

# Papua New Guinea New Leader James Marape's Ambitious Vision: Make His Country "The Richest Black Christian Nation on Earth"?

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Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*The new Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea (PNG) recently elaborated on his vision to make his country "the richest black Christian nation on earth" through a combination of fairer resource deals with transnational corporations and a renewed focus on the agricultural sector, but the success of his ambitious plans will largely rest on his ability to "balance" between the West and China, as well as making unprecedented progress on the socio-economic development of the mostly tribal hinterland.*

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The new Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea (PNG) only entered office a few months ago after a long-running political scandal led to the [resignation](#) of his predecessor but he's already making waves with his [ambitious vision](#) of turning this resource-rich but poverty-stricken island country into "the richest black Christian nation on earth". James Marape made his Trump-like nationalist proclamation in late July during his visit to Australia, which was his first foreign trip since assuming his position, where he also spoke about his plan of one day "participating with Australia looking after smaller island nations". He [aims](#) to achieve this through a combination of fairer resource deals with transnational corporations and a renewed focus on the agricultural sector, but the success of his vision will largely rest on his ability to "balance" between the West and China, as well as making unprecedented progress on the socio-economic development of the mostly tribal hinterland.

Marape's predecessor, Peter O'Neill, was regarded as [extremely close](#) to China, though he was also at the same time responsible for laying the basis of his successor's "[balancing](#)" act by agreeing to allow the US and Australia to [jointly operate](#) a naval base in the northern island of Manus. PNG's new leader emphasized his more visibly neutral position by [recently stating](#) that his country is "friends to all, enemies to none" and that "every businessman and woman is welcome in our country, and the Chinese investors will not receive any special treatment and preference, just like Australian investors will not receive any special favour or treatment." That's a very pragmatic approach and one that's much-needed if he hopes to make good on his bold promise because he can't do it without cooperating equally with both "sides" of the [New Cold War](#). Australia is a long-standing strategic partner while China is a much more recent one, but investment from both is crucial to Marape's plans.

PNG's resource riches have been more of a curse than a blessing over the years after corrupt governments proved themselves incapable of fairly distributing the billions of dollars of wealth that have poured into this comparatively small country of roughly eight million people, but Marape wants to change all of that by using some of that revenue to fund an

agricultural revolution that would turn his nation into “the food basket of Asia”. To do that, however, he must first make serious strides in improving the socio-economic situation of the millions of people who still live in tribal societies there where “[most fights are still about women and pigs](#)”. Tribal warfare recently intensified after an horrific massacre of women and children in July that observers worry might plunge the mountainous heartland into a renewed round of tribal warfare that could hold the country back from the advances that it so desperately needs to make.

If the security situation stabilizes and the writ of the state finally extends into the interior in a noticeable way unlike the present (where it’s only relevant as far as selling land to transnational corporations and electing figurehead representatives to parliament), then one of the first tasks will be to promote an inclusive national narrative that binds together the country’s disparate tribes, hence Marape’s embrace of race and religion as the foundation for this. Concurrent with that, PNG will need to seamlessly transition the locals from their tribal societies into the global market economy, which explains his emphasis on their traditional industry of agriculture instead of anything much more culturally disruptive like their large-scale employment in urban factories for example. Still, what Marape envisions for his people is a profound paradigmatic shift that will be difficult to pull off without the right resources, prior planning, and political will.

It’s here where the West (mostly Australia in this case) and China can help. PNG is being reconceptualized by American strategists as a pivotal geopolitical battleground in the New Cold War, which is why the US will be jointly operating a naval base with Australia there in the coming future, but it’s also partnered with the [Belt & Road Initiative](#) (BRI) being spearheaded by the People’s Republic. If Marape successfully “balances” between the West’s “[Indo-Pacific](#)” strategy and China’s BRI, then PNP could conceivably reap the benefits of improved market access for his country’s forthcoming agricultural exports from both, as well as more infrastructural investment to help with the tribal interior’s socio-economic development. Should he can manage to do that, then he stands the best chances yet of turning this terribly impoverished country into “the richest black Christian nation on earth”, though it’ll still take a lot of time for Marape to pull off this miracle.

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