Elections and the chain of democratic choice

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This special issue of *The Journal of Pacific Studies* covers the 2018 general elections in the Republic of Fiji Islands and the 2019 general elections in Solomon Islands. In 2000, the two countries experienced the overthrow of democratically elected governments. On 19th May 2000, nine armed soldiers of the Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces led by failed business executive George Speight entered the Fiji parliament and held the Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his government hostage. A little over two weeks later on 5th June, Andrew Nori and the Malaita Eagle Force, a faction in the armed conflict in the Solomon Islands held elected Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alo hostage at gunpoint, and forced him to resign. These martial acts ruptured the constitutional rule of law and impaired democratic institutions and mechanisms in both countries.

In the wake of these turbulent events, Fiji and Solomon Islands have transitioned into post-conflict situations of different composition and their experiences over the last 18 years have varied markedly. Fiji held general elections in 2001 and 2006 but the military overthrew the democratically elected government in December 2006, and a military-backed interim government ruled the country until 2013. A new constitution was adopted in that year and a general election held in 2014. From 2003 to 2017, Solomon Islands experienced the intervention of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). This was led by Australia and comprised Pacific Islands Forum member countries in a mission to quell the continued 'ethnic tension' and then support the rebuilding of political and economic institutions. Since 2003, there have been four general elections in Solomon Islands and ongoing debate over constitutional change from its current unitary system to a federal one.

This introductory paper begins by offering reflections on the non-linear nature of transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy. The purpose is to allow the reader to look beyond general appearances and consider the vagaries of such a process and the potential complications of backsliding and reversals, whereby an appearance of

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democracy via elections can mask the persistence of underlying authoritarian practice in various forms. These reflections provide a frame of reference for the analyses of electoral politics and evaluations on the quality of democracy in Fiji and Solomon Islands, represented in the articles of this special issue.

It goes without saying that elections are important to democracy but the expectation that they will lead to a more democratic state needs some qualification; one election does not a democracy make. The assumption that when a transitioning country holds an election it is inextricably heading in a democratic direction is overly optimistic. Elections may serve as a necessary procedural function for choosing decision-makers but they are in and of themselves an insufficient measure of substantive democratic change. In fact, as Andreas Schedler (2002, p. 37) notes, the modern history of representative elections is as much about authoritarian manipulations as it is the story of democratic success. It is one thing to establish a formal electoral process that is nominally 'free and fair' but quite another to deepen democracy over time without stagnation or reversal.

Over the last twenty years, numerous scholars have detailed and drawn attention to the emergence of 'hybrid regimes' or forms of 'electoral authoritarianism' (Beissinger, 2007, pp. 73-99; Bogaards, 2009, pp. 399-423; Bolkvadze, 2016, pp. 751-769; Carnegie, 2012, pp. 71-79; Casper, 1995; Diamond, 2002, pp. 21-36; Levitsky & Way, 2010; McFaul, 2002; Ottaway, 2003; Schedler, 2006; Zakaria, 1997, pp. 22-43). As Thomas Carothers (2002, pp. 5-21) notes, it is wrongheaded to imply that some countries are even moving in a democratic direction. These types of regimes outwardly display formal procedural features of 'electoral democracy' but they play a considerably different game (Carnegie & Tarte, 2018, p. 278). Their political ordering exists somewhere between democracy and authoritarianism. In such cases, the arenas of political contestation not only reflect but also reproduce 'uneven playing fields' that are often heavily skewed in favour of incumbents (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 5). It is a situation that places significant limits on an opposition's ability to organise and compete in elections and contest effectively for political power. Indeed, the misuse of state institutions for partisan ends has reached almost farcical levels in places like Uganda and Belarus.

Having said this, studying elections (with the above caveats in place) can offer telling insight on both threshold strains and the gradation of progress made in particular settings. Analyses of which can give a clearer indication as to whether there is a meaningful number of permitted political parties, the extent to which electoral rules have stabilised and whether or not constitutional limits on the exercise of executive power and terms in office are proving effective. Studying elections also offers an

opportunity to assess the extent to which media (online, print and television) in a country are able to operate in an open and independent manner and the degrees to which civil society (NGOs and pressure groups) is active and able to exert influence. Gauging such matters are useful barometers on the routinisation and state of democratic politics in a country.

Significantly, elections can help shape democratic legitimation if they exhibit acceptable levels of representation and transparency. This can be achieved if effective democratic choice is promoted and maintained. Of course, matters can be thrown into jeopardy if the framework of political contestation and the new 'rules of the game' are not accepted by all key political actors. It is important to get a sense of whether or not actors are respecting the rule of law and willingly performing, operating (and consequently being contained) within the newly ascribed constitutional limits and electoral rules. In a broad schematic sense, adopting a 'chain' of democratic choice framing is a practical way to not just evaluate the democratic character of an election but a country's wider climate of reform. There are at least seven normative links to consider in a chain of democratic choice.

Firstly, elections should 'empower' by serving as a means for citizens to exercise their power to elect decision-makers. Second, elections should have 'free supply' with a credible selection of alternatives from which citizens can choose. Third, elections should have 'free demand' where voter preferences are formed without undue influence. Fourth, elections should be 'inclusive'. Modern definitions of democracy generally mandate universal adult suffrage while barring felons, the mentally ill, and other special categories rendered unfit to vote. Fifth, elections should be 'insulated' with citizens able to express preferences freely through a secret ballot. Sixth, Elections should display 'integrity' with votes counted honestly and weighed equally. Lastly, elections should confer 'irreversibility' with the winners able to assume office and exercise constitutionally derived decision-making power without imminent threat of overthrow (Schedler, 2002, pp. 39-40). For many observers, a peaceful and stable electoral transfer of power is a key indicator of greater democratic consolidation (Huntington, 1991, p. 263). Basically, if you can secure a successful and lasting transfer of power from incumbents to opposition then you are on the right track.

Nonetheless, a chain of democratic choice can become weakened in electoral contests in both direct and indirect ways. Importantly, this can occur not only during elections but between them. The outcome of which may place a country short of full-blown authoritarianism but, at the same time, leave it with persistently illiberal tendencies in its maintenance of power. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2002, p.

53) point out that in these sort of situations "formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority". At the same time, "incumbents routinely abuse state resources, deny the opposition adequate media coverage, harass opposition candidates and their supporters […] [while] journalists, opposition politicians, and other government critics may be spied on, threatened, harassed, or arrested." (Levitsky & Way, 2002, p. 53) As mentioned, in such cases, there is a zone of indeterminacy between outright authoritarianism and illiberal forms of democracy that resist a simple either/or analysis. Although:

> Incumbents […] may routinely manipulate formal democratic rules, they are unable to eliminate them or reduce them to a mere façade. Rather than openly violating democratic rules […] incumbents are more likely to use […] subtle forms of persecution, such as the use of tax authorities, compliant judiciaries, and other state agencies to 'legally' harass, persecute, or extort cooperative behavior from critics. (Levitsky & Way, 2002, pp. 53-54)

In other words, incumbents want the legitimacy 'free and fair' elections can bring without risking the prospect of an adverse result.

In the developing world, varieties of such electoral authoritarianism are disconcertingly familiar. For instance, key decision-makers can be placed in statutory bodies or public enterprises to ensure the marginalization of opposition supporters and reduce potential threats to an incumbent's power and authority. Moreover, experienced officials can be removed from strategic positions under the pretext of non-contract renewal or held subordinate to 'tutelary' influence. And while popular consultation on issues that are not within crucial policy areas may provide an appearance of inclusivity for incumbents, the erosion of civil and political liberties continue to occur through various techniques of direct and indirect intimidation. Dissent can be gagged with opposition figures prevented or disrupted from offering valid criticism or disseminating campaign messages via the media or public forums. This is often reinforced by the banning and/or disqualification of candidates via electoral laws or through protracted investigations carried out by co-opted statutory bodies. Such actions are designed to split and marginalise an opposition. More insidiously, control can be exerted over the composition of the electorate through informal disenfranchisement by way of unreliable registration and identification methods, discriminatory voting procedures or punitive national vote thresholds. Additional forms of electoral bias can take place through introduction of 'redistributive' voting rules or restrictive campaigning timeframes. Voters can also come under undue influence via disproportionate campaign messaging from incumbents and 'vote buying' in poor or rural areas.

Given these considerations, analyses of electoral contests as a measure of nascent democratic credibility should proceed with caution. Having a sense of the less noticeable and more illiberal ways in which incumbent governments can skew a political, legal and media 'playing field' in their favour is important to such an exercise. The benefit of a 'chain of democratic choice' framing as outlined above is to assist readers in working out which combinations and sequences of strategies are or are likely to be used in a given set of circumstances; not just at elections but between elections as incumbents seek to maintain and entrench their power rather than deepen democracy.

Post-2006 coup political developments in Fiji give the appearance of a transition to democracy. These include the military-backed government's 2013 Republic of Fiji Constitution signed into law by the President, which put into place the new open list proportional electoral system and a single national constituency, and the holding of multi-party general elections in 2014 and 2018. However, as Naidu (2015) pointed out in the special issue of this journal on the 2014 Fiji general election, regulatory restrictions on the media, and the proscriptions regarding civil society organisations engaging actively in voter education, debate and discussions, affected the impartiality of the electoral process. There are also other dimensions of the new electoral processes that affect the nature of Fijian democracy. These include tight regulation on the registration of political parties and their funding, the broad definition of public officials to include trade union leaders, and the wide-ranging powers conferred on the Registrar of Political Parties who is also the Supervisor of Elections. Other factors that indicate illiberal tendencies within Fiji's political landscape include the appointment of supposedly independent office holders by the government of the day. In the case of the Supervisor of Elections appointment, this is undertaken by the Minister for Elections who is also the general secretary of the ruling party (Carnegie & Tarte, 2018). Another constraining factor is the punitive and disproportionate sanctions that exist for breaches of electoral and media regulations. Finally, the continuation of some 400 decrees promulgated by post-2006 coup regimes, some of which are draconian, place further limits on the checks and balances within its arena of political contestation. For instance, there are no longer any elected local government bodies at the level of municipalities and provinces.

Somewhat differently to the Fiji case, Solomon Islands does not exhibit the same features of electoral authoritarianism. There is no restriction on the media besides the generally accepted defamation dimension, and civil society organisations and NGOs have the freedom to engage in voter participation, and to organise debates and discussion among independent candidates and political parties. The electoral management body and the Supervisor of Elections are seen as being independent of

government. The imposition of sanctions associated with possible breaches of regulations governing elections are also more proportionate. However, problems of electoral governance do prevail. One of the principal challenges comes from the highly localised fluidity of electoral politics. Independent candidates and independent MPs continue to 'rule the roost'. The 2014 Political Parties Integrity Act has largely failed to promote and enhance political parties at the national level and they remain beset by a considerable lack of cohesion. This is in contrast to the Fiji experience historically and especially since the adoption of the previously mentioned 2013 Constitution and the associated electoral legislation. In Fiji, independent candidates and smaller parties have found it impossible to meet the 5 percent vote threshold in order to enter parliament. Moreover, there is no provision for MPs to cross the floor post-election.

With the above observations in mind, this special issue of *The Journal of Pacific Studies* brings together a group of scholars on Fijian and Solomon Islands politics to examine aspects of the 2018 and 2019 general elections respectively. The editors sought to identify a blend of scholars from different disciplines to give voice to a broad spectrum of informed views about the on-going restoration of electoral politics in Fiji and Solomon Islands. These contributions embrace and reflect multidisciplinary perspectives and discourses related to elections and democracy. They range from development studies and economics to politics and sociology.

Terence Wood is a research fellow at the Development Policy Centre, Australian National University. His research focuses on aid and electoral quality. He was an observer during the 2019 elections in Solomon Islands. In his article "The 2019 Elections: Electoral Quality, Political Inequality and the Flames of Frustration in Honiara" he points to the fluid nature of Solomon Islands national politics, the existence of checks and balances in the electoral process, and the fact that the country "did not lapse into autocracy post-independence" (page 16). Inter alia the article seeks to explain how comparatively peaceful and well-run elections led to riots. He shows how, on the one hand, assistance provided by foreign aid, combined with fluid political dynamics and checks and balances within the electoral system itself, enhanced electoral quality. But on the other, rising political inequality and poor political governance linked to the nature of electoral politics in Solomon Islands contributed to frustrations spilling over into riots after the prime minister was announced in 2019.

Lincy Pendeverana of the Faculty of Education and Humanities at the Solomon Islands National University and Gordon Leua Nanau of the School of Government, Development and International Affairs at The University of the South Pacific are

Solomon Islands scholars with backgrounds in development studies and politics. Their paper, "Independent MPs, Political Party Legislation and Electoral Politics in Solomon Islands" examines the 2014 and 2019 elections, the success of independent candidates and their eschewing of political parties despite the institution of the Political Parties Integrity Act (PPIA) in 2014, which attempts to strengthen allegiance to political parties. The numerous factors that have weakened the effectiveness of this legislation are examined and explained. Drawing lessons from the experience, the authors recommend efforts to close the loopholes that have allowed independent candidates and MPs to exert continued, disproportionate influence over the electoral politics of the country.

Haruo Nakagawa is an economist and a specialist in public finance and governance at the School of Government, Development and International Affairs at The University of the South Pacific. As the title of his paper suggests, "2018 Fiji Election Results: Patterns of Voting by Provinces, Rural-Urban Localities, and by Candidates", he closely examines official voting statistics in the 2018 Fijian election. The tabulation and analysis of electoral data reveal patterns of voting for political parties, political party leaders and candidates along provincial and urban-rural lines, and by ethnicity. Nakagawa then compares these patterns with the 2014 general election voting outcomes. Despite the FFP's electoral victory in 2018, the paper considers the various reasons behind the upswing in voting preference from 2014 to 2018 in favour of opposition political parties SODELPA and NFP at the expense of the ruling FFP.

The fourth article, "Religion and the New Media: discourses and debates in the 2018 Fiji General Election Campaign", is by Jacqueline Ryle and Jope Tarai. Ryle is a social anthropologist and senior lecturer in sociology and Jope Tarai is assistant lecturer in ethics and governance, both at The University of the South Pacific. They examine the discourses on religion and politics in social media during the 2018 Fiji general election campaign, drawing on interviews with leading figures in churches and religious organisations. The paper reveals that, although notions of Christian state and secular state alongside ideas of secularism and secularisation were prevalent throughout the election campaign, there was limited clarity on these terms among the voting public at large. This even extended to some of the religious leaders, and politicians who deployed them. This lack of clarity, the authors argue, served as a potent political strategy to garner support from susceptible voters.

The guest editors of this special issue of *The Journal of Pacific Studies* hope it provides insight into the electoral processes, voting patterns and outcomes in Fiji (2018) and Solomon Islands (2019), against the backdrop of their different socio-

economic, cultural and political contexts. Our selection of articles gives snap shots and reflections on electoral politics and democracy in these two countries. They aim to encourage critical engagement with the ways in which we approach the study of elections in Fiji and Solomon Islands, and stimulate thinking on our prospects for a more democratic future.

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