Constraints and current visions for election of women in Solomon Islands
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Abstract
Solomon Islands has among Pacific Islands countries one of the very lowest rates of women’s participation in parliament, at the same time as a woeful record of prestige-oriented male politicians who in many cases played a part in the ‘collapsed state’ saga in Solomon Islands. Election of women to parliament will be the single most important reform to counteract poor parliamentary performance. International women’s advisers have so far tended to conceive of the problem as one of building women’s support networks or parties for election from ‘the centre’. The problem however is not that these do not exist but lies in the gap between the centre and the rural electorates. We look at rural campaign practices and the processes of vote buying and block voting to suggest firstly that parties and policies figure little in typical village voting patterns. Secondly we look at the possibility that stronger local level governance associations as exist in some parts of Solomon Islands reduces the big-man vote buying and block voting that marks election time for many if not most constituencies. We refer to two current associations that have worked on improving electoral behaviour at the local level. These are the Marau Communities Association and the Rokotaniken Women’s Association. We suggest that a vital longer-term strategy for improving women’s participation in parliament will come through strengthening rural community-based governance associations that will resist vote buying and factionalised block voting and at the same time encourage women’s participation in decision-making at the local level. We project that this, in combination with continuing efforts at ‘the centre’, will enhance women candidate’s electoral chances.

1. Introduction
This paper addresses current issues for women participating in electoral politics in Solomon Islands to become National Parliament or Provincial Assembly members, and then develops ideas about how to overcome some of the constraints that we have identified, with the goal of increasing women’s political representation. About 85% of Solomon Islanders live in rural villages, and apart from the three Honiara urban seats, all seats are predominantly rural. This paper addresses issues for rural electorates more than those for urban electorates. The main objective of this paper is to add to the literature on this topic by presenting a view of the situation as it appears from the village level.

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2 SIG 1999, Annex IV, census constituency map. The situation is slightly more complex in that the two seats near Honiara of North-west Guadalcanal and Central Guadalcanal have a significant peri-urban population, and one seat in each province contains a smaller provincial urban area in addition to rural hinterland populations.
1.1 Women’s participation in Solomon Islands parliament

Solomon Islands has among Pacific Islands countries one of the very lowest rates of women’s participation in national parliaments. The Pacific Islands Forum countries generally have very low rates of women’s participation: just 3% of parliament or congress seats overall are held by women (UNIFEM 2002). Solomon Islands comes in below this low overall rate. Women hold none of the 50 seats in the current Solomon Islands parliament, and only one woman has ever held a seat in the Solomon Islands parliament.\(^3\)

At the provincial level of politics in Solomon Islands, matters are no different. Men currently represent all the nine provincial assemblies, comprised of a total of 183 wards, with only one exception at present.\(^4\) The trend of male-only representation can be traced back down to the now-defunct local Area Council level, and on into the systems of informal village governance.

There is a gap between the performance of the Solomon Islands electoral system in terms of women’s participation and the international treaties and agreements entered into by the Solomon Islands Government (SIG). In May 2002 SIG signed the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In addition SIG has recognized the Beijing Platform of Action and the subsequent Pacific Platform of Action (UNIFEM 1999a). These agreements oblige Solomon Islands to address the low rates of political participation by women. They also enable donors to assist in the process. The question still remains as to the best way forward. To some extent this question has been addressed in the Solomon Islands National Women’s Policy (SIG 1998), although the policy does not present an explicit objective of increasing women’s participation in parliament or elected leadership positions generally.\(^5\)

1.2 ‘Big man’ electoral politics.

At the same time that Solomon Islands has a low rate of women’s participation, many commentators in Solomon Islands have noted that the Solomon Islands has had a woeful record of inappropriate prestige-oriented male politicians living as absentee ‘lords’ playing political games in Honiara while delivering few benefits to their constituencies (e.g. Roughan 2004). It is this failure of responsible leadership that many have attributed at least part of the causes to the ‘collapsed state’ saga of recent Solomon Islands history (Bennett 2002 among others).\(^6\) Beyond the universal principles of the international agreements then, there is reason to suppose that the single greatest practical reform of leadership in Solomon Islands will come about by increasing women’s participation in governance.

1.3 ‘Top down’ assumptions of change

International women’s advisers who have come in since the coup have at least in one case conceived of the problem in Solomon Islands as one of building women’s support

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\(^3\) See Drage (1997): in 1996 one woman member in the SI parliament out of the then 47 constituencies. This was Hilda Kari (East Central Guadalcanal 1993(?)-2001). The late Lily Poznanski was the first and only woman in SI Legislative Council, the 1970s predecessor to parliament.


\(^5\) The objective is implied under section 4.5, ‘Decision Making’, which says ‘The Government will promote women’s participation and representation at all policy and decision making levels …’

\(^6\) Not all analyses of the conflict have looked at the effect of masculine leadership culture in Solomon Islands. Whether by intent or oversight, this is most obvious in Liloqula and Pollard (2000) who while offering a ‘gender and conflict’ analysis of the solution to the conflict, do not ascribe gender a role in their discussion of its causes.
networks for election from ‘the centre’. Structures at the centre do exist for promoting the increased participation of women in Solomon Islands. Figure 1 shows the links that the National Women’s Policy (SIG 1998) have identified between the main women’s agency organisations in Solomons. Figure 1 departs slightly from the original diagram in the annexure of the National Women’s Policy. Figure 1 has added the role of international women’s organisations, also indicates that donor assistance is no longer only bilateral via the Ministry of National Planning and Development, and names more of the active in-country organisations. Figure 1 further alludes to the wide gap between rural communities and the Honiara-based organisations.

Figure 1. The relationship between women’s organisations in Solomon Islands

The urban-rural gap – really a double gap from Honiara to provincial centres and on to rural communities - is due to very high communications and transport costs and lack of associated infrastructure. The gap largely prevents widespread activity by the Honiara-based organisations in rural areas. This indeed is why government and larger NGOs set up provincial offices that are supposed to act as an intermediary. In practice these provincial offices are starved for funds and human resources, since in most cases the Honiara office of such organisations get first access to these resources and absorb most. The provincial offices have limited capacity for transport and communications into their rural hinterlands, so that activity, such as it is, is largely confined to the provincial towns. Despite good intentions by the international and national agencies, the majority of 85% of the population that lives in the rural areas receive almost no exposure to capacity building, especially when it comes to follow-up of one-off workshop activities. The situation as it is set up is most difficult to turn around, due to budget constraints.
1.4 Two complementary approaches

A distinction is drawn here between candidate-based empowerment approaches and community social change approaches to women’s electoral participation. The first is outlined here, and the second is elaborated further on in the paper. The umbrella Pacific agencies UNIFEM and WIPPaC have been active in generating resources that can help individual women obtain the skills to run as a candidate for election (WIPPaC 1998, UNIFEM 1999a,b). Within Solomon Islands this individual capacity building approach has been transferred to Vois Blong Mere and the National Council of Women. It has been outlined in the Solomon Islands by Teakeni and Sigimaru (2003). Whilst undoubtedly important this approach cannot produce optimal results if the electoral environment presents significant constraints to women’s electoral chances. This was a lesson learnt during the 2001 elections (Teakeni and Sigimaru 2003). No women were elected in 2001, which occurred after a number of years of the kinds of individual capacity building noted above, and in spite of voter awareness campaigns that encouraged voters to ‘vote for their future’ on the basis of candidate’s policies and credentials. It is by considering the constraints of actual electoral practice in rural areas that we arrive at the conclusion that social change at the community level is an equally important aspect of any strategy to increase women’s participation as elected leaders. This will not surprise women who have been active in electoral politics in Solomon Islands, but is important to outline so that this view from ‘the bottom’ is not diminished by international agencies who come in to assist from ‘the top’ and have no direct experience of rural areas themselves.

2. Rural electoral politics in Solomon Islands

In this section we consider the ways that electoral politics is conducted in rural areas, and look at the interaction of informal local-level governance associations and formal governance. More generalised information on the Solomon Islands electoral system is contained in UNDP (2001) and Larmour and Tarua (1983). We note that many of the difficulties of electing women in rural areas stems from the single seat constituency system used in Solomon Islands, which assumes that there can be only one leader for each district. In the Solomon Islands cultural context this for many people constrains them to think of that single leader as necessarily being a male. An alternative model would be multi-seat constituencies, along the lines of the Kiribati electoral system. In such a system, voters may not feel so constrained as to candidate’s gender. However we recognise that this is not the system in Solomon Islands as it stands. Alasia (1997) discusses the weakness of the party system in rural electorates, where ‘big-man’ politics is still most influential. We also see as this as important to why women are not elected, as we now discuss.

2.1 Voting behaviour, parties and policies.

We look in this sub-section of our paper at actual candidate’s campaign practices and the process of block voting behaviour (rather than individual choice) in typical village election scenarios. By concentrating on the polling and count during elections without devoting more time to understanding campaign practices and then going on to suggest that electoral process was generally satisfactory in the 2001 elections, the Commonwealth observers (Commonwealth Secretariat 2002) did not identify some significant features of Solomon Islands electoral practice. Two features in particular, block-voting and vote-buying can be

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7 Vanuatu also has multi-seat constituencies (van Trease 2004), but Kiribati differs in that voters have as many votes as there are seats in the constituency (e.g. if it is a four seat constituency, voters have four votes. See van Trease 1993). In Solomon Islands such constituencies might align with broad cultural boundaries. We think that if implemented along with strengthening of women’s participation in decision making at the local level, this system would provide rural voters more flexibility to vote for women as well as men.
observed in the lead up to any national election in Solomon Islands, and the former is also observed in provincial ward elections. Block voting can mean both the appropriation of a wad of validated ballot papers for marking outside the polling station, or can mean a pre-arranged agreement by a number of people to vote in a certain way. The former was thought to have occurred in at least one constituency during the 2001 national election (Commonwealth Secretariat 2002). However this problem was not widely reported in local rumour and does not appear to constitute serious systemic abuse. It is the latter form of block voting that we will discuss here.

Rural constituencies in Solomon Islands cover a large number of villages and underlying descent groups, from which a number of candidates are drawn. We have no accurate average number of candidates running for a constituency but this would be around six or seven. Although some of the candidates may have a political party affiliation, this is more important for the candidate’s competition in Honiara for positioning within the possible upcoming government than for attracting their rural constituent’s votes. It is a given that all candidates promise ‘development’. In many cases voters are not concerned to distinguish a superficial approach to this issue (or constellation of issues) from a substantial one. Reasons for this are illustrated by fieldwork in Western Province by Scales (2003).

A clear assumption by candidates in campaign mode is that if they can convince the male household heads, the rest of the family under his roof registered to vote will follow his vote. That this is so is demonstrated if vote buying occurs. Vote buying consists in many cases of simple gifts like tobacco or flashlights. These are given to male household heads, nobody else. Not all candidates attempt to buy votes but some are skilful in softening its appearance. A second tier of vote buying blurs with patronage relationships. In these, local men who are known to influence the opinion of many others may be especially favoured, and are given larger gifts as well as promises of direct benefits (i.e. patronage) if the candidate is successful. Canoes and outboard motors are not unknown. They then are given positions such as ‘campaign manager’ where they are expected to tour villages on behalf of the candidate to gain support, especially where the candidate in a direct approach might be less successful because he extends beyond his realm of familiarity. Sometimes large gifts, such as a radio-cassette player, are given to buy off a known ‘complainer’, who becomes silent if he takes the gift. Such a candidate has to be wealthy, or has had to enter into a deal with a wealthy third party (e.g. a logging company) with a promise to return wealth for that party during his term if successful. Patronage also occurs via the use of the Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF), an annual grant to each Member of Parliament (MP) of about SI$ 500,000 annually (Commonwealth Secretariat 2002), which is not regulated or audited in any way. MPs can, and are alleged to, use this money to favour supporters during their parliamentary term (cf. Maetala 2003).8

Often, but depending on the actual local events of the election year, a greater factor than political parties and national policies in voter choice of candidate is to the way each candidate plays their descent-group affiliations, in the context of their alignment to one or more contentious local resource exploitation issue. Commonly this is logging. Competition over resources exploitation is tied to who has the ‘landowner’ rights to the resource, which is determined by complex debates over kinship precedence. The winners of such a competition stand to gain control of royalties, and conversely the losers may permanently

8 The RCDF replaced an earlier scheme, the SICOPSA grant scheme, that went to the constituency but decisions on its expenditure went through the local Area Council and decisions were minuted.
lose their standing on that ground. The winning parliamentary candidate is in a key position to influence the process. This is a high-stakes local issue, and in such cases, voting can be factionalised in terms of descent-based associations. We are careful to say ‘associations’ because this accounts for the layer of political construction that occurs around resources issues, and is not the same as saying votes are determined by descent group membership (see Scales 2003a for an extended discussion). For the electorate this can override any interest in political parties or policies. Villages prior to the election are rife with positioning of opinion leaders within one candidate’s camp or another. The factions might be informed by many decades of local resources conflict, and are locally well known.

Whether block voting happens due to vote-buying or because of local resource conflict, the vote is not very secret. In cases of factionalisation, it is well known who belongs to each faction and the way they are expected to vote. In the case of vote buying, or of voters who are suspected of ‘double-dealing’, information can be obtained when the polling station returns are compiled. Access to these is available to ‘those in the know’. Both authors have heard examples of this situation. Polling station results reflect the voting patterns of only a few nearby villages. People look for unusually high or low votes for certain candidates, and speculation is then made as to the causes – i.e. who voted for whom. Arguments within the village may then ensue.

Particularly in the case that vote-buying occurs or strong patronage relationships have been set up, it is difficult for legitimate campaigners to win on issues of policy or genuine benefit to the community at large. Vote-buying is an indicator that community organisation is at a low ebb with little consensus on local goals anyway. Further, even if the community is resistant to the worst of the vote-buying rot through its internal strength of leadership, that leadership is, due to ‘custom’, likely to be almost wholly male anyway. In local public affairs, it is a matter of social categories that men are looked to as the leaders, whether or not this is a reflection of authentic pre-colonial culture or a more a practice that came in with the categorically male colonial ‘headman’ system. There is also the possibility that in the rough unregulated environment of a rural election that active discrimination and unfair practices against women candidates can occur (Teakeni and Sigimanu 2003). All together, these factors can combine to create the hostile environment into which a woman candidate, albeit capacity-built by contact with national or even international women’s resource organisations, may enter.

2.2 Local-level associative governance

We look at the possibility that stronger local level governance associations, as exist in some parts of Solomon Islands, reduces the big-man vote-buying and factionalised block-voting that marks election time for many constituencies. There are three aspects to cover: what these associations are; what they can achieve in terms of stabilising electorates; and what they can do in terms of increased women’s participation in leadership. Local level governance has been discussed in more general terms for the Pacific by Schoeffel and Turner (2003). In this, Turner discusses more the idea of local level government, e.g. official local councils. Solomon Islands, prior to 1997, had the local Area Councils which were of this type. They were abolished, ostensibly as a cost-cutting measure. Maetala (2003) discusses these in a gender perspective, but omits to mention they no longer exist. Schoeffel discusses local level governance of the type we discuss below: that is, informal, often village-based structures such as traditional leadership and committees. Schoeffel is more negative about the prospects for local level governance (LLG) than we are. She also
makes some Pacific-wide assumptions about LLG that are not correct for Solomon Islands in particular. LLG in Solomons has been discussed by Scales (2003a).

A feature of LLG in Solomon Islands is that it is home-grown and shows significant variation across the country in how it is organised. LLG is usually based not just on leadership by traditional ‘chiefs’ as is commonly expressed but a combination of leadership from traditionally-based land and village leaders, church leaders and leaders (sometimes based in town) who have a ‘big’ government job (or are the elected member). These: custom, church and government are the three main power bases that can be found in almost every rural community, and these bases interact to create complex politics and organisational solutions to those politics. Another feature of rural communities is the heavy use of village and sometimes area-level committee structures. Typical committees are the local School Committee, Church Committee, Health/clinic Committee, Water Supply Committee and so on. Most communities also have a local church based women’s group and youth group. There may also be a chief’s council. Although variable in their ability to provide real services and benefits for their communities, these various elements of local level governance held up the rural communities in a clearly demonstrated way when government all but collapsed in the 1999-2001 main ‘tension’ period. During that period, rural communities were left without government services or policing. It was the web of local level governance that carried on the functions of communities not affected heavily by fighting, and were the first to engage in peace-building in those areas that were. One reason why so little is known about this feature of rural society and why it is not better supported and its capacity built by government is that SIG has never had a policy to recognize local level governance and determine to work with it. Policy discussions have often assumed that ‘chiefs’ alone were the basis of community governance, and have assumed that this can be overlaid by the arbitrary placement (in the past) of Area Councils, and now simply of the wards and constituencies laid over the complex local networks and cultural links that LLG consists of.

In many areas the various community structures that make up LLG extend beyond the village and are created as organisations that incorporate a number of nearby villages, or a district. Sometimes this district is based on government boundaries, and sometimes on other criteria. Chief’s councils tend to cover tribal or single-language areas. Church associations are organised in a hierarchy through parish (or equivalent), diocese (or equivalent) and onto their national level structure. Sometimes services such schools or clinics are locally managed by area committees, and sometimes economic services such as marketing co-ops, market committees and ‘wharf committees’ are also organised at a district level. Further, many areas have experimented with local area associations that attempt to handle the conflict over resources (e.g. forests) and provide more effective resource management across a district. Ideas on how to manage these structures are drawn from the old colonial ‘village headman’ model, experience of Area Council operation, advice of town-based village members who work for government, church committee guidelines and customary concepts of social organisation. Unfortunately there has never been any systematic widespread long-term support for capacity building of such organisations based on a sound understanding of what they are.

One model of local level governance that articulated strongly with formal government was described by Wairiu and Haisiau (2003). They discussed their experience in setting up the post-conflict Marau Communities Association and Leadership Council in Guadalcanal. This had the common local area association feature of a two-tiered structure: village-level
committees and then representatives from these in an area committee (or council). They described the way in which the Marau area was using this model to network all the villages into a strong organised body that could advocate for and deliver services to the area. Part of the strategy was to do away with the arbitrary method of electoral campaigning ‘from the pocket’ and sit as a council to weigh the pros and cons of each candidate before endorsing one, who is then expected to be accountable to the council (Hasiau, pers. comm. 2003). This ‘electoral collage’ system is also a version of block voting, where the population will follow the Council directive. This may not be a ‘Western’ ideal of democracy but represents one expression of responsible functioning governance in the Melanesian context. Not all communities may want to follow this example. Below we discuss another recent initiative that has other features of fostering women’s participation and responsible governance across a district.

3. Local level strategy

3.1 Building women’s participation within local level governance

We suggest that one longer-term strategy for improving women’s participation elected leadership will come through work in rural areas at strengthening the kinds of civil society governance associations outline above, at the same time as encouraging women’s participation in decision-making at the local level. This, we project, will enhance women candidate’s standing more than the prevailing conditions of competitive village electoral vote-buying and factionalised bloc-voting. Partly this is because women in more organised communities (a) have more chances to engage in community leadership positions that are found to be an indispensable precursor to election (see Teakeni and Sigimanu 2003), (b) partly because organised communities may be less prone to degraded campaign techniques and more conscious of concrete community goals and (c) because these communities have more effective means to monitor and evaluate candidate’s performance.

Leadership has been assumed in modern ‘custom’ across Solomon Islands to be a male attribute. Historical evidence does not always support this as a true statement. In the Western Province, leadership by the pre-colonial bangara was sometimes a woman’s role.9 In Guadalcanal, this was also the case, with oral history still maintained about two powerful women’s leaders in particular (Kari 2004). In Are-Are in south Malaita too the forgetting that in pre-colonial times there was no categorical necessity for all leaders to be male is being turned around. The idea that it is only men can be leaders as a result of strongly bounded concepts of gender category seem to have come in with colonial rule: the village ‘headman’ system and the assumptions by the missionaries. Part of the work of increasing participation by women in decision making is to engage in a process of remembering the full traditional roles of women.

This process is being achieved by the West Are Are Rokotaniken Women’s Association, a constituency-level association formed in 1999 which is engaging with traditional male leaders to reassess women’s participation in local level governance. The Rokotaniken Association is also working at building capacity of women for livelihoods, community organisation and leadership and at the same time working at including male and female community members across all denominations and age groups in improving all aspects of community organisation in the area. While the Association has not yet produced a

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9 This assertion is based on comments in the fieldnotes and typescripts of A.M Hocart, an anthropologist who worked in the New Georgia islands in 1908. These MS are held in the Turnbull Library, New Zealand.
successful women’s candidate, it is laying the foundation of a more goal-focussed community that demands higher quality political leadership. We contend that such participatory community building informed by a re-examination of community cultural resources as well as organisational and conflict resolution skills is essential to turning the electoral environment into one that encourages good leadership choices. In turn, we think that women stand a better chance of election in such an environment. However, community capacity building cannot be achieved from ‘the top’ and has to be achieved by long-term community development work. There is no one solution to this kind of organisational development, as each area will extend its own home-grown approach in regard to its own specific community issues and background. This is a long term strategy that we are proposing here.

3.2 Candidate capacity building is still essential
We reiterate here that the strategy of building local level governance associations that support democracy, instil responsibility and accountability of leaders at the local level and that have worked through the issues of women’s leadership roles from a traditional perspective is a long term strategy. We believe it is essential. However it is a complement to the also-essential and immediate need to continue with building the capacity of women to participate in decision making and to promote support for such activities, especially within the rural electorates.

References


