use an accepted definition of the state (that it holds "a monopoly of the use of violence" (23)) and extend it, such that any state that fails to hold such a monopoly is no longer functioning as a state. This can happen when a

state is in an embryonic stage of development in the state lifecycle (such as independent East Timor) or a declining stage (such as that seen in Haiti or Pakistan). All of these states have had a functioning state apparatus at varying times of their history, yet are currently failing to hold a monopoly over violence in their territories.(24) While clearly a less-than-optimal phase for the states concerned, failing to hold such a monopoly does not always indicate failure. Instead, it may indicate a parlous phase of uncertainty from which a state can progress to normalcy, or regress to failure.

A Flying Metaphor and Trajectories of State Formation and Failure

In 1960, Walt Rostow identified five stages of economic growth of society in a process now commonly referred to as the “Rostovian take-off model”.(25) Represented in Figure 1, he equates societal economic development to phases of flight, from “traditional society” through “take-off” to “high mass consumption”. Rostow’s model presumed that development is the defining feature of an economy, and that regions or countries in the third world can only progress by treading the same path.(26) While Rostow’s logic has been criticized, his model provides a useful basis for the aviation-minded to consider the progress of a state against the trajectory of an aircraft and its flight path.(27)

To borrow another flying term (and extend Rostow’s analogy), it could be said that states at both ends of the spectrum described above are at an *incipient* stage – losing or gaining the capacity and ability to control violence. The Oxford Dictionary defines the term *incipient* as “beginning to happen or develop”.(28) The term is commonly used in flying to describe the commencement of certain phases of departure from controlled flight – most commonly the spin, spiral and stall.

While an aircraft at an incipient stage of flight can stall (or ‘fail’), certain actions can produce a recovery and allow the aircraft to return to the desired flight path, while others cause the aircraft to depart from controlled flight and ultimately crash. Similarly, states could be at a stage of *incipient statehood* (East Timor) or *incipient failure* (Pakistan and Haiti) with similar security implications and similar solutions or interventions required. Figure 2 is an adaptation of the Rostovian take-off model and equates the trajectory of a state with that of an aircraft – tracking from Rostow’s *take-off* and *mass production* through phases of flight that can be affected by forces internal and external to the cockpit. It does not adhere to the use of economic development as a measure of the state (y-axis) and deliberately so. It offers instead the concept of *measure of statehood*, which could include a variety of indicators.(29)

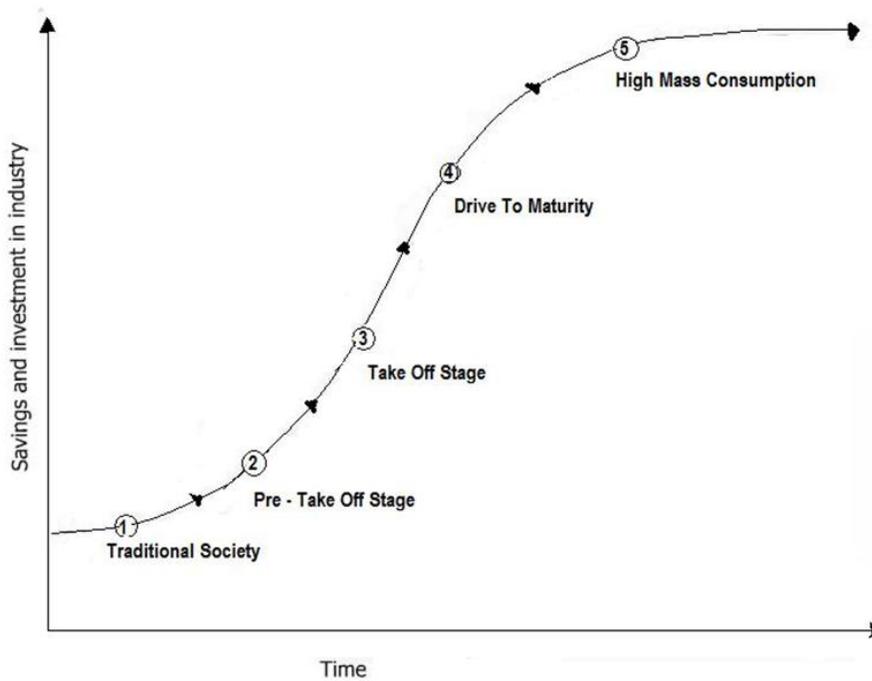


Figure 2. Rostow's Take-off Model for Societal Economic Development

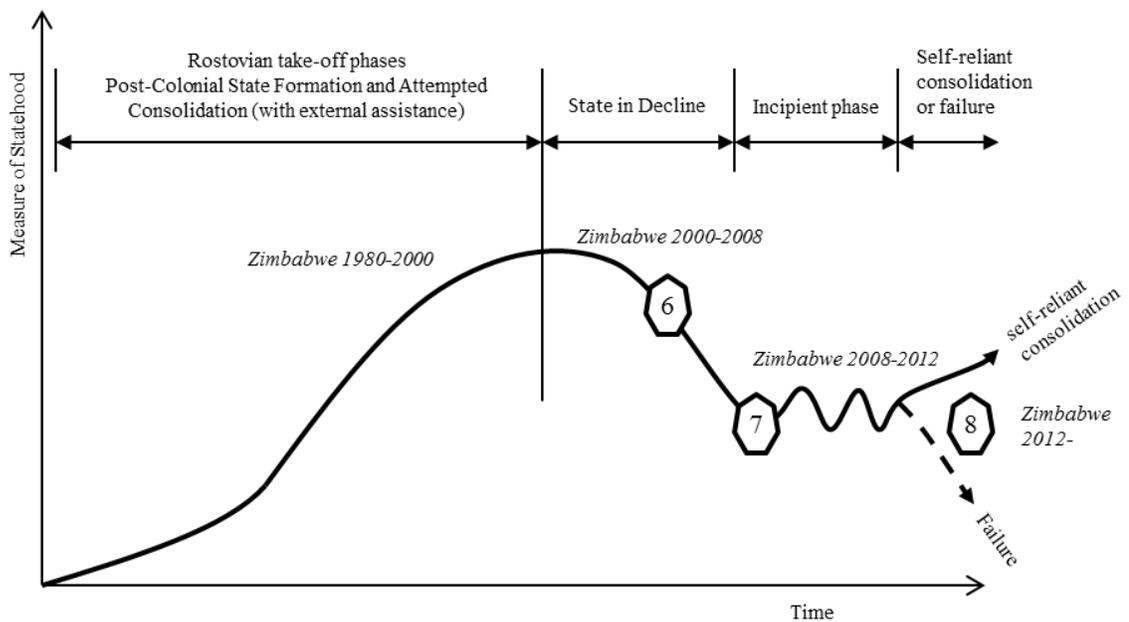


Figure 3. Incipient States Model

The figure shown depicts a state that was in decline prior to becoming incipient (phases 6 and 7 respectively). While this would normally be the case, certain scenarios could see a state climbing beyond Rostow's *mass production* phase and encountering a shock or sequence of

events that rapidly see it subjected to forces from which it must 'recover or fail.'⁽³⁰⁾ An example of this would be economic destabilization as seen in Zimbabwe in the first decade of the 21st century (depicted above) or the destabilization currently being suffered by Pakistan. Both states progressed from 'satisfactory' trajectories to ones with uncertain outcomes – both internally and for the international community.

When flying, recovery from an *incipient stall* requires a predetermined sequence of control inputs to be made so that the aircraft can accelerate away from the point of the stall and continue flight. Each stall is technically different and is a combination of a range of factors including atmospheric, aircraft configuration, attitude, airspeed, G-loading etc. These are normally predictable to the aircraft operator, but certain combinations (particularly in the 'corners of the envelope') cause the aircraft to enter the incipient phase rapidly and require an even more timely response. A state is no different.

While the warning signs of impending state failure are normally obvious – either to the state in question or the international community – the combination of these signs (or factors) often causes a collapse that was either unforeseen or underestimated in severity or consequence. Plausibly, a state could be rated against a number of risk factors (similar to those used in the *Failed States Index* described previously) and each risk factor could have an *incipient threshold* – beyond which a state could be classified as incipient. An incipient state would be able to recover through internal or external action (or intervention), or risk failure caused by one or more risk factors.

Incipient thus describes a state in transition and is sufficiently differentiated from a 'failed' or 'functioning' state to give the term utility. An incipient state could conceivably reverse direction and either regress to ungoverned lands (becoming a "failed state"), or progress to functioning statehood, depending on the choices made by the state and the international community.

To explore this concept further, the remainder of this paper returns to Papua New Guinea to examine a state in the *incipient* stage. It argues that following take-off (independence), it failed to reach cruising altitude (consolidation) and instead reversed direction to now teeter on the brink of losing control of its economy and descending into violence and civil war.

Its leaders must make a number of significant decisions during this incipient stage and they will need assistance from the international community. Such periods of choice will be faced over the short term as it exploits its mineral wealth and attempts to allocate the benefits effectively. While it may remain incipient for some period, it will not decline further and will gradually transform into a more peaceful nation, maintaining an appropriate place in the international community.

PNG as an Incipient State

Incipient states can be victims of momentum. When they are exhibiting signs of incipient failure, private investment dries up, corruption flourishes and the elites often abandon the cause for opportunity abroad. Conversely, when fledgling nations are exhibiting signs of incipient statehood, they enjoy the support of the international community and can utilize inflows of ODA in the provision of governance and security mechanisms. Security forces and government programs can be established relatively quickly and the good work of NGOs often accelerates the processes of education and healthcare provision.

For whatever purpose, the international community does not appear to have patience for incipient states. It brands them with negative descriptors rather than classifying them as having one of three possible outcomes – stable statehood, failure, or somewhere in between. PNG is an incipient state (and is likely to remain such for some time), but its cultural composition, economic management and strategic importance to Australia all contribute to an urgency for an ultimate resolution in stability, rather than decline to failure.

Unfortunately, the nation struggles with corruption, patronage and a political system not suited to their needs.(31) Corruption in PNG is rife with *The Economist* referring to the nation as a “fully fledged kleptocracy” in August last year.(32) PNG’s heterogeneity and these deep-seated cultural limitations and tendencies will limit the nation’s full potential, but conversely, they will also ensure that it will not fail. This “collective action dilemma”(33) will be discussed with reference to contemporary theoretical debate on the forces conducive to destabilization and conflict within nations.

Cultural Aspects That Encourage Incipience, But Prevent Failure

The extreme ethnic and linguistic diversity of Papua New Guinea challenges the ability of the state to benefit from formal collective action in Government. Strong cultural allegiances among tribal groups ensure that representation in the Parliament is diverse – yet this diversity causes fragmentation and limits the formal checks and balances inherent in the Westminster Parliamentary system. Election results still rely heavily on the concept of Wontokism – which leads to government majorities being formed on the basis of highly unstable coalitions based on personality and patronage networks.(34) This is evident in the composition of the current Parliament, comprising no less than 22 different political parties.(35) There are no strong national political parties – which are the primary vehicle by which equivalent systems generate good Government.(36)

This leads to a classification of PNG as “weak state-strong societies”(37) – a double-edged sword for governance. While the country routinely suffers from unstable government,(38) there appears to be a lack of capacity and unity of effort to overthrow the government in either a significant military/police-led coup or a broader insurgency. Collier and Hoeffler (1998) found that highly fractionalized and heterogeneous societies were less prone to civil war, due to the high co-ordination costs of rebellion, when the rebels themselves were fractionalized.(39) PNG is one of the most ethno-linguistically diverse nations in the world with some 852 different languages spoken by 5.3 million people.(40) Moreover, geography (both in terms of the volcanic, mountainous terrain and disparate island chains), along with a lack of communications infrastructure, continue the isolation that impedes homogenization.

The existence of multiple ethnic groups thus provides a barrier to the collective action necessary to form a coherent rebel group in as much as one group could not dominate the other, either on its own or in a small coalition.(41) The effect of the ethno-linguistic diversity in PNG has thus been to reduce the impact of conflict and violence on the state.(42)

This goes some way to explaining why PNG has been able to maintain a functioning democracy since independence despite its extreme heterogeneity.(43) With a similar argument, Fukuyama (2007) offered that PNG “...[is] probably immune from the sorts of dictatorship that have arisen in other countries.” This is not to suggest that PNG is ‘immune’ from violence and a significant amount of local level ethnic conflict.

Tribal, domestic and criminal violence also remain a crucial challenge to the nation’s future. (44) *Raskol* gangs dominate each of the four principal cities,(45) and their prevalence has led most businesses to hire private security companies to augment the under-resourced Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary (RPNGC) and the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF). With a current force of 4,800 officers(46) for a population of 6.1 million,(47) there is only one police officer for every 1270 people.(48) They are underpaid, have a reputation for work absence and are far more likely to participate in petty criminal behaviour than participate in Government overthrow. Yet this is a problem that can be solved. Resourcing for such security services is possible, noting the improved fiscal position the nation will enjoy over the next five years.

Society in PNG lacks broad cohesiveness - an initiator of state failure in other parts of the world. Unfortunately, it also contributes to a national governance system that tends to the incipient state model – requiring constant internal and external intervention to continue to

remain viable. These cultural aspects thus limit the potential for PNG to climb away from incipient statehood, but also provide a comforting backstop that continues to prevent descent into civil war and subsequent state failure. Such diversity serves as a form of stall prevention, yet hinders efficient economic activity and potential for climb.

The next section of this paper examines the economy of PNG. It proposes the thesis that prudent management of the impending mineral resources boom and associated budget surpluses will provide for better funding of essential mechanisms of state. Moreover, the resourcing of governance bodies, the health system and law enforcement agencies will lay the platform for a countervailing force to the centrifugal forces and security challenges which it faces, thereby preventing state failure.

PNG's Economy and Avoidance of State Failure

The PNG economy has a small, formal, corporate sector, with over 85% of the country existing on subsistence agriculture.(49) This sector has a narrow employment base, consisting of workers in the mining sector, a small manufacturing sector and the government.(50) This disparity in economy can be explained by PNG's relative underdevelopment as a state, but also by the challenging geography, limiting the ability of the government to co-ordinate social programs and distribute essential services.

While PNG's fundamental economic indicators show both stability and expansion,(51) it remains a challenging environment for international investors. The *Heritage Foundation* ranks the nation 128th worldwide in economic freedom, citing 'corruption' and 'property rights' as the largest challenges to the economy. In its 'Ease of Doing Business Report', *The World Bank* ranked PNG 101st out of 183 countries with 'enforcement of contracts' and 'construction permits' listed as major impediments to business. Yet despite these disincentives, foreign investment is booming.

Lihir Gold (subsumed into Newcrest Mining) and Ok Tedi have been the dominant mining interests within PNG over the last 20 years. Along with a number of smaller mines, their revenues are declining as their mineral deposits deplete and their mining methods are increasingly brought into question. In fact, Ok Tedi has been cited as causing one of the worst man-made mining disasters in the world.(52) This is putting downward pressure on the PNG economy, with future small to medium mining projects at least five years from providing tax income to the PNG government.(53) But the economic impact of these projects is dwarfed by the potential of Natural Gas.

In the most significant economic development since independence, Exxon Mobil has received approval to build a \$US 15BN Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) production and processing facility in the Southern Highlands and Western Provinces of PNG(54). While it must be noted that the report was prepared for Exxon, a recent ACIL Tasman study(55) estimated that the project would see "US\$10bn in capital expenditure over 30 years with a resultant doubling of GDP" [emphasis added].(56) Tax receipts are also forecast to increase significantly with company tax rising by over 130% and income tax by at least 20%.(57) While these estimates are no doubt optimistic (conveniently providing incentives for PNG government approval or permits), their order of magnitude requires PNG to anticipate the fundamental transformation of the economy as it currently exists, to realize the potential benefits for the country.

Resurgent commodities prices and new investment will bring inflationary challenges to PNG. To combat this, the Government has begun to allow the Kina to appreciate against major international currencies, but the resilience of mineral prices due to demand have caused other factors to have greater effects on the prevailing exchange rate. For example, in its *PNG Economic Briefing*, the World Bank reported that the PNG Kina had appreciated 5% against the US dollar in early 2011(58) – at a time when it also increased its USD holdings to almost \$3BN. On the surface, this could be classified as prudent fiscal action. Yet this appreciation can be explained more by the US dollar's early 2011 weakness than the Kina's strength. PNG's major

trading partner, Australia, saw its dollar appreciate by over twice that amount in the corresponding period, suggesting that the currency fluctuations will *contribute* to inflation rather than ease it, as exchange rate differences bear more relevance when considering major trading partners and their disproportionate impacts on the domestic economy.

Such high dependence on mineral wealth – and the volatility this produces in the current global environment – necessitates Papua New Guinea taking steps to ensure that the vast wealth ultimately contributes to societal development. Nations with similar dependencies on commodities have recently deposited increasingly large revenues into Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs) with the largest now rivalling central banks in value. SWFs serve a number of purposes, including:

- insulating the budget and economy from increased volatility in revenues,
- helping monetary authorities sterilise unwanted liquidity,
- build up savings for future generations, and
- revenue streams for economic and social development.(59)

Papua New Guinea has recently announced the establishment of an offshore SWF to assist in preventing the effect of “Dutch Disease”(60) – thus prolonging the benefits of the forecast increased commodities receipts. The 2011 Budget Papers (p. 12-4) add “transparency, asset management, savings and macroeconomic stabilization” as the objectives of the fund. It also commits to future budgets being prepared with reference to a “mean annual income” from mining receipts, rather than variance with respect to both the amount of minerals extracted and commodity prices in any given year.

Bosson and Varon (1977) found that the volatile price of minerals produces fluctuations in fiscal revenue and export related indicators for both developed and underdeveloped economies. They added that the fluctuations tend to be cyclical (in line with the corresponding commodity price) and are thus able to be averaged and predicted in the long term. While a complex financial vehicle for a developing nation, a SWF such as that outlined above will provide a cushioning effect for PNG. It will allow the economic stability on which to rebuild the infrastructure and service delivery construct that has suffered decline since independence. The adequacy of such services is critical to mitigate the impending dangers of a health crisis associated with HIV/AIDS,(61) along with the societal effects of violence – now endemic in major city centres.

PNG is in a unique and desirable financial situation. The resource boom and associated receipts have been anticipated and mechanisms have been instituted that will serve to insulate the nation from the pitfalls often associated with rapid development. From an economic perspective, the thrust provided by its economic prosperity should allow PNG to commence a climb away from its incipient phase in an attempt to cruise at a more comfortable altitude. This altitude would logically provide incentive for foreign investment and the return of the elite from overseas - setting it on the long path to high mass consumption.

Conclusion

This paper has introduced the concept of an *incipient* state and trajectories of state formation and failure, to describe a state in transition – neither failing, nor functioning, as a legitimate controller of violence within its territories. An incipient state can be either progressing to, or regressing from, statehood and its path will be dependent on the actions taken both within and from beyond its territorial borders.

Papua New Guinea is an incipient state, having suffered slow, continuous decline since its independence from Australia in 1975. While its mechanisms of governance are underdeveloped, it is harnessing its mineral wealth using a Sovereign Wealth Fund – aimed at providing long-term prosperity and extracting maximum benefit from its mineral resources. It is far from perfect and will continue to suffer from democratic crises, yet the lack of a societal or

governmental subgroup to create anarchic conditions will ensure the minimum stability necessary for the state to continue to function – albeit in a disjointed manner. Significantly, such disjointedness buys Papua New Guinea time. Properly managed, the economic benefits of its mineral resources boom will allow the people to enjoy a greater standard of living, brought by increased domestic product and delivery of services by the Government. These enhancements should also raise educational standards across the country, increasing the capacity of the public service over the medium term. With near term stability, this virtuous cycle should see the country recover from its current incipient stage and climb towards high mass consumption within the construct of a functioning state.

The terminology *incipient state* and the incipient states trajectory framework offered in this paper serve as useful conceptions of a state that is losing or gaining the apparatus and ability to control violence and protect their people. Much like an aircraft in an incipient stall, certain actions from both within and outside the immediate control of a state can allow it to recover and climb toward what Rostow characterized as High Mass Consumption. PNG is in an *incipient* phase now. Its government (and by extension the general population) needs co-ordinated and informed action to be taken to ensure recovery.

Author's Biography

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