‘Social Unrest and Electoral Institutions in the Solomon Islands’,
John Roughan, Solomon Islands Development Trust, Solomon Islands.

Solomon Islands electoral system of ‘first past the post’ is a major link in the chain contributing to the Social Unrest period the country suffered during its 1998-2003 years. It is this electoral weakness as well as a grossly unprepared electorate, corrupt practice at the highest levels of government and serious ineptness throughout the public service that allowed leaders who, perhaps influential and capable at village and local level politics, proved incompetent and unable to cope at the provincial, national and international levels.

This study suggests that the Solomon Islands electoral system—the nation followed it for almost 20 years and used in five national elections—contributed significantly to national breakdown state-building institutions. The electoral system allowed too many unfit personalities to basically undermine efforts to form a nation from different peoples, scattered among hundreds of islands and strung out over thousands of kilometers of ocean. The electoral process basically hollowed out not only state institutions but more importantly allowed too many unqualified and unprepared individuals into the halls of power who commanded but minimum voter backing.

**Electoral Results 1984-2001**

The following table details the Solomon Islands electoral history since 1984.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MPs/ %</td>
<td>MPs/ %</td>
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<td>MPs/ %</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>50% or above</td>
<td>9 (24)</td>
<td>6 (16)</td>
<td>14 (30)</td>
<td>12 (24)</td>
<td>10 (20)</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 50%</td>
<td>29 (76)</td>
<td>31 (84)</td>
<td>33 (70)</td>
<td>38 (76)</td>
<td>40 (80)</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 30%</td>
<td>9 (24)</td>
<td>12 (32)</td>
<td>10 (21)</td>
<td>14 (28)</td>
<td>19 (38)</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 25%</td>
<td>5 (13)</td>
<td>9 (25)</td>
<td>9 (20)</td>
<td>10 (21)</td>
<td>13 (26)</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% MPs failing to return</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members in Parl.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Solomon Star Election Results 1984-2001. LINK Magazine

**Note 1:** Winning candidates percentages can be found in more than one category. For instance, in the 1984 election 29 parliamentarians received less than 50% of the vote. But
some of these same parliamentarians (9) scored below 30% and in some cases even below 25% (5).

Note 2: The 1993 election is recognized as skewed and somewhat out of the pattern of the other four elections. Three months prior to election day, the Prime Minister of the day, Solomon Mamaloni, ordered his Ministry of Finance to hand out $100,000 to each sitting parliamentarian. The fund was nominally called a Development Fund but it was known by many that the monies would not have to be accounted for. In fact, they weren’t. Hence, the percentage of parliamentarians failing to return was the lowest (19%) and the percentage of winning candidates with more than 50% of the vote was significantly higher (30%) than the average (23%) in all other elections.

Analysis of Election Results

Since 1984 and through five national elections, there emerged a pattern of fewer and fewer successful candidates to the nation's highest elected office able to think and act nationally, not merely lead locally. Fewer and fewer winning candidates—23% on average—actually attracted 50% or more of their constituency vote. Those who achieved less than 50% of the popular vote—78% on average over five elections—dominated parliament’s proceedings and national politics during a 20 year period. In fact, in the five national elections (1984, '89, '94, '97 and in the most recent poll, 2001) almost a third of all winning candidates attracted less than 30% of the popular vote of their respective areas. More disturbing, however, a substantial and growing number of parliamentarians managed to gain office with less than 25% of the popular vote.

From the 1984 election to the poll of 2001, each category--less than 50% of the vote, 30% or less and 25% or less--substantially strengthened. For instance, in 1984 only 13% successful candidates were under 25% of the popular vote. By 2001, however, the number of winning candidates with less than 25% of the vote had doubled to 26%.

Almost twenty years after the 1984 election and through five national elections, then, more and more members who gained their seats were attracting less and less of the popular vote. As happened a number of times, voters—85% of an electorate—had cast their votes for other candidates. However, their democratic rights were frustrated by a system that rewarded a candidate to win with less than 15% of the vote.

Crisis of Leadership

In the early years of independence, 1978-1986, Solomon Island leaders tended to emphasize building up the state apparatus—ministries, General Orders, right procedures and focused less and less on nationhood-building matters—bringing the whole of the nation into closer contact, equity in development projects, reduction of second class citizenship, etc. Unfortunately, parliament the body most endowed to build up the nation and which should stand at the forefront of nationhood building, was too often dominated
by leaders more and more focused on local matters—especially private and personal—than the burning issues of good governance, strengthened national institutions, nationwide development, the vital place of the village in nation building and so on. When the first hints of the Solomons' Social Unrest began to raise its ugly head in mid-1998, national leaders proved ill equipped to respond adequately to the crisis.

Leaders continued to practice, to an unacceptable degree, the Politics of Self-interest. Historically, over more than two decades of independence, this was the very reason why many entered politics in the first place. The biggest hurdle they had to jump, getting themselves elected, was greatly simplified by the ‘first past the post’ electoral system and the fact that the constitution has no review mechanism to keep parliamentarians tied to serving their constituency.

The following table—Solomon Islands Governments Report Card Summary—details how government after government failed to serve their people. All these report cards, conducted by the Solomon Islands Development Trust, a local NGO operating within the country since 1982, canvass more than 2,500 people across the nation for each of the six report cards. Each survey—men, women, young men and young women—are asked separately their opinion on the four fundamentals of living in Solomons as listed below.

### Solomon Island Governments Report Card Summary

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Health Services</strong></td>
<td>47</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Opportunities</strong></td>
<td>48</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resource Assistance</strong></td>
<td>57</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Availability of Money</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Mark</strong></td>
<td>48</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: SIDT)

Since 1989, then, Solomon Islanders across the nation have passed judgment on how well—or how poorly—the governments of the day, their members of parliament, have served people’s basic interests.

All Report Card scores (as listed in the table) measure the same four fundamental areas of life that people expect to be assisted in by the government: health services, education opportunities, resource assistance and the availability of money. Citizens, rural and urban, men and women, young and old (these are the sub categories which are individually tested) know full well each of these separate areas of life. They capture the
typical life-patterns of ordinary people and are good proxies for measuring how the politicians of the day are caring for the people of their electorate.

A quick study across the six Report Card scores indicates that although there was a slight rise in performance from the 1989 period to the 1998 period, all governments of the day scored below 60%. The Kemakeza government’s Report Card, however, is shocking. The Report Card results come as no surprise to the people of the land.

Solomon Islanders demands on government are normally modest. Most villagers are self-sufficient—grow their own food, build their own homes, their energy demands for fuel and light are slight, health matters are basically in their own hands. However, modern day demands with their over emphasis on cash is fast running people into the ground. In basic terms, most people are becoming poorer each year.

People look more and more to government to help them catch up. People are not looking for the handout, nor the gift but simply for normal government services to strengthen their resource base, insure quality education for their kids and basic medical service for the family. When these services are not provided, however, people get on with their lives as seen in the recent 5 years of Social Unrest.

Solomon Islands Central Bank's governor, Rick Hou, made this statement crystal clear recently. The country finally snapped out of its economic down ward spiral and did it with a bang. It posted an almost impossible 6% growth pattern for 2003. The International Monetary Fund (IFM) was amazed that an economy so hard hit could turn itself around so well and at such a rate that it is "unprecedented and seen nowhere else in the world". What the Governor was talking about, however, was basically the village sector, the woman gardener, the small producer, copra cutter, cocoa farmer, ordinary Solomon Islanders all "when the international community already wrote off this country"(Central Bank Report: 2004).

But the great thing about this staggering turn about was it started in 2002, months before RAMSI had even been thought about much less entering the picture. The little people, the Solomons backbone, didn't hang around waiting for the hand out, the grant, the donor gift but got on with daily life and produced exports—cocoa, copra, sawn timber, seaweed, etc. under hardship. These are the people the donors must not only recognize and celebrate but invest in to keep the fragile but growing economic 'pot boiling'.

Rather than bemoaning their fate, listening to political tok tok, worrying what government would or would not do, or following failed leaders, the typical Solomon Islander got on with life. It is they whom the investor, the donor and those interested in this country must not only fully recognize, praise for sticking to the basics of life but especially invest in their lives to keep this country's economy humming.

Lords of the State vs. the People of the Nation
When civilians organize themselves to insure the delivery of services and especially mobilize public opinion to counter government’s dubious decisions, governments of the day quickly close rank across the political spectrum and object to the supposed attack on their perceived status. Over the past 26 years, the most recent one last month, there have been at least four public confrontations between the NGO sector and most recently the Civil Society Network.

The first confrontation occurred in the late 1980s. In Russell Rollason’s 1988 study, commissioned by government through the United Nations Development Program, *The Contribution of NGOs to development in the Solomon Islands and a review of NGO-Government relations*, indicated that the NGO community’s relationships with government though beset with friction, misunderstanding and potential difficult were indeed becoming more harmonious. Public criticism of government in any democracy was necessary if painful event. He continued:

> The concern that NGOs are too critical of government focuses on one indigenous Solomon Islands NGO—SIDT . . . However, SIDT’s criticisms have focused on the exploitation of natural resources—forestry, fishing and gold mining—particularly on customary land. . . . The concerns voiced by SIDT are genuine concerns reflecting deeply felt concerns of village people. NGOs do have a legitimate role of being a voice of the voiceless, particularly when they are being exploited (Rollason, 11).

These statements were quite timely for a young nation where public media—newspapers and radio—were just beginning to cover national political life in a systematic and critical way. NGO public scrutiny, however, was something new to government officials and politicians.

The second public confrontation took place when ordinary land owners, through the NGO sector publicly disputed government’s insistence that it and it alone had the right to people’s development of their own land.

Many of these same forces—illegal logging scheme, government unable or unwilling to listen to the cries of its people, citizens through the NGO community determined to have their voices heard in the halls of power—came to a head in the Pavuvu Incident of 1995.

The island of Pavuvu in the Russell Islands group is a valuable piece of real estate—approximately 6300 hectares of commercial forest with a total harvestable volume of almost a million cubic meters of log resources worth more than US$120 million (Billy 1995). Pavuvu’s original owners had over many years pleaded with past governor-generals, prime ministers, government officials, and their own members of parliament for the return of the island to its rightful owners. All to no avail (Rose 1995).
The government had promised the people development, including clinics, schools, roads, and a large agricultural project once the logging operations were completed. However, the original owners of Pavuvu held serious reservations about allowing their land to be logged. It was their supermarket, pharmacy, storehouse, food producer, and especially a source of fresh water. Commercial logging, they knew, would deprive them of these life sources and no amount of money or development would make up for the loss. In early May SIDT conducted a survey about Pavuvu asking more than 650 people their opinion about the Pavuvu issue. More than 90 percent of those polled disagreed with the statement: “Government has the first say over development on Pavuvu Island.” Almost 84 percent were convinced that Pavuvu Islanders themselves have the first say over development on the island (SIDT 1995). Survey results were presented in a public forum in which government officials were present.

Prime Minister Mamaloni’s response to what he took as a public rebuke to his and his government’s authority was swift. He issued a written public warning singling out the NGO community at large and its expatriate advisors in particular “not to interfere in internal government development matters of Solomon Islands and to refrain from feeding the media with false information.” He also claimed, without offering a shred of evidence, that “These NGO personals (sic) are the same characters who have destabilised PNG during the past ten years and have now come here to do the same to our people and country” (Mamaloni 1995).

The NGO response to the prime minister’s statement was equally swift and to the point. The day after the PM’s security decree, the Development Services Exchange faxed its public respond to the PM as well as the media. The statement made it clear that the NGO community was happy to hear that the government had been lenient with non government organisations over the years. It applauded this leniency but was appalled at the accusations made and asked either for proof of the unfounded accusations or “apologies to the wrongly accused NGO community” (DSE 1995). Of course the NGO community did not expect a reply, and they were not disappointed. The government offered no apology, retraction, nor proof of the accusations made.

But the Pavuvu Island issue went beyond a simple case of foreign logging interests felling and exporting of round logs against the expressed wishes of the majority of the landowners. It became a clear case of the government growing deaf to the voice of its people, a citizenry determined to have its say. It also became clear that the NGO sector needed to use its own information-sharing methods. LINK magazine, an ability to reach out and test public opinion—Pavuvu Survey—and especially its mobilizations tactic of using of using dozens of workers to share the other side of the story with villagers proved vital for the health of Solomons democracy.

Two other serious incidents—parliamentarians seeking an extra year in the house through a dubious constitutional amendment and a more recent one of the sale of a national heritage site to overseas investors—continues the pattern set before. Government members see themselves, not as servants to the people, but their masters. In the first
case, during the whole of 2001, government members especially, sought every legal and some dubious means to guarantee themselves an extra year in office. Many parliamentarians were convinced that they would not be returned—and how right they were. At the next national election—December 2001—65% of all sitting members, the highest failure rate ever, were unable to win back their seats.

Civil Society opposed their different ploys—holding meetings to inform the public how it would be constitutionally impossible to hold free and free elections, paid adverts indicating much the same, etc.—and finally its persistence paid off. Government was unable to carry a majority to push through a constitutional amendment allowing five years in office rather than the mandated four years.

In the most recent case (June 2004), government continued to grow deaf to the pleas of its own people. It's a rare when the Solomons' public get upset and determine to confront the authorities. But it happened a few weeks ago. Parliament, through its Minister for Tourism, reluctantly accepted a public petition for parliament to review the cabinet's decision to sell a piece of prime Honiara property. This was the same property which government sold a few years ago only to be forced to re-buy it again after public outcry. Yet, here it was being re-sold to a hotel developer when it was quite well known that the site was so valuable to the people... cultural centre, recreation place, conference site, etc. After a hurried review of the people's petition, however, it was summarily rejected by the house.

Wiser heads prevailed, however, in the following session when the Speaker of the House allowed a private member’s motion concerning the same issue to be entered in for consideration.

**Summary Statement**

The above details of inept, unresponsive and venal leadership which occurred over the past twenty years have not been totally caused by the nation’s ‘first past the post’ electoral system. But the system has greatly entrenched the attitude that political leadership is more about serving oneself than that of the community.

The Lords of the State vs. the People of the Nation examples detail the meaning of our Leadership Crisis. National leaders’ inability to serve the political well being of the people of the nation, lies at the heart of the good governance issue which currently plagues Solomon Islands. Clearing up the national and local election systems lies at the heart of leading this wonderful nation to a better future which it richly deserves.
7.

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Solomons’ Weak Electoral System
Links into the Nation’s Social Unrest

Dr. John Roughan
Advisor
Solomon Islands Development Trust

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