CONTROL, ALT, DELETE: HOW FIJI’S NEW PR ELECTORAL SYSTEM AND MEDIA COVERAGE AFFECTED ELECTION RESULTS FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES IN THE 2014 ELECTION

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ABSTRACT

International strategies to improve election outcomes for women candidates focus heavily on campaigning schemes targeting change in voter attitudes, defending female quota systems, scrutinizing political parties’ approaches, and challenging gender stereotypes. In the Pacific, these strategies have dominated pre-and post-election discussions. There has been less focus on two areas of growing significance: the type of electoral system and the media. This study examines the impact of these two factors on election outcomes for women candidates in Fiji’s 2014 election. Our findings indicate that, on the surface, both appeared to make a positive contribution to the results for winning women candidates. At a deeper level, however, a different narrative constituted by various other aspects of electoral engineering and media politics in Fiji can be identified.

Key words: women candidates, electoral system, media, Fiji
INTRODUCTION

The descriptive underrepresentation of women in legislatures is a key democratic concern among women’s groups, scholars and others which is most strongly expressed at election times. Strategies to improve election outcomes for women candidates focus heavily on campaigning schemes targeting change in voter attitudes (King & Leigh, 2010), defending female quota systems (Krook & Zetterberg, 2014; Celis, 2012), scrutinizing political parties’ approaches (Kunovich & Paxton, 2005) and challenging gender stereotypes (Dolan, 2010; Fox & Lawless, 2011). In the Pacific, these strategies have dominated pre-and post-election discussions. Less understood, however, are the impact of the type of electoral system and the media. Yet, both of these may be significant elements in the determination of election outcomes- positively or negatively -for women candidates (Rosen, 2013; Sanbonmatsu, 2010; Kaminsky & White, 2007; Salmond, 2006). In Fiji’s 2014 election, eight women were elected to a 50-seat parliament, but this number increased to nine in early 2015 following a female MP’s replacement of a colleague who resigned (Vuadreu, 2015). This count constitutes the highest percentage of female Members of Parliament (MPs) since the country’s Independence in 1970 (Swami, 2015). This score has been interpreted by many post-election commentators to be the result of what Kaminsky and White (2007, p.186) call “macro-economic and social conditions”1 (see Chattier, 2015; Cokanasiga, 2014; Shamim, 2014). Discussion of the likely impact of the country’s new ‘open list’ proportional representation (PR) electoral system and of women’s media coverage has been virtually absent. This article examines the possible impact of Fiji’s new electoral system, and the visibility of women candidates in the public media, on their election outcomes.

Our focus on the PR electoral system and female media coverage reflects our primary interest in highlighting the gendered nature of the election. The literature is dominated by Fiji’s complex political history and its implications for the 2014 election outcomes (see Firth, 2015; Fraenkel, 2014; Lal, 2014). While this comprehensive body of work forms an important context for our study, much of it is masculinist in nature and approach (see Underhill-Sem, 1999) and sheds little light on an alternative reading of election results, at least through a gender lens. Globally, most studies on gender and elections analyse the roles of electoral systems and media coverage separately. We attempted in this study to look at the possibility of a different impact on election outcomes for women candidates by examining these two factors concurrently. Our findings indicate that, on the surface, both appeared to have a positive contribution to the results for winning women candidates. At a deeper level, however, a different narrative constituted by various other aspects of electoral engineering and media politics in Fiji can be identified.

The article consists of two related parts. First, we discuss how the new open list PR system worked (albeit unintentionally) to the advantage of some women candidates, using examples from the three major political parties, FijiFirst, SODELPA and NFP. Second, we discuss the findings of our content analysis of 76 issues of each of the two main newspapers, The Fiji Times and Fiji Sun, in relation to media coverage of women candidates. The focus on these two printed media was based on the understanding that these were more easily accessible to the majority of Fiji’s population compared to social media, television or internet. The 76 issues for each newspaper consisted of publications in July (31 days), August (31 days) and September 1st –
Electoral Systems

 Democracies around the world generally use either of two types of electoral systems: the plurality or majoritarian system also known as First-Past-the-Post (FPP), and the Proportional Representation (PR) system. The majoritarian system is commonly used in established democracies like the US, the UK and in many Commonwealth countries including most independent Pacific island nations. As is well known in the Pacific, countries are divided into electoral constituencies and voters in each constituency cast their ballot for one candidate. The candidate with the highest vote count wins the election and becomes an MP. As a technically simple system, the majoritarian system creates a manufactured majority. It favours big parties and works best in a two party contest. This in effect creates a functional parliamentary majority for the government, while at the same time penalizing small parties (Norris, 1997). In a multi-party contest, big parties may still dominate but may need the support of one or two smaller parties to gain a majority and rule as a coalition. A key aspect of this system is that the major political parties tend to alternate in governing, and this is said to ensure stable and strong governments. From a gender perspective, however, the majoritarian system is claimed to be “notoriously unfriendly to women” (Nicholl, 2006, p.87).

In the PR electoral system the constituency is responsible for electing more than one politician. Scholars generally agree that this system influences levels of political engagement across different groups. Minority parties and groups with the likelihood of less political representation, including women, are said to benefit more under this system than under the majoritarian model. This is due to several factors. First, parties can propose more than one candidate per constituency. This allows the introduction of new candidates without disrupting internal party power structures (Wauters et al, 2010) that centralise nominations. According to Matland and Studlar (1996) party leaders in a PR system have control over candidate nominations and they are able to include more female candidates if this becomes the party priority. Another reason the PR system benefits women is that it allows parties to nominate a whole range of candidates from sub-groups rather than a single representative for the whole constituency as featured in the majoritarian system (Wauters et al, 2010). The third factor relates to the assumption that parties compete for gender-sensitive voters which then pushes them to increase their effort for female representation (Meier, 2004).

The Media

The role of the media in feeding positive or negative images of parliamentary candidates to the public is an important determinant of electoral outcome. Studies conducted mainly in more established democracies reflect two schools of thought. The first one argues that media coverage of elections is biased against female candidates (Mueller, 2009; Norris, 1997) with women candidates mentioned in significantly fewer news stories than their male counterparts (Gidengil & Everitt, 2010; Fowler & Lawless, 2009). There is a tendency to take female candidates less seriously with coverage disproportionately focusing on a limited set of stereotyped ‘female’
issues and traits as well as on candidate appearance and gender (Gershon, 2013). Generally, these types of media representation are associated with poor election results for women.

The second view is that media-related stereotypes may not have as much of an impact ‘on the ground’ as originally thought (Dolan, 2014; Fox, 2010). One of the main reasons for this relates to the understanding that gender stereotypes may be changing. Evidence suggests an easing of stereotypes and an increase in egalitarian attitudes toward women candidates as more women move out of the home sphere into education and public workplaces (Dolan 2010; Fridkin & Kenney 2009;). Another reason relates to the central role of political parties. As Dolan (2014: 98) argues: ‘In the context of elections, voters know more about candidates than simply their sex, and a significant body of research points out the importance of party and incumbency in shaping candidate evaluation and vote choice’.

LOW REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT

The Pacific island region is currently ranked the lowest in the world in terms of women’s political representation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015). Various explanations have been given for this dismal situation: male-dominated cultures (Wood, 2015; Chattier, 2015; True et al., 2012; Durutalo, 2012; Slatter, 2010-2011), financial constraints for female candidates (Huffer, 2006; Whittington, 2006), women’s low ambition to run (Fiji Women’s Forum, 2014; Siwatibau et al, 2005) and legislative restrictions and constraining political climate (Zetlin, 2014; Baker, 2014; Fraenkel, 2006). For Fiji, recent results for women candidates have placed the country top in the region. Globally Fiji is now ranked 93rd out of 140 countries. Of the six lowest ranked countries in the world, however, four are Pacific island states (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015).

To some extent, the highest proportion of women elected to Fiji’s parliament in 2014 defies some of the explanations noted above for the paucity of women in Pacific legislatures. The persistently low results for women candidates in the region have been predominantly blamed on patriarchal cultures and traditions. One weakness of this view is that it portrays patriarchal cultures and thinking as static and frozen in time and place, thus presenting an even more discouraging and hopeless scenario for women. Yet, women’s increasing leadership engagement in other public bodies and spheres of work, is bound to have some kind of ‘role-model’ effect, albeit small, on people’s perceptions about women in public life.

Research to ascertain changing perceptions of women’s place in public life is needed. The persistent citing of cultural traditions as barriers to women candidates also tends to overshadow the role of other ‘traditions’ such as established electoral systems in perpetuating the problem. The PICs with consistently low numbers of women in parliament all use the majoritarian system. Well aware of this, a top government official from the Solomon Islands, Dr Jimmy Rodgers, is convinced that in order to increase women’s representation in Pacific Parliaments, electoral reforms must be considered (Osifelo, 2008). Indeed, investigating the contribution of the majoritarian electoral system to the under-representation of Pacific women in politics is long overdue. The introduction of the PR system in Fiji warranted analysis in respect to how it had worked for women candidates and whether it had improved women’s representation.
DATA AND METHOD

In examining the international literature on electoral systems, we distilled particular aspects of the PR electoral system that could apply to Fiji. In particular we looked at how the ‘inclusive’ nature of the PR system operated in the context of Fiji, a society with an ‘increased awareness’ about gender and political leadership. Our content analysis of reports and articles on women candidates in 76 issues of the two daily newspapers in the two and a half months immediately prior to Election Day, followed a method commonly used in feminist studies taking a deconstruction perspective. Texts are analyzed to see not only what is there but also what is missing or silenced. The goal is to critically examine the text to see what is revealed, what emerges, and what juxtapositions may have developed (Leavy, 2007).

The analysis of newspaper items was done in three steps:

1. A simple tabulation of the number of times any woman candidate’s name and/or photo appeared in the newspapers was constructed. Although the focus was on election-related items, we were also interested in news and reports on women candidates that were not directly related to the elections. This was mainly because of the likely implications of such coverage for how a candidate performed in the election, given the context of the election period.

2. Key issues or topics linked to the candidates being in the news were identified.

3. A closer examination of how one key woman candidate was portrayed by the two newspapers, and discussion of the possible impacts on her (and her Party’s) election outcome.

FIJI’S NEW ‘OPEN LIST’ PR ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Two of the most important new features of Fiji’s 2014 elections were the open list proportional representation (PR) electoral system and the single national constituency. The election also introduced ‘one person one vote’. Previous elections used the majoritarian system which, in Fiji’s peculiar race-based system of political representation, involved a combination of communal constituencies in which electors voted only for members of their own communities to fill racially reserved seats (Fraenkel, 2015; Nicholl, 2006), and national (or cross-voting) constituencies in which voters cast votes for candidates outside their own ‘communal groups’. In previous systems, each elector had more than one vote. The candidate receiving the highest number of ballots in each constituency won and entered parliament as a representative of his or her respective constituency. The adoption of the PR system and a single national constituency by Voreqe Bainimarama’s post-coup government ended race-based representation and broke with the traditional style of voting that the majority of adult voters were used to. For these reasons, the 2014 election was tagged ‘No Ordinary Election’ in a post-election workshop convened by the School of Government, Development and International Affairs at the University of the South Pacific (USP). Concerns were earlier expressed that voters had ‘little understanding’ of the new system (Madraiwiwi, 2015) and ‘some difficulties’ were expected in relation to the high threshold (5% of the total votes cast) required for parties and independents, and in respect to
how candidates would campaign and who they would represent in a single national constituency (Fraenkel, 2015). In the end, however, the efficiency with which the election was conducted, using 2,025 polling stations, was praised by voters who did not have to stand in long queues the whole day as experienced in previous elections (Fiji Times, 2015).

In 2006, only 30 of the 338 candidates (9%) were women (Usman, 2013; Pacific Women in Politics, 2015). Eight of them (11%) became MPs in a 71-seat parliament. In the 2014 election, 44 out of the 249 candidates (18%) were women. Eight of them (16%) won seats in a 50-seat parliament. The number has since increased to 9 following Jilila Nalibu Kumar’s replacement of Dr Neil Sharma (who resigned in April, 2015). Kumar was FijiFirst’s next highest vote winner.

The positive correlation between the PR system and the greater representation of women in politics as noted in the literature (Kaminsky and White, 2007; Nicholl, 2006) seemed to be borne out in Fiji’s 2014 elections. As noted by Fraenkel (2015: 159), “women had greater prominence than [in] Fiji’s previous elections”. Some political parties had candidates standing as youth, disabled persons’ and women’s representatives within the new single national constituency, reflecting a level of diversity not previously seen. The youngest candidate was a 21 year old woman lawyer, Anishni Chand, a nominee of the National Federation Party. In fact, she was the youngest woman candidate ever to have contested in a national election in the Pacific Island region. A noted feature of the 2014 elections was the fielding of women candidates by six of the seven political parties that contested the election. FijiFirst, the National Federation Party and the Peoples’ Democratic Party each included 9 women in their slate of candidates; SODELPA included eight women. One of the two Independent candidates was a woman; a feisty young feminist activist who announced her intention to stand and began campaigning via social media well ahead of all other candidates. Table 1 shows the number and percentage of female candidates fielded by each of the parties.

Another striking feature in this election was the number of female party leaders. Five of the seven political parties had female presidents – a characteristic that was starkly absent in the 2006 and previous elections. Having female party leaders has had precedence in Fiji but is largely unheard of in other PICs. Fiji, which also has the largest and most active number of women’s organisations in the region, has led the way (George, 2012).
Did Fiji’s electoral engineering produce positive outcomes for women candidates? With respect to the country’s single national constituency, political parties could field as many as 50 candidates – the corresponding number of parliamentary seats. Only FijiFirst, the party of the incumbent government, did so, including 9 women (eight of whom were first timers in politics) in their slate of 50 candidates. Five of the 9 women candidates for FijiFirst became MPs. The combination of the PR system and the 5% threshold meant that three of them (Mereseini Vuniwaqa, 1175, Rosy Akbar, 990, and Veena Bhavnagar, 874) received far fewer votes than women in other parties who did not win seats (Mere Samisoni, 1855, and Vane Seruvakula, 1701, of SODELPA; and Lynda Tabuya, 1375, of the People’s Democratic Party); two of them received fewer votes even than the sole female independent candidate (Roshika Deo, 1055), who did not make the 5% threshold. The PR/Single constituency system worked to the advantage of the five women in FijiFirst as they won their seats through the lion share of votes pulled by their Party leader (the incumbent PM), which secured for FijiFirst a landslide majority of votes (202,459 or 69% of the 293,714 votes cast for FijiFirst) and almost two-thirds of the seats. It could be concluded that the PR/Single constituency model worked in favour of women candidates in the dominant party, Fiji First, but against women candidates in other Parties who had earned more votes in their own right. There are, however, other factors to consider, including women voters’ behaviour.

Although it is difficult to ascertain the influence of ‘gender-sensitive voters’ in the Fiji election, there is some evidence of a relatively high level of public consciousness about women in national decision making. In a pre-election national survey conducted by the Fiji Women’s Forum (2014) two key statements received unusually high responses. The first was: Women are underrepresented in government in Fiji. Fifty-seven percent (57%) strongly agreed and 24%
slightly agreed. The second statement: *It would be better for the country if there were more women in national government* received 45% strongly agree and 27% slightly agree. This snapshot of people’s views reflects an increased awareness about gender and political leadership - an awareness that we might have expected to be reflected in voter behaviour under the new PR electoral system. As Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer (2010, p.994) argue, “electoral rules that emphasize proportional representation over majoritarian send signals that the long-standing, male-dominated political environment is open to representation and inclusion of women”.

Given the increased awareness in the country of women and public leadership, and the strong push for the introduction of Temporary Special Measures (or quota system) by women’s organizations, it was in every Party’s interests to include women candidates. Clearly the three main Parties which secured seats in Parliament (FijiFirst, SODELPA and National Federation Party) strategically included women candidates. All parties except one seemingly responded to changes in societal perceptions and expectations in relation to women in political leadership by including women in their line-up of candidates. Since all candidates in the single constituency competed with one another, it could be said to have been a level playing field. There was evidently an assumption that women voters would vote for female candidates; or that enlightened voters would approve of parties with both genders represented.

As it turned out, however, votes for women candidates constituted less than 16% of the total votes cast for all parties, suggesting that only a minor proportion of women voters voted for women candidates. As already mentioned three women from FijiFirst ‘won’ seats despite having lower scores than other women candidates whose parties did not secure a sufficient proportion of votes to meet the 5% threshold, or to earn more than a handful of parliamentary seats. This revealed a downside of Fiji’s combined PR system, single constituency and high threshold – the system may only advantage those women candidates in large populist parties headed by a charismatic (or incumbent) leader who manages to score sufficient votes to place them ahead of their male competitors within the party. It will not necessarily open doors to Parliament for women seeking election on their own merit within smaller political parties, or as independents. It is too early to say whether or not the outcomes for female political aspirants under this electoral engineered model of PR cum single constituency can be predicted. Given the technical workings of this new system, however, the possibility of a pattern developing of female candidates of dominant parties riding into Parliament on the coat-tails (or *sulu va taga*) of populist male leaders who have capacity to amass votes, cannot be ignored.

Another problematic element in the new electoral system is the restriction placed on voters inside the polling station. As shown in Table 2, candidates’ names and photos appeared in the newspapers as part of their parties’ profiles. These were the only opportunities that the voters had to not only familiarise themselves with new faces running in the election, and the parties they belonged to, but also to memorize their candidate number. Unlike in previous elections, the ballot paper excluded candidate names and party symbols, and consisted only of each candidate’s allotted number. Voters were prohibited from taking any written material into the polling station and had to therefore remember their chosen candidate’s number and circle the correct number at the polling booth. The possibility of making an error and circling the wrong number was high,
raising the question of whether some candidates (including women candidates) might have done better without this tricky restriction.

**MEDIA COVERAGE OF WOMEN CANDIDATES**

With regard to media coverage of female candidates, the literature notes disadvantages and advantages to women. Although it is based on experiences in non-Pacific contexts, useful parallels can be drawn. To a large extent, media treatment of Fiji’s women candidates was not explicitly discriminatory at least not in the manner experienced in bigger democracies (see, for example, Sawer, 2013; Mavin et al, 2010). In the two newspapers in our study, reports or news items involving women candidates were almost always simultaneously about the political party that they stood for. With the exception of articles involving SODELPA leader, Ro Teimumu Kepa – which we discuss later - newspaper reporting on women candidates appeared to celebrate and even champion them. It was common to read news headlines such as: “Female power”; “Courage and Conviction – one woman alone”, “Female candidates stand tall”, “Female candidates set election focus”, “Draunidalo’s vocation to serve”, and “Chief who won’t back down”. Fiji Time’s regular Columns, “What the politicians say” and “Road to Democracy” provided women (and male) candidates avenues to campaign on such issues as education, health services, poverty, water supply, cost of living, unemployment, infrastructure, land, religion, race, corruption, environment, military and security, coup culture and crime.
Table 2. Number of times the Leading Female Candidates’ names and pictures appeared in the papers, July-September 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Candidate</th>
<th>Number of times Name/Photo appeared in Fiji Times (76 issues)</th>
<th>Number of times Name/Photo appeared in Fiji Sun (76 issues)</th>
<th>Dominant Related Issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Ro Teimumu Kepa (SODELPA) (84)    | 54                                                         | 30                                                       | -Being leader of SODELPA  
-Exchanges with Banimarama  
-Election issues (esp. land, religion, and GCC)  
-Views on soldiers captured in the Golan Heights  
-Views on the military  
-Party campaigning (local and overseas)  
-Party manifesto  
-Featured story |
| Jiko Luveni (FF) (46)             | 21                                                         | 25                                                       | -Ministry of Women’s programmes  
-Party Campaigning  
-Party candidate profile  
-Women candidate profile |
| Tupou Draunidalo (FNP) (46)       | 29                                                         | 17                                                       | -Party campaigning  
-Party candidate profile  
-Election issues  
-Women candidate profile  
-Featured story |
| Lavinia Padarath (FLP) (21)       | 10                                                         | 11                                                       | -Capacity as party president  
-Party campaigning |
| Lorna Eden (FF) (21)              | 8                                                          | 13                                                       | -Party campaigning  
-Party profile |
| Lynda Tabuya (PDP) (20)           | 12                                                         | 8                                                        | -Capacity as PDP president  
-Party Campaigning  
-Party candidate profile  
-Women candidate profile  
-Featured story |
| Roshika Deo (Independent) (19)    | 13                                                         | 6                                                        | -Campaigning  
-Women candidate profile  
-Featured story |
| Veena Bhatnagar (FF) (19)         | 8                                                          | 11                                                       | -Party campaigning  
-Party profile |
| Eci Nabalarua (NFP) (13)          | 11                                                         | 2                                                        | -Party campaigning  
-Party profile |
| Ansu Lata (NFP) (11)              | 10                                                         | 1                                                        | -Party Profile  
-Featured story |
Generally, articles with affirmative headlines placed emphasis on candidate traits, discussing the more positive aspects of their educational, career, and family backgrounds. Independent candidate Roshika Deo, for example, was described as a feminist, a strong advocate for women’s rights with extensive experience in community development, the inaugural coordinator of the Emerging Leaders Forum Alumni, and the second Pacific woman to receive in 2014 the US Department of State’s International Women of Courage Award (Swami, 2014). Similarly, Tupou Draunidalo’s interest in politics was linked to her career as a lawyer, her stand against Fiji’s coup culture, as well as to that of her late mother, former MP Adi Kuini, and her late step-father, former Prime Minister, Timoci Bavadra (Devi, 2015). News items on Jiko Luveni highlighted her role at election time as the incumbent Minister for Women. She frequently appeared opening workshops for women’s groups or economic empowerment programmes for rural women or advocating against teenage pregnancy and domestic violence. As noted in one of her speeches: “My dream is for Fijian women – irrespective of religion, belief, colour, creed, rural and urban, to venture successfully through empowerment” (Fiji Times, 2014). But, like other women candidates, it was not uncommon for Luveni to campaign for her party and its leader when the opportunity arose. In one report she claimed that: “The only person … capable of making strong and firm decisions that moved Fiji forward was FijiFirst leader, Bainimarama” [referring to the previous eight years of military government] (Fiji Times, 2014).

**DIVERSE POLITICAL PARTIES, CONVERGING INTERESTS IN WOMEN’S ISSUES**

Table 2 shows the number of times that the names and photographs of 10 women candidates’ appeared in the newspapers as well as the issues or reasons related to their being on the news. The bracketed numbers underneath the candidates’ names are the total times they featured in the two papers. The women are referred to here as ‘leading women candidates’ because, compared to all female candidates, they had more than one related issue or reason why their names and photographs appeared. For the rest of the women, names and/or photos were in the papers only as part of their political party lists or member profiles. This means that not all women candidates campaigned for themselves using the print media. Perhaps not all were confident enough to do that.

The number of political parties represented by leading women candidates was significant and reflective of the openness of the new PR electoral system to diverse representations of different groups within political parties. More interestingly, the subject of ‘women’s issues’ was clearly an important item for the political parties, as spelled out in their respective manifestos. As reported by Susu (2014), “the political parties have vowed to empower women and uphold their rights” in recognition of their contribution to Fiji’s development. All seven parties made reference to at least five issues relevant to the welfare and rights of women. For example, NFP proposed to work on reducing gender based violence, increasing economic opportunities, strengthening the legal and institutional environment, and taking measures to enable women’s participation in the policy domain by creating space for women’s collective action. The People’s Democratic Party planned to work with major stakeholders to promote gender equality in all sectors, to mainstream gender in all national and sub-national policies, increase to 30 per cent women’s participation
at all levels of decision-making, and develop a comprehensive response to eliminating violence against women (Fiji Sun, 2014). The position of the two major parties – SODELPA and FijiFirst – on women’s issues was very similar to that of the aforementioned parties.

This positive media attention to women candidates alluded to the significance of a constrained and controlled political climate. In this controlled environment, political parties and the media were able to generally give women candidates a high (and positive) profile as women’s representation and women’s empowerment were ‘safe issues’ in this election as opposed to divisive issues. As pointed out, all the parties were more or less agreed on women’s issues. There were no genuine debates on policies for women’s issues and these were not the main political issues on which the election was fought. The election was indeed a referendum on the post-coup Bainimarama government’s radical policy shifts - from the indigenous ethno-nationalism of the deposed government to non-racial political equality and the creation of a new Fiji.

This was very evident in the fact that the bulk of newspaper reports on election campaigning came to focus on a blame-game between two party leaders in what emerged as a two-way contest between FijiFirst and SODELPA. For example: while Voreqe Bainimarama, former military commander, Prime Minister since the 2006 coup and FijiFirst leader (and sometimes, Jiko Luveni) claimed that women’s development and rights were addressed in the 2013 Constitution, Ro Teimumu Kepa (SODELPA leader) was reported to have argued otherwise, insisting on the discriminatory nature of the Constitution with no specific provisions for the development and empowerment of women. Bainimarama’s labelling of Kepa and some of her party members as ‘liars’ only fuelled their bitter exchanges. The line between debating and attacking/blaming each other in the name of election campaigning became more and more blurred closer to the Election Day. Newspapers and their reporting style played right into the acrimonious exchanges of insults.

**DID MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF RO TEIMUMU KEPA AFFECT HER (PARTY’S) ELECTION OUTCOMES?**

Ro Teimumu Kepa’s frequent appearances in the Fiji Sun, compared to The Fiji Times, were for all the wrong reasons. The Fiji Sun, which was overtly biased in favour of the government and Fiji First, entertained and fuelled confrontations between her and Bainimarama - much more regularly than The Fiji Times. Of the 30 news items in the Fiji Sun featuring Kepa, 21 were her responses to provocative statements by Bainimarama, and this became more frequent and intense during the last three weeks of campaigning. Kepa and her party were presented or framed as being on the defensive while Bainimarama was always represented on the offensive. This binary construction could be said to reflect classic unequal gender power relations: female/defender versus male/aggressor. Fighting from a defensive position is usually equated with weakness and vulnerability and tends to be viewed less favourably. The binary was also directly applied to their respective political parties. SODELPA was reported as being “desperate and … trying everything that is available to win votes”. From opinion poll results, Kepa and her party were reported to be “catching up” while FijiFirst was ‘way ahead’ (Fiji Sun, 2015). When Kepa cancelled participating in a live debate, the Fiji Sun ran the headline “What is she afraid of?” (Fiji
Sun, 2015). Such terms as ‘desperate’, ‘catching up’ and ‘afraid’ are choice words conveying a specific representation of a defensive female leader and her party. According to Lal (2014, p.466), “Kepa brought dignity and calm to the leadership, but lacked the political sharpness and debating skills required to combat temperamentally volatile and intellectually obtuse opponents in an intense political campaign…” This is an image of Kepa that Lal would have gathered from newspaper reporting. Dignity and calmness were not good enough. As the ‘defender’ – and a female - in the fight with the Fiji First leader, Kepa, it was suggested, needed to be more combative, more aggressive, more strident, and more on the offensive. This desire for her to be tougher and more aggressive reaffirms not only the masculine nature of political elections and the political terrain in general, but also how such masculinity is seen as ‘normal’.

News reports in The Fiji Times, on the other hand, took a more even approach, portraying Kepa respectfully as a heroic character, emphasizing her femaleness and her leadership. As the paper’s most popular female candidate, her status derived more from the fact that she occupied the figurehead position of a major political party, than from her gender. Wrapped up in her leadership are several other identities. She is one of the three paramount traditional chiefs in Fiji; former chairperson of the Rewa Provincial Council and a former government minister. To some, her rise to party leadership was unexpected although the political circumstances were quite similar to that of many women leaders around the world. A significant proportion ascends to power in the contexts of political change, many due to unanticipated leadership vacuums following severe political allegations or upheaval (Escobar-Lemmon et al, 2005). Given her chiefly status, Kepa’s ascension to party leadership was not unusual or unexpected. Her chiefly status was what The Fiji Times seemed to emphasise in its reports.

Kepa’s popularity as a media subject may have had some influence on her and her party winning 15 parliamentary seats. Being frequently in the news would have certainly assisted her and her party’s campaign. SODELPA’s ideological representation of indigenous (or ethno-nationalist) interests made it Fiji First’s main rival. This factor, combined with Kepa’s kin or clan links, educational background, traditional rank, prior political leadership experience, and high public profile, would have been a determining factor in her becoming the second highest individual vote scorer (after Bainimarama), attaining 49,485 votes or 35% of her party’s share of the vote. This resonates with the situation in other parts of the Pacific where kin or clan links, combined with candidates’ educational and career status, traditional rank and community association determine voting behaviour and, ultimately, election outcomes (Corbett & Liki, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Exploring the factors that contribute to increasing women’s representation in parliaments has been a key interest of researchers on gender and elections. This is particularly so for countries of the Pacific where there have been persistently low numbers of women candidates standing for and winning seats in national parliaments. Fiji’s 2014 election outcomes showed some encouraging signs. While there is no straight-forward formula for women candidates’ success, examining the impacts on women’s representation of changes in electoral systems and media coverage is crucial to exploring fairer approaches for women. This study explored the significance of Fiji’s new PR
electoral system together with the role of print media in the improvement of election outcomes for women candidates. Focusing on both factors simultaneously enabled an exploration of the role of other factors, and actors, beyond the electoral system and the candidates in influencing or determining electoral outcomes. At first glance, the new PR system and the more robust media coverage of women candidates than in previous elections seemed to have contributed positively to the highest ever percentage of women elected to parliament. Further analysis, however, pointed to the significance of micro-level dynamics within the electoral system that worked for women in major political parties and not for others. The results suggest that in the absence of any temporary special measures to purposely increase women’s representation and counter systemic gender bias, political parties may remain ‘gate keepers’ for women’s entry to parliament to some extent, but the design of electoral systems can also by default improve women’s representation.

While media visibility may have been immaterial for most women candidates, it might have contributed to the success of some. The championing of women candidates in the newspapers may however have been empty rhetoric that did not translate into winning votes for most of them. Indeed, this is an area that future research might further explore. Negative representations of certain women candidates compared to others were entangled with tensions between political parties with diametrically opposed political agendas. We do not expect such representations of female candidates to evaporate in future elections, but if they can serve to build more women candidates who are bolder, more determined and resilient, then that, at least, is good news for Fiji’s democracy.

ENDNOTES:

1  This refers to the sociocultural and economic factors commonly cited to underpin the low representation of women in legislatures. Examples include women’s cultural role in patriarchal society, societal perception about leadership as a domain for men, and financial constraints that hamper effective campaigns by women candidates. Kaminsky and White (2007) argue that to achieve the goal of equal gender representation in parliaments, governments may find it easier to change electoral systems than changing sociocultural and economic factors.

2  In some countries, in a perversion of the FPP system, where large numbers of candidates may compete for a single seat, the winner may actually represent a very small proportion of the voters in the constituency.

3  Nicholl’s analysis of the voting systems in Fiji focused on the period before 2006. She argued that the Alternative Vote System that replaced the First-Past-the Post system after the 1997 Constitution was a majoritarian system. It was very similar to FPTP in that it is based on single-member electorates, a system which is disadvantageous to women candidates. She compared Fiji to New Zealand and South Africa - the two countries with PR systems and relatively large numbers of women MPs. Thus she claims that the PR system is friendlier to minority and women candidates than the majoritarian system.
For the most part women felt left out of the 2006 election (Sharma, 2006), as reflected in the critical article “Where are all the women candidates during elections? A Fiji media case study,” by USP Journalism student, Shazia Usman, published in 2013.

Women candidates for FijiFirst won only 3% in all the part.

Submissions by women’s groups and partner NGOs, emphasizing issues of women’s equality, made up almost a third of all submissions to the Constitution Commission. See Virisila Buadromo’s report: http://www.c-r.org/sites/default/files/Accord25_Fiji.pdf

Chattier (2014) reports the total number of registered female voters for the 2014 election as 290,742. If all registered female voters actually voted (which is unlikely), and 16% of the total votes cast (496,364) equates to 79,418, then, allowing for some male votes for female candidates, less than 27% of registered women voters supported women candidates. http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/news-events/all-stories/struggles-daily-bread#.VI_8tWSUf38

Unprecedented, decreed restrictions on the commencement of political party campaigning, on media reporting, and on civil society organisations’ involvement in the elections, together with close relations between the incumbent government and the military, made for a very controlled election climate.

REFERENCES:


