

PNG's long trek to the polls

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BY CANOE and on foot, millions of Papua New Guineans will journey to remote voting centres tomorrow, haunted by the spectre of past election violence.

More than 30 people died in the last poll five years ago, and thousands of ballots were stolen or destroyed as armed clansmen in the volatile highlands region sought to ensure victory for their candidates.

The run-up to these elections, from June 30 to July 10, has been quieter, although the Deputy Prime Minister has reported an attempt to assassinate him at a rally in which two people were wounded in a volley of gunfire.

Prime Minister Michael Somare won the last election, but given the post-election horse-trading among parties and independents, analysts refuse to guess at the result.

Despite the difficulties, turnout is expected to be high, with about 3.9 million registered voters choosing 109 members of Parliament from an astonishing 2760 candidates.

"Everyone's trying to get their guy from their clan or tribe into Parliament," said Ben Reilly, director of the Australian National University's centre for democratic institutions.

With more than 80 per cent of the population dependent on subsistence farming — despite rich deposits of oil, gold and copper — politics is one of the few routes to a better lifestyle for successful candidates and their clans.

"Modern representative democracy has merged with a lot of aspects of traditional culture — one of which is that competition between tribes for prestige and status is a very important, powerful motivator," Mr Reilly said.

"If their guy wins, the way democratic politics has evolved in PNG, that means the member showers as many goodies as he can get from government back towards his clan and tribe."

Members of Parliament also find "lots of ways of personal enrichment", Mr Reilly said.

Ideology plays little part in an election where more than half the candidates — about 1500 — are standing as independents and allegiances within the 34 contesting parties are fluid.

"Everyone campaigning says the same thing — they'll bring development to the region, they're against corruption, they're for good governance," said Mr Reilly.

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