Elections and the chain of democratic choice

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Paul Carnegie[1], Vijay Naidu[2] and Sandra Tarte[3]

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

[1] Associate Professor, Politics and International Relations, Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam.
[2] Adjunct Professor, School of Government, Development and International Affairs, The University of the South Pacific.
[3] Associate Professor, School of Government, Development and International Affairs, The University of the South Pacific, email: sandra.tarte@usp.ac.fj

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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The 2019 Elections: Electoral Quality, Political Inequality and the Flames of Frustration in Honiara

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Terence Wood[1]

Abstract

The 2019 general elections in Solomon Islands were the country's tenth since it became an independent country. The elections were relatively well-run, and free of violence. However, shortly after the elections, when the prime minister was announced, rioting erupted in Honiara, the country's capital. In this paper, I describe the elections themselves before looking at election results. I then explain how comparatively peaceful elections led to riots. My central arguments are that the assistance provided by foreign aid, combined with fluid political dynamics and checks and balances within the electoral system itself, contributed to reasonably well-run elections. At the same time, political inequality is rising in Solomon Islands. And the nature of electoral politics in Solomon Islands leads to poor political governance. Poor governance, in turn, contributed to the frustrations that spilled over into riots after the prime minister was announced in 2019.

Keywords: Elections; Solomon Islands; Political violence; 2017 elections; The Pacific

[1] Research Fellow, The Development Policy Centre, The Australian National University, Australia, email: terence.wood@anu.edu.au

Introduction

In 1967, Solomon Islands held its first mass suffrage general election. It has held an uninterrupted sequence of national elections at regular intervals since. Its first election as an independent country was in 1980. The 2019 general elections were the country's tenth as an independent state, and its fourteenth since national, mass-suffrage elections began. Unlike many developing countries, Solomon Islands did not lapse into autocracy post-independence. Particularly in recent years, its elections have been reasonably well run too. Although vote buying and some voter coercion exists, large-scale fraud and electoral violence has been mostly absent. This is a considerable achievement for a comparatively poor country, with a geography that makes holding elections hard. At the same time though, democracy, and reasonably free and fair elections, have not brought good political governance in their wake.

In this paper on the 2019 general elections in Solomon Islands, I start by describing the quality of the electoral process. I then shift to discussing election results before looking at the aftermath of the elections, and the riots that occurred in Honiara as the country's prime minister was announced. As I do this, I contend that the high quality of recent elections in Solomon Islands stems from quite good electoral assistance from aid donors, alongside the fluid nature of the country's politics, which largely impedes any political actors seeking to centrally subvert the electoral system. I also argue that checks and balances associated with the inclusion of candidates' scrutineers at key points in the electoral process makes some forms of electoral malfeasance hard. In discussing electoral results, I focus on the role of Constituency Development Funds (CDFs) and the increased ability of sitting members of parliament to win their seats back. I argue that CDFs have strengths as a service delivery mechanism, but that their use is often politicised, and that they contribute to political inequality in Solomon Islands. My central argument in explaining the post-election riots is that, paradoxically, despite well-run elections, the nature of electoral politics in Solomon Islands has contributed to poor governance and under-development, and that a consequence of this is a rising frustration amongst people who see little change or improvement in their lives.

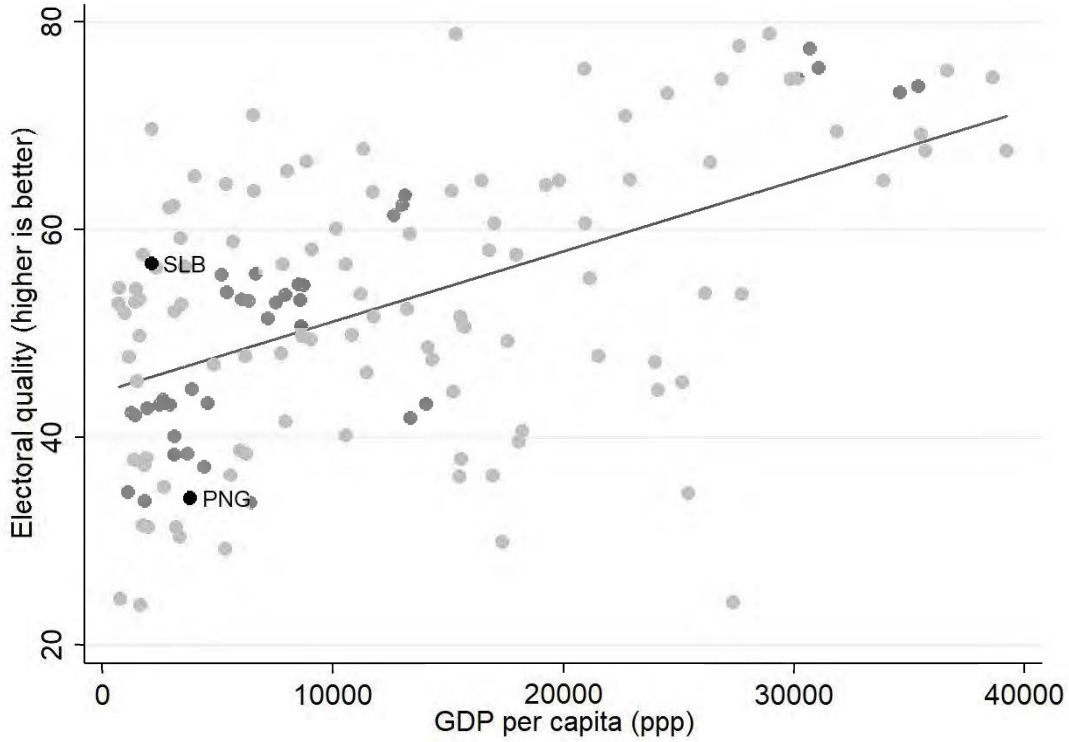
Electoral Quality in Solomon Islands

Figure 1 is a scatter plot that uses data from the Electoral Integrity Project's (EIP) dataset of electoral quality (Norris & Grömping, 2019). Each point on the chart is a country. The y-axis shows the EIP's measure of electoral quality for the country.[1]

[1] The measures come from a survey of country experts.

The x-axis is purchasing power parity adjusted GDP per capita. The location of each point reflects the quality of the country's most recent election. Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea are marked on the chart. The line of best fit plots the average relationship between GDP per capita and electoral quality. Data for Papua New Guinea are from the 2017 election. Data for Solomon Islands are from the 2014 election. The chart illustrates three points: on average, electoral quality is lower in less affluent countries; the 2014 election in Solomon Islands was of considerably better quality than the 2017 election in neighbouring Papua New Guinea; and the 2014 election in Solomon Islands was above average quality for countries of its GDP level (this can be inferred from the fact Solomon Islands sits above the line of best fit).

Figure 1. Electoral Quality Globally



Source: Norris & Grömping, 2019

Unfortunately, the EIP dataset does not yet have data for the 2019 election in Solomon Islands. However, media reporting (Wasuka, 2019a) as well as reports and comments from observation missions (Batley, 2019; Commonwealth Observer Group, 2019; Melanesian Spearhead Group, 2019) suggest the 2019 elections were at least as good as those held in 2014. I was in Isabel province during the election,

and both campaigning and polling were peaceful. Complaints about electoral irregularities were rare. Discussion with people in other parts of the country suggested similar experiences.

This is not to say the elections were entirely trouble free. Vote counting was tense in Auki, the provincial capital of Malaita. There were also problems with the roll. In particular, attempts to make registration easier appear to have led to voters being paid to transfer to electorates where their eligibility to vote was questionable. My analysis of roll data provided by the electoral commission reveals implausibly rapid roll growth in a number of electorates including West Honiara, Gizo Kolombangara, and Baegu/Asifola between 2014 and 2019. Also, vote-buying, a perennial problem in elections in Solomon Islands (Marau, 2010), appears to have occurred prior to the 2019 election (Wasuka, 2019b). Although the elections themselves were peaceful, it is also likely that the quiet coercion that occurs around election time, and which sees some voters obliged to vote in line with the wishes of household heads or along family lines, was also present in places in 2019 (for excellent discussion of these and related issues in previous elections, see: Cox, 2015; Hiriasia, 2019). All of these issues are real, but they are also all present, and typically much more acute, in other countries of Solomon Islands' level of development (for a good general discussion of electoral issues globally see: Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018; for a summation of the problems that plagued the 2017 election in Papua New Guinea see: Haley & Zubrinich, 2018). What is more, there is no evidence to suggest that the problems were more severe in Solomon Islands in 2019 than they were in previous elections, such as 2014. Recent elections have been comparatively well-run in Solomon Islands. There is no evidence that 2019 was any exception.

Governance more generally in Solomon Islands is not strong (World Bank, 2019), which raises the question, why have elections – including the 2019 elections – been run quite well? The answer to this question stems from both international and domestic inputs. Internationally, over at least the last decade, a core team of aid-funded electoral advisors have worked with the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission (Van de Velde, 2012). While the team has not been able to address all of the issues faced by the Electoral Commission, they have acquired a good knowledge of the country context and a good rapport with Electoral Commission staff. These factors have enhanced the quality of assistance and compare favourably to assistance provided to Papua New Guinea (Arghiros et al., 2017; Markiewicz & Wood, 2018; Van de Velde, 2012; Wood, 2014a). Assistance to Solomon Islands has also benefitted from Australia (the country's largest aid donor, and primary provider of electoral assistance) having fairly favourable motives. It has been in Australia's

interest to do what it can to enhance electoral quality in Solomon Islands, as elections are seen as integral to international perceptions of the Australian-led RAMSI mission. This contrasts with Papua New Guinea, where Australia, which is once again the primary provider of electoral assistance (Markiewicz & Wood, 2018), has many competing interests, including its need to have favourable relations with the government of Papua New Guinea so as to continue to be able to house asylum seekers on Manus Island. Although Australia's needs have not necessarily entailed less effort from aid workers, they do appear to have diminished Australia's desire at a political level to press for well-run elections in Papua New Guinea. Despite the major problems associated with the 2017 elections in Papua New Guinea (Haley & Zubrinich, 2018), Australia's then Foreign Minister Julie Bishop congratulated the government of Papua New Guinea for holding successful elections soon after polling day (Armbruster, 2017).[2]

International assistance was, however, not the only factor that contributed to generally well-run elections in Solomon Islands in 2019. Some of the other contributing factors were idiosyncratic, such as an energetic new electoral commissioner appointed in the lead up to the 2019 elections. Others, such as dedicated electoral commission staff and electoral officials, are important, and have helped over many elections. However, engaged electoral staff are also present in countries, such as Papua New Guinea, with worse elections.

An important contributor to electoral quality in Solomon Islands is the checks and balances built into the system itself. One of these is the scrutineers that candidates employ to sit watch at most polling stations in their constituency, and also to watch the ballot counting process.[3] Ethnic ties, particularly associated with clans, play an important role in people's choices about whom to vote for in Solomon Islands, but in most instances, they are not the only factor contributing to voters' choices. Vote buying, the previous track record of candidates, and churches also shape voters' decisions (Kabutaulaka, 1998; Nanau, 2011; Wood, 2014b). What is more, in parts of Solomon Islands clans are geographically cross-cutting, meaning multiple clans will be found in the same village (Oliver & Johnson, 1989). As a result, it is common for multiple candidates to have supporters at any given polling station come election day. This, in turn, means that multiple candidates will have scrutineers present at

[2] To be clear, these are not the only differences between Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. Papua New Guinea faces additional hurdles such as geography and ongoing violence in the Highlands. These additional challenges do not, however, explain away the differences in aid efficacy.

[3] These scrutineers are typically referred to as "Polling Agents" in Solomon Islands.

polling stations. When numerous candidates have scrutineers present it becomes much more difficult for any individual candidate to arrange for large-scale cheating, such as ballot stuffing, at a polling station. For example, Wood (2014a) provides detailed evidence of the fall in fraud over time at a polling station in southern Malaita when it changed from being a base for one candidate to a location where multiple candidates had supporters. The comparison between Solomon Islands and the Highlands of Papua New Guinea is also instructive. In much of the Highlands, clans are cohesive and located in defined areas. Violence is also common. This means candidates' scrutineers are often limited to their key support areas and cannot watch polling stations in other candidates' areas of support. It is no coincidence that the Highlands is where electoral fraud is at its worst in Papua New Guinea (Haley & Zubrinich, 2018).

The counting of ballots in elections in Solomon Islands, including in 2019, occurs at provincial capitals. As with polling stations, most major candidates have scrutineers present when ballots are counted. Scrutineers are legally permitted to closely observe the process of counting. Although counting is sometimes tense because of the presence of scrutineers,[4] the ability of scrutineers to closely monitor counting makes it hard for candidates to engage in wholesale counting fraud (for quantitative tests showing counting fraud is rare see, Wood, 2014a). The watchful eyes that scrutineers provide, and the presence of multiple scrutineers at most polling stations and counting venues serves as a check on fraud, including in 2019.

Other problems, particularly vote buying (Marau, 2010; Wasuka, 2019b) afflict Solomon Islands elections. Notably, though, these are problems that stem from actions that cannot usually be observed and recorded (discretely paying for someone's vote, for example). As a result, the checks provided by scrutineers provide little protection against these forms of malfeasance.

The nature of Solomon Islands politics spares it another problem that has plagued electoral quality in much of the developing world: attempts by powerful politicians to capture the electoral commission itself and engage in national manipulation of electoral outcomes (for a discussion of international issues in this area see, Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018). With over 80 languages spoken (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office, 2000), Solomon Islands is one of the most linguistically fragmented countries – no single language group is large enough to dominate more than one or two electorates at most. As a result, language groups do not form a basis for political contestation nationally in Solomon Islands. Although they are fewer in

[4] This was the case in Auki, the provincial capital of Malaita, in 2019.

number, churches do not play an active role in national electoral politics (Wood, 2014b).[5] And while islands and associated provinces were the basis of political division during the Tensions, schisms rapidly emerged within island groups during the conflict (Allen, 2013; Fraenkel, 2004; Moore, 2004) – island identities did not prove to be an enduring building block of political action. As a consequence, national-level politics wants for cohesion. Instead of strong national political parties built around class or ethnic divides, at a national level the country's politics are fluid, loyalties weak, and sustained political action very hard (Fraenkel, 2008b; Steeves, 1996). This state of affairs has numerous negative effects on political governance in Solomon Islands. However, it does have unexpected positive consequences for elections. Politicians will cheat through vote buying and manipulating the roll when they can get away with it, but this cheating is localised and does not require collective action involving multiple politicians. Capturing the electoral system nationally would, on the other hand, require large numbers of politicians to cooperate over sustained periods of time. But sustained engagement is very difficult amongst the fluid politics of Solomon Islands, and this is one reason why national capture of the electoral system has not occurred to date, which is clearly of benefit to electoral quality (Wood, 2014a).

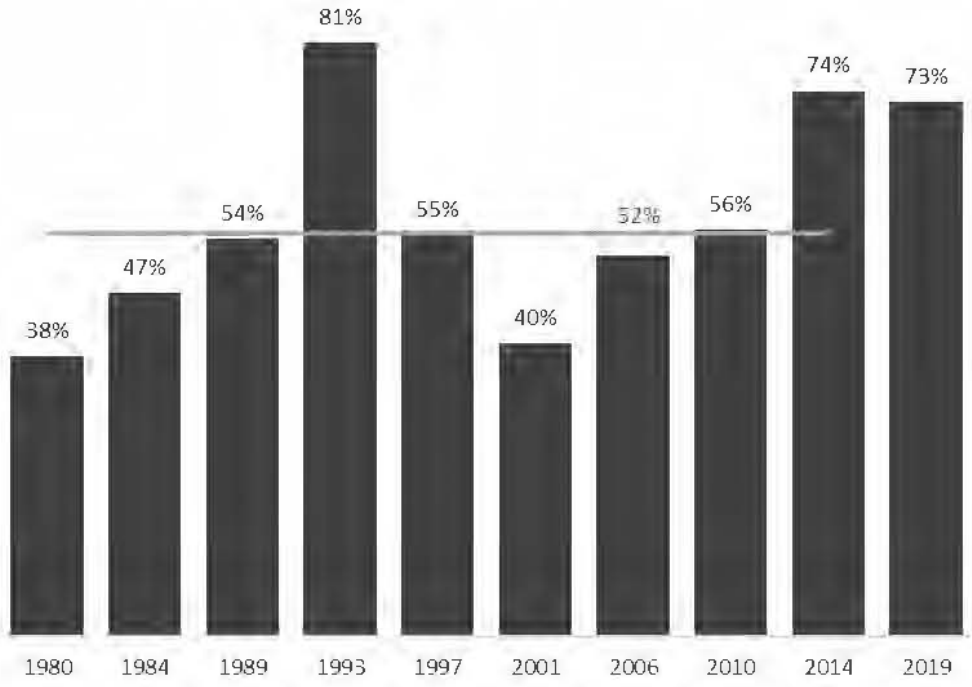
Candidates and Winners

As a result of the features outlined above, elections in Solomon Islands are usually of reasonable quality, and 2019 was no exception. One aspect of election results in 2019 was unanticipated, though: the high percentage of MPs who retained their seats. Figure 2 shows the percentage of MPs who contested their seats and won them in general elections in Solomon Islands since independence.[6] The percentage of MPs who contested and won their seats averaged across elections from 1980 to 2014 is shown with a horizontal line. The chart shows that, on average, from 1980 to 2014, just under half (45 per cent) of those MPs that contested their seats in general elections lost. Historically, MP turnover has been high. Turnover was much lower than average in 2014, but prior to the 2019 elections, there was no reason to believe this would be anything but a one-off – turnover was lower still in 1993, but turnover rates subsequently returned to the long-term average.

[5] In instances churches and religious ties are used locally by candidates to gain support within electorates. However, the national bodies of churches are non-partisan, and there are no national political blocs based on denomination.

[6] All analysis of election results in this paper data draws on data from the Solomon Islands Election Results Database: http://solomonselections.org/election-results/.

Figure 2. Incumbent Re-election Rate.



Source: http://solomonselections.org/election-results/

However, as the chart shows, a large share of those sitting MPs that contested in the 2019 elections also won their seats back. Solomon Islands, which once shared high MP turnover rates with other Pacific countries such as Papua New Guinea and Samoa (for Papua New Guinea see, Laveil & Wood, 2019; for Samoa see, Wood & Muller, 2018), appears to have become a country where the incumbency advantage MPs possess is such that it is very hard to dislodge them at election time.

The most likely explanation for this change is the rise of Constituency Development Funds (CDFs). CDFs were initiated in 1989 (Fono, 2007), but the funds were trivial until just prior to the 1993 general election when aid from the government of Taiwan boosted the funds substantially (Fraenkel, 2011). Data on the growth of CDFs subsequently are patchy, but it is clear that the funds increased rapidly from around the time of the 2010 election. Funds are now estimated to be nearly USD 10 million per year per constituency (Wiltshire & Batley, 2018, p. 1). CDFs are now predominantly funded from the Solomon Islands government's own revenues rather than Taiwanese aid (Batley, 2015).

CDFs are contentious. The case for the funds is that they afford MPs the ability to

assist constituents in paying for services, such as school fees, and that they allow MPs to provide constituents needed material assistance, such as housing materials. The case against them is that the funds serve as a political tool that MPs focus on their supporters and use to ensure re-election. (For a range of different insights into, and perspectives on, the funds see: Allen, Dinnen, Evans, & Monson, 2013; Batley, 2015; Hiriasia, 2019; Kabutaulaka, 1998; Wiltshire & Batley, 2018.) My own experience has been that, in many electorates, both claims about CDFs are true. When I conducted research in the constituency of South Guadalcanal in 2011, it was obvious in the western part of the constituency that CDF money had paid for numerous, useful material items such as chainsaws, outboard motors, solar panels, and roofing iron. Such items were clearly helpful in people's everyday lives. CDFs were assisting people in a part of the country where government services were very sparse. On the eastern side of the constituency, however, no such evidence of any CDF assistance was visible. Uncoincidentally, in the previous election, voters in the west had voted for the sitting member, voters in the east had not. (For more systematic evidence that MPs target CDF spending on supporters see, Wood, 2019.)

Above and beyond the utility of CDFs as a tool for promoting development, their apparent impact on the likelihood that MPs are re-elected raises its own concerns. Up to and including the 2010 elections, it did not appear as if CDFs offered any major additional advantage to sitting MPs.[7] However, if CDFs are now leading to a situation in which most MPs are re-elected at each election, they are likely a source of rising political inequality. (By political inequality, I mean inequality in people's ability to serve in senior political roles.) With MPs equipped with a very large fund through which they can gain public support, it will become increasingly hard for newcomers to enter national politics in Solomon Islands. For an aspiring MP to have any real chance of winning an election they will need to either be wealthy themselves, or have the support of wealthy backers. Access to parliament has never been equally open to all in Solomon Islands – MPs have typically benefitted from various forms of privilege in their pre-political lives (Corbett & Wood, 2013). However, in the past it has been possible for a range of people, from community organisers to provincial officials, to win election. A shift to a situation in which, barring the occasional exception, the only people who win elections are either established politicians or wealthy businesspeople, would represent a marked rise in political inequality. Although political inequality is far from the only problem of political governance

[7] In 1993 they may have contributed to high incumbent re-election rates. However, there were other contributing factors in that election, particularly re-districting. Moreover, any effect in 1993 proved to be transitory: by 1997 incumbent re-election rates were as low as ever.

facing Solomon Islands, it is hard to see how rising political inequality could lead to improvements in the state of the country's governance.[8]

It may yet be the case that 2014 and 2019 will be aberrations. Possibly, in future years fewer sitting MPs will be re-elected and CDF money will only have a limited influence on electoral politics, either because the Solomon Islands' government runs out of money, or because voters' expectations of MPs change. For now, however, it appears as if the rise of CDFs in Solomon Islands has contributed to rising political inequality. This does not negate the positive impact that CDF spending sometimes has within constituencies – the funds do at times provide help to people in a climate where the state often fails in its role. However, the likely rise in political inequality associated with CDF money does show that the funds have had a very mixed impact on the country's political life.

After the Election

Should it continue, rising political inequality will be a long-term problem for Solomon Islands. Within three weeks of the final ballots being counted in the 2019 elections, the country had a more immediate issue to face: major riots in Honiara. The riots emerged from protests that erupted upon the announcement of the country's new Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare (Dziedzic & Wasuka, 2019). Because parties are small and weakly bound in Solomon Islands, elections themselves do not determine who will govern the country. Rather, in the wake of the announcement of the individual MPs that have won in their electorates, MPs converge on Honiara where they form into different groupings attempting to cobble together a governing coalition headed by the person who will become prime minister (Allen, 2008; Fraenkel, 2008a).

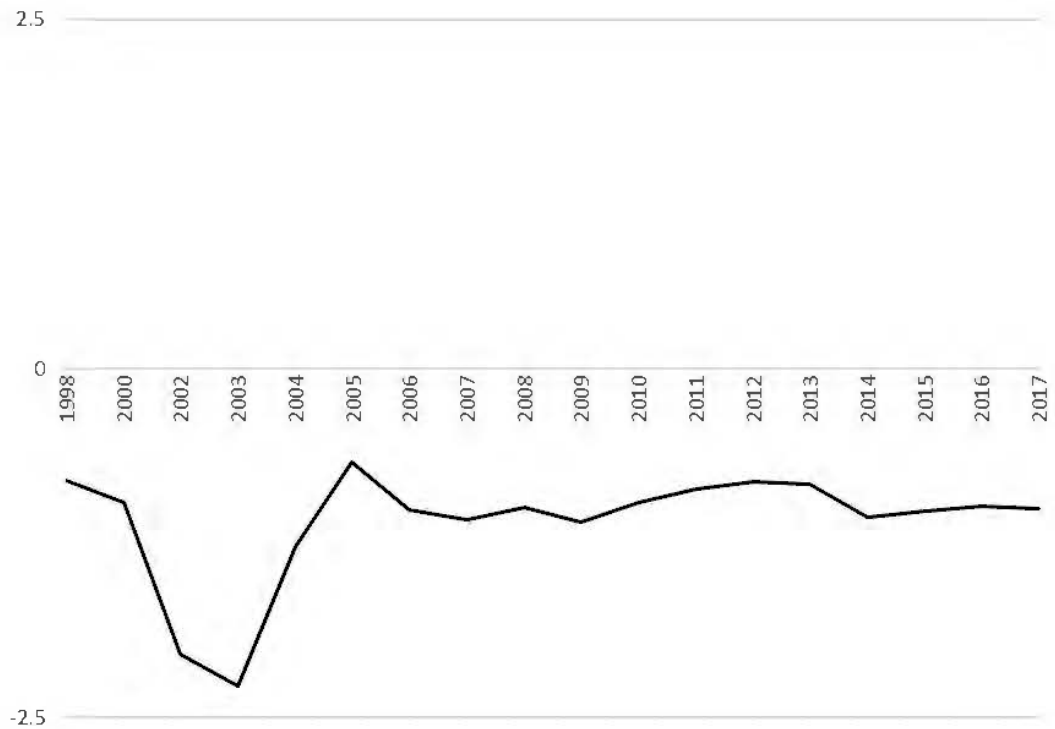
In 2019, ongoing negotiation between candidates ultimately led to a situation where Manasseh Sogavare headed one political grouping, competing with long-time reformer Matthew Wale and popular newcomer Peter Kenilorea Jr. (Radio New Zealand, 2019). Sogavare had once been a popular politician himself. However, by 2019 he was competing to become prime minister for a record fourth term. To some at least he represented the status quo. As protestors marched on parliament they chanted "we want change", and one, a spokesperson of sorts interviewed by local journalists, was explicit that protestors wanted someone other than Sogavare at the

[8] One possible argument might be that MPs gain experience and govern the country better as they spend more time in power. As a result, more MPs being re-elected might lead to improved political governance over time. This is possible in theory, but there appears to be little evidence of it in practice: political governance post 2014 was no better than in previous electoral terms.

helm (for video of the protests and the interview see, Dziedzic & Wasuka, 2019). Presumably, in addition to Sogavare, the return of almost three quarters of the last parliament's MPs also did little to convince voters that change was afoot.

Figure 3 offers some sense of why change might have been on the minds of protestors. It shows government effectiveness for Solomon Islands using data from World Bank quality of governance indicators (World Bank, 2019). Of all the governance indicators the World Bank covers, government effectiveness is particularly relevant to the lived experiences of ordinary Solomon Islanders as it captures the government's ability to provide services. Government effectiveness can range from -2.5 (the worst possible) to 2.5 (the best possible).

Figure 3. World Bank Measure of Government Effectiveness Over Time



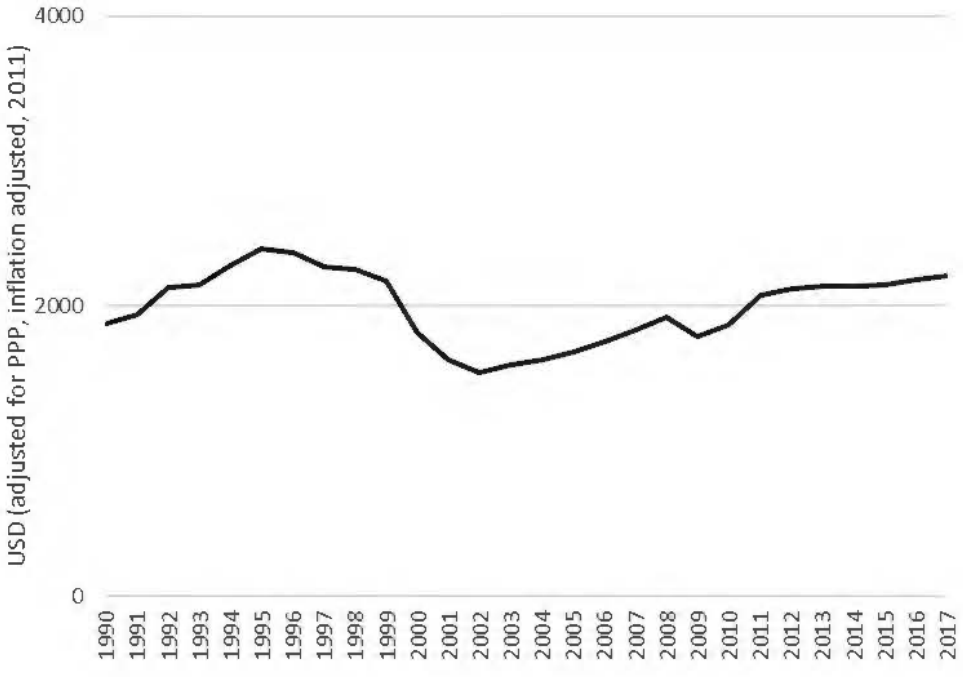
Source: World Bank, 2019

As can be seen, after a clear improvement in government effectiveness associated with the arrival of RAMSI, government effectiveness has stagnated. Solomon Islands' score is one of the lowest of all Pacific countries (World Bank, 2019).

Figure 4 shows real GDP per capita adjusted for purchasing power parity. GDP measures are no substitute for more holistic measures of human well-being. But long,

reliable time series for alternate measures do not exist for Solomon Islands. And GDP does at least capture economic activity, which itself is relevant to employment, particularly for urban dwellers in Honiara. The reality for many people living on the periphery of Honiara is that economic opportunity is very limited. As the chart shows, economic performance in Solomon Islands has barely improved since 1990. It is easy to imagine why people living under such circumstances might be craving change.

Figure 4. Real GDP per capita Solomon Islands



Source: World Bank, 2020

From Elections to Frustrations

The 2019 elections in Solomon Islands were well run. But their ultimate outcome was protests and then riots because ordinary people in much of the country are beset by problems that are not improving. Given the circumstances, it is not hard to see how the announcement of a prime minister could serve as a flash point. One puzzle remains though: if Solomon Islands holds reasonable quality elections, in which many people are free to vote, why do voters continue to vote for politicians who fail to bring them the change they desire.

One common explanation is that voters do not understand political governance well, and that, rather than think about the state of the nation, they vote in an unthinking

manner for candidates with whom they share clan, church, or language ties (for detailed discussion of this view see, Wood, 2016). However, when one actually speaks to voters in Solomon Islands, most voters display a remarkably practical and considered approach to elections. When they are free to choose who to vote for, voters typically vote for candidates whom they think will be likely to directly help them, their family, or their community. (For survey evidence see, Wood, 2013; for interview evidence see, Wood, 2014b.) These choices are based on local considerations, such as family ties, or past track record, and are focused on direct assistance, rather than views about national policy, but this is reasonable in a country where the state is weak and delivers little, and where voters have never experienced elections leading to national change. The only problem with voters' choices in Solomon Islands is that, although they are reasonable on their own grounds, they select and incentivise MPs to focus on channelling resources to supporters rather than governing the country as a whole. This dynamic explains why CDFs have risen so rapidly in Solomon Islands: the funds are very appealing to MPs who need to find means of delivering directly to supporters. The dynamic also explains the country's poor governance and subsequently poor development trajectory. MPs are not rewarded if they govern the country well, nor are they punished if they govern the country poorly. As a result, the country is governed poorly.

This political dynamic is not the only political issue Solomon Islands faces. The impact of logging and mining firms, and their corrupting influence on politics is also a major problem (Allen, 2011). However, the voter-politician relationship plays a significant role in contributing to the poor political governance Solomon Islands suffers. To be clear, the problems are most definitely not the fault of the voters, who are responding reasonably to the circumstances they find themselves in, with pressing needs and a state that delivers little. Nor does the state of affairs wholly absolve the country's political elite from the problems it faces. Some MPs still pay attention to national issues, despite the political incentives that emerge from their relationship with voters in their electorates; many other MPs show no such interest. Nevertheless, the underlying collective action problem is real; it is an example of an instance where reasonable choices from voters can contribute to poor political outcomes for the country as a whole.

Conclusion

As was dramatically illustrated by the 2019 elections and subsequent riots, the Solomon Islands case shows that well-run elections are not a sufficient condition for good governance and development. Other ingredients are needed to ensure good

governance emerges from electoral democracy. Looking at the rise, and in some instances fall, of better governance in many OECD countries, it would seem that a strong and vibrant, politically-engaged civil society is essential within a democratic framework to enable and inspire voters to engage with national issues. An active civil society also holds at least some potential to tackle political inequality by serving as a countervailing force to the entrenchment of existing political elites. Encouragingly, in Honiara at least, it is possible to find new groups that might eventually grow to fill that role (for one example see, Spark, 2014). The success of these groups is not guaranteed, but they offer some promise that electoral democracy, good governance, and better development outcomes will be part of the future of Solomon Islands.

In the meantime, it would be a mistake to cease caring about electoral quality in Solomon Islands, even if well-run elections are not currently bringing good governance in their wake. Even if well-run elections are not sufficient on their own to cause good governance, they will almost certainly be necessary in the Solomon Islands context. Rigged elections are unlikely to bring good governance, nor broad-based development to Solomon Islands. For this reason, there is something to be celebrated in the reasonably well-run elections of 2019, and also something to be preserved as the country builds its democratic future.

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Independent MPs, Political Party Legislation and Electoral Politics in Solomon Islands

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Lincy Pendeverana[1] *and Gordon Leua Nanau*[2]

Abstract

Independent MPs have always determined formation of government in Solomon Islands. In an effort to limit the critical influence of independent MPs in forming governments, which has been a problem after almost all elections since 1974, the National Parliament of Solomon Islands debated and passed the Political Parties Integrity Act (PPIA) in 2014. The PPIA promises to limit the influence of independent MPs and prescribes how political parties are to be administered. It is also intended to establish fairer gender representation in Parliament. We noted with interest that most MPs who debated and passed the PPIA went on and contested as independent candidates. In this paper, we look at the 2014 and 2019 election results to assess the impacts, effectiveness, and weaknesses of the PPIA. We also explain why it may have failed, and highlight factors that determine voter behaviour, election outcomes, and government formation in the country. Lessons learnt from the loopholes and weaknesses of the PPIA and electoral politics more generally are then used to suggest ways forward for political party development, inclusiveness, integrity, and stability in Solomon Islands.

Keywords: Gender Equality; Independent MPs; Integrity; Political Parties; PPIA

[1] Faculty of Education and Humanities, Solomon Islands National University, email: lincy.pende@sinu.edu.sb

[2] School of Government, Development and International Affairs, The University of the South Pacific, email: gordon.nanau@usp.ac.fj

Introduction

The Political Parties Integrity Act 2014 (PPIA) was passed by the Solomon Islands National Parliament in an attempt to encourage political stability. It has provisions to recognise female candidates and encourage them to contest elections, and describes how political parties are to be registered and administered. This paper relates the intentions of the PPIA, along with its effects and challenges, by specifically looking at the election results of 2014 and 2019. With the help of figures, we illustrate the composition and distribution of candidates by political party and by province following the passage and implementation of the PPIA. The election results for 2014 and 2019, and the composition of coalitions that were subsequently formed are also highlighted. We use the data to highlight the weaknesses of the PPIA and explain factors that influence voter behaviour and determine election outcomes in the country. From lessons learnt, we propose certain approaches that could be pursued to strengthen political parties, encourage gender inclusion, and boost political stability in parliament.

Characteristics of Electoral Politics and Government Formation in Solomon Islands

Before we look at the PPIA and its provisions, it is important to provide the context and features of political parties, electoral politics, and government formation in the country. Political parties proliferate in Solomon Islands but most have short life spans, formed only in the lead up to elections. Some political parties that may be regarded currently active include the Solomon Islands United Party (SIUP), founded in the 1960 by Peter Kenilorea (Snr); the People's Alliance Party (PAP), founded in 1979 by Solomon Mamaloni and David Kausimae; the Solomon Islands Liberal Party (SILP), founded in 1988 by Bartholomew Ulufa'alu; the National Party (NP), founded in 1997 by Francis Billy Hilly; the Association of Independent Members of Parliament[1] (AIMP), founded by Tommy Chan in 2001; the Solomon Islands Democratic Party (SIDP), founded by Mathew Wale in 2006; the Solomon Islands Party for Rural Advancement (SIPRA), founded in 2006 by Gordon Lilo and Dudley Tausinga; and the Ownership, Unity and Responsibility Party (OUR), founded by Manasseh Sogavare in 2019. Besides these active political parties, there are also those considered inactive but still in existence, such as the Autonomous Solomons

[1] The Leader of Independent MPs is a constitutional post provided for under Chapter VI, Part 2, Section 66 of the Solomon Islands Independence Order, 1978. However, a formal association of independent MPs was formed in 2001 as an in-house group of MPs with no political party affiliation.

Party (ASP), founded by Dennis Lulei and Jackson Sunaone; the Direct Development Party (DDP), founded by Dick Ha'amori and Alfred Sasako; the New Nations Solomon Islands Party (NNSIP), founded by Belani Tekulu; the Peoples Federation Party (PFP), founded by Rudolf Dorah and Clement Forau; the Peoples Power Action Party (PPAP), founded by Wales Feratelia; the Rural Congress Peoples Party (RCPP), founded by Milton Talasasa; the Reform Democratic Party of Solomon Islands (RDP), founded by Danny Phillips; and the Twelve Pillars to Peace and Prosperity Party (TPPPP), founded by Delmah Nori (see Alasia, 1997; Nanau, 2010; NPSI, 2019).

Most post-colonial political parties in Solomon Islands have similar intensions to improve citizen's livelihoods, but only a handful of them strive to effectively regulate how they function to deliver services. The failure of parties to regulate themselves is demonstrated by frequent floor crossing (known locally as "grass hopping") by MPs. Here, MPs freely move between political parties, often distorting the numerical balance of power in government and leading to increased votes of no confidence that characterise Solomon Islands post-colonial history. This "ever-changing series of political alignment" is what Steeves (2011, p. 345) calls "unbounded politics". As Baker (2019, p. 2) says, "the political party system remains weak and so alliances remain highly fluid and still largely personality rather than ideology-based". Others also noted the affiliation of MPs being more towards their communities than anything national (Corbett & Wood, 2013; Nanau, 2010). Under this logic, it may be concluded that governments are largely personality-based and have little to do with party policies and manifestos, a recipe for political instability in parliament.

The outcomes of elections relate mostly to personal and kin connections and have little to do with party manifestos. Such an understanding is confirmed by the results of a survey carried out by RAMSI in 2011 on what is important to individual voters (see Table 1). These reasons remain the same for all elections since independence, including both 2014 and 2019 elections.

Table 1. Voters' Reasons for Voting their Preferred Candidates.

Reasons	Male %	Female %	All %
A good person. I like/trust him/her	38.3	30	34.1
He/she made good promises	17	21.8	19.4
He/she has done good work in my community	17	18.8	17.9
Candidate is a good leader/good MP	23.8	11.3	17.5
I think he/she will help people	15.5	18.3	16.9
He/she is well educated	19.9	12.9	16.4
He/she is from my family/tribe	9.9	12.5	11.2
Church affiliation	9.1	5.0	7.0
He/she has helped me/my family	5.8	7.1	6.4
I was told to vote for him/her	3.9	5.9	4.9
He/she is from my community/I know them well	4.6	4.7	4.7
He/she gave me money or gifts	3.0	5.9	4.5
Has money/good business person/owns a business	3.1	1.2	2.2
I like that political party/policies	2.2	0.6	1.4
Good vision for the country	1.9	0.7	1.3
I thought he/she would win	1.2	0.8	1.0
No details/other/wrong answer	0.9	0.3	0.6
Don't know	0.9	1.9	1.4
Number of respondents	**2128**	**2157**	**4284**

Source: ANU Enterprise, 2012

As demonstrated in Table 1 above, the important considerations that usually determine the success of candidates in Solomon Islands elections include the following: (i) the popularity of and trust voters have in candidates; (ii) promises and actual tangible outputs previously delivered by the candidate to the community; (iii) a good sitting MP; (iv) previous assistance to a voter's family; (v) a member of the same Christian denomination; (vi) education level attained; and (vii) the size of ones extended family and family affiliations Political party policies and a vision for the country are very low considerations by voters, scoring only 1.4 per cent and 1.3 per cent respectively. Election outcomes and voter behaviour in Solomon Islands are very much influenced by the personal connections of individual candidates with voters, or what is commonly known as the *wantok* system in Melanesia (Nanau, 2018). Apart from the personal connections of candidates, the influence of brokers (or campaign managers) and their own support bases often makes considerable difference between the winning candidates and others (Hiriasia, 2016, pp. 3-5). This is not peculiar to Solomon Islands, but is prevalent across Melanesia and other Pacific island countries (see Haley & Zubrinich, 2018; Wyeth, 2017; Cox et al., 2007; Rich et al., 2007). The communal nature and close interpersonal relationships

that people have with their kin and those who speak the same language or are from the same part of the island have implications in terms of goodwill and reciprocity.[2] As such, individuals and families would discuss and support candidates they closely associate with or who may have supported them in the immediate or distant past. It is common for families to split up and support two or more competing candidates depending on their individual, marriage, and even denominational connections.

The chronic under-representation of women in Parliament is also a feature of Solomon Islands electoral politics. Again, this is not peculiar to Solomon Islands as it is also the case in most PICs. For instance, there are currently no female MPs in Vanuatu, PNG, or the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM); 1 in Tuvalu; 2 each in Nauru, and Marshall Islands; 3 each in Solomon Islands, and Tonga; 4 each in Tokelau, Palau, and Kiribati; 5 each in Niue, and Samoa; 6 in the Cook Islands; and 10 in Fiji (PWP, 2020). In Solomon Islands, three female MPs in the 50-seat parliament reflect the patriarchal nature of its parliament, where important decisions affecting men, women, youths and children are made. In 2008, the government requested the Constituencies Boundaries Commission to look at the possibility of including ten reserved seats for women representing nine provinces and the Honiara Municipality, but this did not eventuate (*Solomon Times*, 20 March 2019). This has been criticised from various fronts and to date remains "unfinished" business. A UNDP report pointed out that "in the Solomon Islands, grassroots activism has not been sufficient to persuade (mostly male) legislators" (UNDP 2016, p. 2). One outgoing High Court Judge, Stephen Pallarus, during his farewell speech, also challenged leaders to recognise the role of women in society and suggested that "there should be one united organisation that could harness the energy, the intelligence, the anger and outrage of how women are treated in their own country" (SIBC, 15 November 2014). The Commonwealth Observer Group recommended in their 2019 report that the country adopt Temporary Special Measures (TSMs) to increase female representation in parliament. Two options suggested include the allocation of a quota of seats for women, and a relook at financial incentives for political parties fielding women candidates (The Commonwealth, 2019, p. 15).

In recent years, the use of discretionary funds was blamed for skewed election outcomes in favour of sitting MPs and the nature of government coalitions formed. For instance, two issues cited during the 2019 election were cross-border[3]

[2] For a detailed analysis on kin-based voting in Solomon Islands, see Tony Hiriasia's (2016) study of East AreAre Constituency politics and voter behaviour.

[3] Cross-border registration and voting is where voters change their registration to vote in a different

registration and voting, and the use of Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF) to the advantage of sitting MPs (Wiltshire et. al., 2019). It is nevertheless important to re-emphasize the critical point raised earlier about constituency level voting that gifting is "embedded within kin-based social organisation and kin networking and that, on its own, gifting does not always bring about political loyalty, as often assumed" (Hiriasia, 2016, p. 3). What is being witnessed in Solomon Islands is a continuous contention between structure and agency. Much understanding and analysis of Solomon Islands elections revolves around structural approaches to addressing political instability with minimal attention on agential factors, including individual behaviour and attitude, experiences, background, or things such as the feelings of leaders in the country. Such structure-agential arguments are discussed in detail by scholars like Dinnen (2008) and Leftwich (2010).

A former Solomon Islands Prime Minister, Rt. Hon. Ezekiel Alebua, observed that the main source of corruption in the 2019 election was the 2018 Electoral Act, describing it as either "ill conceived" or "intentionally drawn up" to allow sitting MPs to retain their seats (Asia Pacific Report, 15 April 2019). Money politics, either through business support from, say, logging companies or through MP contingency funds (although very difficult to prove), have always been regarded as influential in determining election outcomes and government formation in Solomon Islands and other Melanesian countries (Haley & Subrinich, 2018: Kabutaulaka, 2005). With the above context set, we will now turn to discuss legislative changes instituted in 2014 aimed at encouraging stability and political party discipline. Perhaps the most significant attempt undertaken to encourage political stability in Solomon Islands' parliament was the passing of the Political Parties Integrity Act, 2014 (PPIA).

The Political Parties Integrity Act 2014

The PPIA aims to encourage MPs to become members of registered political parties before and after elections and not remain as independents, a tendency assumed to encourage parliamentary instability because of limited political party affiliations. This Act was an attempt to encourage political parties to take root, become mass-based, and, possibly, increase member loyalty. The PPIA prescribes criteria for political party registration, including how MPs are to be disciplined if they switch party allegiances, and how to strengthen the internal organisation of political parties. It also established a Political Party Commission to oversee the enactment of the Act

constituency where they do not reside with the hope of getting personal benefits from candidates. It was reported that in 2019, there were 54,000 instances of voters wanting to change their registration to a different constituency (see Wiltshire, et al, 2019).

and the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties responsible for administering the registration, amalgamation, and deregistration of political parties (NPSI, 2014).

Certain provisions of the PPIA ought to be highlighted. First is the requirement that a candidate must be a registered voter and a member of a political party. This is an interesting provision because in practice an intending candidate can still contest as an independent candidate and only join a party after the election when s/he is declared the winner and/or before the formation of government. There is also a provision that attempts to encourage gender representation in elections. The provision states that at least 10 per cent of candidates who apply to contest under a party must be women. This is undermined by making the provision contingent on whether there are enough women applying under the party and subsequently endorsed as party candidates. To encourage female candidates, there is also a provision for a TSM grant that political parties that retain women MPs can claim after election results are declared.

The PPIA, in its attempt to dissuade independent MPs, prescribe that an independent candidate must renounce his or her independent status and join a political party prior to or after the Oath of Allegiance is taken upon successful election. Once an MP renounces his/her independent status, s/he is deemed to be endorsed by that political party that s/he declares allegiance to. More importantly, no political party may enter into a coalition with any independent or group of independent MPs after elections. This is a controversial provision that may have also contributed to the demise of the PPIA. Nevertheless, the requirements for party registration appeared to reduce the number of political parties and independent groups that contested the 2014 election. Prior to the enactment of the PPIA, in the 2010 election, a total of twenty political parties contested, while in 2014 and 2019, only twelve and fourteen, respectively, contested the elections. Table 2 below provides the names of the political parties that contested the 2014 and 2019 elections.

Table 2. Registered and Non-registered Parties that Contested the 2014 & 2019 Elections.

Election Year	**2014**	**2019**
Registered political parties	1. People's Alliance Party 2. Democratic Alliance party 3. People's Progressive Party 4. National Transformation Party 5. Kadere 6. Solomon Islands People First 7. SIPRA 8. United Democratic Party 9. New Nation Party 10. Pan-Melanesian Congress Party 11. Direct Development Party 12. Youth Owned Rural and Urban Party	1. People's Alliance Party 2. Democratic Alliance Party 3. Peoples Progressive Party 4. National Transformation Party 5. Kadere 6. Solomon Islands People First 7. SIPRA 8. United Democratic Party 9. New Nation Party 10. Pan-Melanesian Congress Party 11. Green Party 12. Solomon Islands United Party 13. Democratic Party 14. Independents
Non-registered political parties	1. OUR Party 2. SI Democratic Party 3. Liberal Party 4. Labour Party 5. Rural Urban Party 6. United Party 7. National Party	1. OUR Party (registration completed after election).

Source: SIBC, 2014 & 2019; SIEC, 2014 & 2019; ST, 2014 & 2019; NPSI, 2019

We will now present the data in the form of tables of results from the 2014 and 2019 elections and discuss key findings. It should be stated at the outset that the overall findings in the tables and discussions below is that, despite the PPIA, the characteristics discussed in the first section of the paper persist, especially in relation to the prominent role played by independent MPs, the continuing weakness of political parties, and the under-representation of women. Political instability and the unpredictable behaviour of independent MPs in government formation continued after the enactment of the PPIA. Indeed, independent MPs determined the final

composition of government coalitions following both the 2014 and 2019 elections. Notably, most MPs that debated and passed the PPIA went on and contested both the 2014 and 2019 elections as independent candidates and not under political parties. They appear to have had little regard for the PPIA that they themselves passed to encourage political stability in parliament. On the contrary, loopholes and weaknesses inherent in the PPIA were exploited by individual MPs for political rewards. Some of these loopholes are discussed below. It is also important to point out that party affiliated MPs behave very similarly to independent MPs. They too frequently change sides.

On gender equality, the PPIA provisions failed to encourage political parties to fulfil the 10 per cent provision even with the TSM inducement grant. In the 2014 election, only one female MP was elected to parliament, Hon. Freda Tuki Soriocomua, representing Temotu Vatud constituency. She contested on a People's Alliance Party (PAP) ticket but when she got to parliament, she decided to switch allegiance to another political party. The TSM grant was never given to any political party because of that change in party loyalty. Later in the term of that particular house, an election petition unseated the then MP for Gizo/Kolombagara, Jimmy Tanangada, and a by-election was subsequently held. His wife won the by-election and became the new MP for Gizo Kolombangara. Hon. Tuki and Lanelle Tanangada became the only two female MPs in that 10th Parliament. Unfortunately, Hon. Tuki lost her seat through an election petition and so only Hon. Lanelle Tanaganda completed the term of that Parliament. In 2019, both female MPs were re-elected and were each given ministerial portfolios. Hon. Tuki became the Minister for Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs (MWYCFA) and Hon. Tanangada was appointed Minister for Police, National Security and Correctional Services (MPNSCS) only to resign following the government's decision to switch diplomatic relationship from Taiwan to China. She was reappointed as the Minister for Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD) during a cabinet reshuffle in April 2020 (*Solomon Times*, 29 April 2020). In December 2019, a third female MP was elected into Parliament following a by-election in the East Makira constituency left vacant by the passing away of her husband and MP (*RNZ*, 2019b). Solomon Islands now have three female MPs in its 11th Parliament.

Composition and Provincial Distribution of Candidates, 2014 and 2019 Elections

The number of registered political parties and candidates that contested the 2019 general election increased slightly from those that contested in 2014. Nevertheless,

the results of both elections showed that a majority of those who won were independent candidates compared to those who contested under registered political parties. Indeed, this has been the case since 1974, even before independence, when the first coalition government was formed between some independents and the People's Progressive Party (PPP) (Kabutaulaka, 2008, p. 106). Subsequent elections also indicated higher success rates for independent candidates than those who contested under registered political parties. For example, in the 2001 election, about 40 per cent of successful candidates were independent MPs; 42 per cent in 2006; 42 per cent in 2010; 64 per cent in 2014; and 42 per cent in 2019 (Nanau, 2010; SIEC, 2019).

The provincial distribution of political parties in both 2014 and 2019 elections render some insights into political culture and behaviour in the country. The 2014 election statistics show that 55.4 per cent of the 444 candidates who contested were independent candidates (Table 3) and 64 per cent of the seats on that election were secured by independent MPs. The relatively large political parties that contested in 2014 were the United Democratic Party (7.9 per cent), People's Alliance Party (7.4 per cent), People First Party (5.4 per cent), and National Transformational Party (5.2 per cent). The success rates for registered political parties in both 2014 and 2019 elections were mixed. Tables 3 and 4 show the distribution of candidates as per province and political party/grouping.

The domination of independent candidates in 2014 and 2019 raises many questions, as the group is not a formally registered political party under the PPIA. Independent MPs are required to join a political party after elections for purposes of forming a government, as only registered political parties are entitled to form government under the PPIA. This poses issues ranging from concerns about political party allegiance and commitment, to the constitutionally recognised position of the Leader of the Independent MPs in Parliament. As mentioned above, there continues to be a constitutional provision recognising a "Leader of the Independent group of MPs" and an associated office.

Table 3. Candidates as per Province and Party in 2014.

Party	IND	DAP	PAP	PFP	PPP	UDP	SIPRA	KP	DDP	YRU	NTP	NNP	PMC
Choi	21	2	1	2							2		1
West	25		6	2		7	4	2		1	4		1
Isa	10	1	1	1		2		1		1			
Mala	79	7	7	8	2	7	4	10	1	4	7	2	6
Centrl	15		2	1		2		2		1			
R&B	2	1				1						1	
Guale	35	1	6	6		8	1	2	1		3	2	5
HIR	17		3	3		3	1			2	3	1	2
MUP	20	1	4	2		3		2	1		1		
Temo	22		3	2	1	2	1	1		1	3		2
Total	**246**	**13**	**33**	**24**	**3**	**35**	**11**	**20**	**3**	**10**	**23**	**6**	**17**

Source: Wood, 2019; SIEC, 2019

Table 4. Candidates as per Province and Party in 2019.

Party	IND	SIUP	DAP	SIDP	PAP	PFP	PPP	UDP	SIPRA	KP	GP	PMC	NTP	NNP
Choi	13	2	2	2	2	1	1							
West	17	3	2	3	2	3		3	1	1				
Isa	7		3		1			1		1	2			
Mala	43	12	6	6	7	5	1	5		4				1
Centrl	12	1	1		1	1		1	1	2			1	
R&B	4		1		1									
Guale	20	4	2	6	1	1		2	2	1		2	1	
HIR	14	3	1	1	2	3		1	1			1	3	1
MUP	17	2	4	2	2	2		3	3	2				
Temo	15	2	2	1	3	1		2	2	2	1		1	
Total	**162**	**29**	**24**	**21**	**22**	**17**	**2**	**18**	**10**	**13**	**3**	**3**	**6**	**2**

Source: Wood, 2019; SIEC, 2019

Government formation: 2014 and 2019 Coalitions

Given the affiliation of candidates that contested the 2014 and 2019 elections, it is important to determine the success rates of these candidates under their respective groups and parties. Tables 5 and 6 below show the results of 2014 and 2019 elections for candidates that contested under registered political parties and those that contested as independents. It is obvious from the results that independent candidates were more successful in securing seats in both elections.

Table 5. 2014 Election Results.

Political Party	Seats secured	Percentage (%)
1. Democratic Alliance Party	7	14%
2. United Democratic Party	5	10%
3, People's Alliance Party	3	6%
4. Kadere Party of Solomon Islands	1	2%
5. Solomon Islands People First	1	2%
6. SI Party for Rural Advancement	1	2%
7. Independents	32	64%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Source: IPU, 19 November 2014

Table 6. 2019 Election Results.

Political Party	Seats secured	Percentage (%)
1. Kadere Party of SI	8	16%
2. Solomon Islands Democratic Party	8	16%
3. United Democratic Party	4	8%
4. Democratic Alliance Party	3	6%
5. People's Alliance Party	2	4%
6. SI United Party	2	4%
7. SI Party for Rural Advancement	1	2%
8. Solomon Islands People First	1	2%
9. Independents	21	42%
Total	**50**	**100%**

Source: SIEC, 2019

In the 2014 national general election, twelve registered and seven unregistered political parties contested (see Table 2). The majority of candidates that won seats in both 2014 and 2019 elections were independent candidates. Given the predominance of independent MPs compared to MPs affiliated to political parties in the 2019 election, the government led by Prime Minister Sogavare again formed a coalition called the Democratic Coalition for Change Government (DCCG). The DCCG comprised six political parties (Solomon Islands Democratic Party, United Democratic Party, United Party, People's Alliance Party, Peoples First, and Party for

Rural Advancement) and a seventh political party, OUR Party, which only completed its registration after the 2019 general election, bringing together all the independent MPs formally for the first time. Strictly speaking, most of them contested as independents but they did so under the unregistered party called OUR Party in both 2014 and 2019. Unfortunately, the delayed registration of OUR Party and its pivotal role in forming a coalition after the 2019 election gave rise to a court challenge questioning the legitimacy of the registration of OUR party and the eligibility of Hon. Manasseh Sogavare's nomination as the candidate for the prime minister's position. It was ruled legitimate by the Solomon Islands High Court.

Statistics on both the 2014 and 2019 elections show that a majority of incumbent MPs retained their seats. The public saw these as indicators of vote buying, where sitting MPs use funds from the RCDF and other sources to support their campaign effort. This is supported by the increased number of petition cases received by the High Court in 2019 totalling twenty-eight cases, more than half of all the parliamentary seats (*RNZ*, 2019a). There were only fifteen petition cases against winning candidates in 2014 (SIBC, 20 December 2018). This may be attributed to the differences in levels of public awareness carried out by the Electoral Commission Office in 2014 and 2019, and the improvement of judicial and policing services inter alia. Wood (2014, p. 1) explains that, although vote buying appears to be increasing, the sensitivity around this issue made it hard to quantify. Table 7 provides some comparative statistics on the 2014 and 2019 elections.

Table 7. Summary of Important Comparative Statistics on the 2014 and 2019 Elections.

Election Year	**2014**	**2019**
Number of seats in parliament	50	50
Total number of candidates contested	443	333
Number of male candidates	417 (94.1%)	307 (92.2%)
Number of female candidates	26 (5.9%)	26 (7.8%)
Number of registered parties contested	12	14
Number of election petitions	15	28
Number of parties winning seats	6	8
Number of parties in government	2	7 (including OUR Party)

Source: The Commonwealth Observer Group, 2014; ERT & SPC, 2016; SIBC, 2018; SIEC, 2019

Why has the PPIA Failed to Achieve its Intended Objectives?

There are a few loopholes or weaknesses of the PPIA and the processes that led to its adoption. They include, but are not limited to, the government's piecemeal approach to addressing political instability, very weak provisions on gender equality and representation, limited impact on voter behaviour, and the fact that independent MPs have constitutional rights to form government. To start off, let us consider this point regarding independent MPs in parliament. The initial intension of the PPIA was to minimize or put a stop to "grass-hopper" politics, and part of the approach was to limit the influence of independent MPs by obligating all MPs to declare their allegiance to a registered political party before or after national elections. As highlighted throughout this paper, the role of independent MPs has been pivotal in the making and unmaking of governments in Solomon Islands. Independent MPs have been publicly criticised for their allegiance to a group that is not construed as a political party, but rather a group established to capitalise on the fluid political party system in the country.

In 2014, Hon. Mathew Wale's Solomon Islands Democratic Party (SIDP) sought legal clarification from the High Court, as they felt that some sections of the PPIA contravened the constitution, particularly their freedom of association. The High Court dismissed the case saying that the PPIA "does prescribe that an unregistered party cannot sign a coalition agreement with a registered party" (SIBC, 16 November 2014). However, it allows MPs, including independents, to enter into Memorandums of Understanding or Agreements with other political parties in parliament to form government but not under the agreement prescribed by the PPIA (SIBC, 16 November 2014). As the Commonwealth reported, "an important component of this agreement is that it must include provisions prescribing who the coalition may nominate as its candidate at the election of a new Prime Minister" (2014, p. 15). Mr. Calvin Ziru, former Registrar of Political Parties further explained that "the act does not contravene the right or freedom of association of any individual and or political party and that political parties must be registered under the act in order for them to contest the elections" (*Solomon Times*, 17 November 2014). Herein lies a loophole of the PPIA. Alliances and associations are protected by the national constitution. However, an unregistered party cannot sign a coalition agreement with a registered political party under the PPIA, but they can form a "coalition with other unregistered parties or other independent MPs under a simple MOU or an agreement that is not the same as agreement prescribed by the Act" (SSN, 16 November 2014). The 2014 ruling of the High Court also implied that independent MPs must join a political party in order to be able to participate in the governing of the country. Because of

this, the support of independent MPs can either encourage stability or instability during the process of forming coalitions. This is where the weakness and failure of the PPIA lie.

A classic example was during the 2019 lobbying to form government. At that time, various political parties camped in different Honiara hotels. Two of the largest political parties, the Solomon Islands Democratic Party and the Kadere Party of Solomon Islands, only had 8 MPs each and therefore had to lobby for the support of the 21 independent MPs to form government. This was further complicated when OUR Party only completed its registration process after the election results were officially declared. Following its official registration under the PPIA, most independent MPs, including Hon Manasseh Sogavare, formally declared their allegiance to OUR Party. The party leader Hon. Manasseh Sogavare was able to form the Democratic Coalition for Change (DCC) government with the subsequent support of most independent MPs. The opposition led by Hon. Matthew Wale questioned the validity of OUR party's registration, and wanted the Governor General to delay the election of a new Prime Minister until a court decision was made on the case they filed. The Governor General decided instead to go ahead with the election of the Prime Minister and Hon. Manasseh Sogavare was duly elected while the opposition group walked out of Parliament without casting their votes. The High Court later struck out Hon. Wale's case, but that was after sporadic riots and looting in East Honiara by disgruntled and ill-informed citizens (*RNZ*, 2019a). Hon. Wale rejected allegations that he fuelled the riots because of his group's decision to walk away from the prime minister's election and instead blamed it on Hon. Sogavare's greed for power (ABC, 3 May 2019). In any case, independent MPs, although a loose group, not formally registered under the PPIA, wield the balance of power in the formation of governments. This has been the trend since independence in 1978. The PPIA failed to address this chronic cause of instability.

Closely related is the fact that the PPIA was developed through a piecemeal rather than a holistic approach to address political instability. Since political instability is a national concern and a longstanding one, it should have been approached holistically, taking a more political settlement approach. Here political settlement refers to "a combination of power and institutions that is mutually compatible and also sustainable in terms of economic and political viability" (Khan, 2010, p. 4). The PPIA failed to do that and only focussed on parliamentary instability and the registration and administration of political parties. It did not address other aspects of instability, such as how to reduce election petitions, potential for riots, and other factors associated with frustrated voters who cannot get the change they wish to see.

Parliament has ignored the extensive consultations, research and analysis carried out by the constitutional reform committee that had been working on what may be regarded as a political settlement through the draft federal constitution. A loophole in the PPIA is that it attempts to address instability in Parliament while ignoring the wider implication of instability in society. The PPIA addresses the need for MPs to declare their allegiance to political parties but did little about the constitutional provision of the office of Leader of Independent MPs in Parliament as highlighted earlier.

A holistic approach, taking into account the various forces that have contributed to political instability in the country, is critical, as government formation in Solomon Islands is influenced by the politics of individual interests and not so much by party ideologies and affiliations. Political ideologies that stemmed from different party manifestos only play a useful role in governance when the personal interests of candidates or MPs are reflected in them. In such a political climate, there is always a contention between individual interest and public interest. Attaining the common good for the Solomon Islands populace always appears unachievable despite large amounts of RCDF funds injected through government budgets and aid donors annually.

The situation described may in part be attributed to the short time period since independence, when Solomon Islands had to adopt the Westminster parliamentary democracy, a system refined over centuries in the West. The challenges of introducing such a system of government in a country with more than 87 local languages and dialects (Bugotu et al., 1975, p. 12) spoken by hundreds of different tribes led one early leader of the country to express the notion that Solomon Islands was as "a nation conceived but never born" (Mamaloni, 1992, p. 14). The tensions between 1998 and 2003 contradicted efforts to unite this culturally and linguistically diverse country. As such, the PPIA failed to work towards a political compromise that would have been useful to engineer political party discipline and electoral stability in the country. As Craig and Porter suggested, "post-conflict political settlements, their compromises and combinations can develop out of 'pacts' between political and economic elites that, as they become institutionalised, provide a durable kind of stability and order" (2014, p. 1). Again, a weakness in the PPIA is its inability to accommodate the diverse aspects of instability in electoral politics and inability to work towards a political settlement instead of focussing entirely on political party registration and administration.

Finally, the PPIA has very weak provisions on gender equality to wear down the

highly patriarchal nature of Solomon Islands society. Like other PICs, Solomon Islands will require more effort to change this cultural mind-set to pave the way for a more sympathetic and gender-sensitive approach to leadership. Since this requires cultural change, which is usually very slow change, it may be strategic to use legislation to incentivise or coerce voters to make their choices in a certain way that addresses gender equality in the political party and/or electoral system. As highlighted earlier, a prominent provision in the PPIA that attempts to address equal representation of women in parliament is the 10% provision for women contesting under political parties and the inducement grant on successful female candidates that contest under political parties. This is simply a percentage mentioned but it does not obligate political parties to set aside that percentage of spaces to female candidates since it goes on to say that only if there are enough women candidates applying to contest under the party. In a sense, this provision on gender equality is meaningless and does not have weight (Commonwealth, 2019). Examples of gender equality measures that work in the Pacific can be seen in French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa (Baker, 2016). The PPIA could have learnt from experiences in other parts of the Pacific to strengthen gender equality provisions.

Future Considerations for Improvement

A possible way forward, given the fluidity of Solomon Islands' political party system, would be to engineer ways that either induce or coerce voters, candidates, and MPs to adhere to certain political behaviour patterns that encourage stability and cooperation. There is still a need to strengthen political parties to make them more inclusive and attractive, such as requiring them to have a wider support base and offices with women and youth wings, and continuously recruiting members. If mass-based political parties are not deemed feasible after careful study and experimentation, one other option is to coerce voters and political parties to adhere to certain standards of behaviour and operation through legislation (Nanau, 2015). Solomon Islands could learn from, say, Samoa, where a registered political party is only recognised if the party secures eight or more seats in an election. Moreover, in Samoa, independent MPs and those who resign from their political parties cannot be given ministerial portfolios in the entire life of that house.[4] This is justified on the grounds that allowing political parties to control and discipline MPs or to cater for

[4] We are conscious that the Samoan electoral law in this area led to the weakening of the opposition and have been regarded as "draconian" by external assessors. Nevertheless, it eliminated unnecessary frequent floor crossing and discouraged candidates from contesting as independents, a chronic challenge in Solomon Islands.

the 10 per cent provision for female candidates through inducements have so far been unsuccessful. As such, a more coercive approach engineered through the electoral system or political parties' legislation may produce better outcomes and instigate change in voter behaviour.

There is also the opportunity to stop, rethink, and develop a new electoral system that captures the nature and political culture of the Solomon Islands. In other words, there should be a search for a "political settlement" to address instability in the country. The basis for this new electoral system could be the lessons and experiences of the past four to five decades, taking on board lessons from other PICs. There are examples such as the Proportional Representation (PR) system used in Fiji, or the preferential and two-round systems of voting that require 50 per cent support from voters in a constituency before a candidate is declared a winner. An example of such a system is used in Kiribati. Of course, adopting and refining systems borrowed from other PICs would have to be contextualised to minimise potential negative impacts of such systems experienced elsewhere. It is important to stress that some provisions under the draft Federal Constitution of Solomon Islands, which defines representation and how elections are to be carried out, could be starting points (Nanau, 2017). For instance, under the draft federal constitution, there is a provision for "recall", where an MP can be recalled by constituents if their MP is unable to fulfil his/her duties or is likely to bring disrepute to the constituency (SIG, 2018, pp. 79-80). Political will and the ability to step away from the status quo to push for such reforms are essential requirements.

Gender inequality, both in terms of candidates that contested and winners of both the 2014 and 2019 elections, demonstrates there is an urgent need to address this issue in Solomon Islands national parliament. There is a gradual increase in the number of female candidates contesting elections over the years. For instance, in 2010, 25 females (4.9 per cent) contested, in 2014, 26 (5.8 per cent) contested, and, in 2019, 26 female candidates (7.8 per cent) contested. In the 2019 election, only 30 per cent of female candidates (8) contested as independents, while 69 per cent (18) campaigned under various registered political parties. Could this be an indication that female candidates have more faith in political parties than their male counterparts? The gender inequality gap between men and women's participation in political leadership remains an outstanding issue to be addressed. In relative terms, women's engagement in Solomon Islands politics is only six per cent[5], and demands structural and behavioural changes to improve equal representation. The Solomon

[5] In 2020, there are only 3 female MPs in the 50-seat parliament of Solomon Islands.

Islands Government should address this issue in the interest of stability and a fairer representation of genders in political leadership.

Conclusion

Overall, elections in Solomon Islands are relatively peaceful and well-respected by citizens. The general concern over the years is the acute level of instability in parliament caused by MPs frequently crossing the floor, toppling governments, or creating new ones. An attempt to address this under the PPIA proved ineffective in a country where personality politics determine the making and unmaking of governments. Independent MPs who command the balance of power during political lobbies in both 2014 and 2019 were testaments to the inherent weaknesses of the PPIA. Much more could be achieved through political party engineering to strengthen political party institutions and to encourage gender equality in Solomon Islands' political processes. Positive experiences from other neighbouring countries could be adapted and contextualised to develop a more effective electoral system that will also encourage political stability without restricting the rights of representatives over leadership allegiances in parliament. This fine line between a re-engineered electoral system and democratic freedom of MPs to freely decide on allegiances is the most difficult but essential puzzle to solve in Solomon Islands. Little has changed in the behaviour of voters, political parties, and how coalitions are formed since independence, despite allegations of influence and pressures from loggers on politicians since the 1980s or the 2019 diplomatic switch from Taiwan to China. Now is probably the opportune time to reflect on the lessons learnt so far, to rethink what is best for the country and to forge a new electoral system that institutionalises political parties, addresses gender inequality, and ensures political stability for governments to deliver services.

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2018 Fiji Election Results: Patterns of Voting by Provinces, Rural-Urban Localities, and by Candidates

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Haruo Nakagawa[1]

Abstract

Akin to the previous, 2014 event, with no data on voter ethnicity, no exit polls, and few post-election analyses, the 2018 Fiji election results remain something of a mystery despite the fact that there had been a significant swing in voting in favour of Opposition political parties. There have been several studies about the election results, but most of them have been done without much quantitative analyses. This study examines voting patterns of Fiji's 2018 election by provinces, and rural-urban localities, as well as by candidates, and also compares the 2018 and 2014 elections by spending a substantial time classifying officially released data by polling stations and individual candidates. Some of the data are then further aggregated according to the political parties to which those candidates belonged. The current electoral system in Fiji is a version of a proportional system, but its use is rare and this study will provide an interesting case study of the Open List Proportional System. At the end of the analyses, this study considers possible reasons for the swing in favour of the Opposition.

Keywords: 2018 Fiji Election Results; Ethnic Vote; Rural Vote; Urban Vote; Voting Patterns

[1] Fellow, School of Government, Development & International Affairs, The University of the South Pacific, email: haruo.nakagawa@usp.ac.fj

Introduction

The Fiji general election of 2018 was the second held under the Open List Proportional (OLPR) electoral system, with a single, nation-wide constituency introduced by the 2013 Republic of Fiji Constitution, which supposedly discourages race- or region-based political parties. According to the government rhetoric, all candidates are supposed to represent the entire country and people, and not a particular geographical region or ethnic group.[1] This new electoral system introduced for the first time in the general election of 2014 saw the Fiji First Party (FFP) win a landslide victory. FFP was a newly-formed party led by leaders and supporters of the 2006 coup, and the post-coup interim government that had promulgated the 2013 Constitution.

The government formed after the 2014 election continued the post-coup interim government's approach of promoting a common national identity, which meant deliberately pursuing "non-racial" or ethnically blind policies. In this regard, one of the most controversial decisions made by the interim government was the adoption of a single identity for all Fiji nationals as "Fijians," which was formalised by Section 5 of the 2013 Fiji Constitution. As a democratically elected government, the regime continued to implement policies in this direction, such as the elimination of ethnicity-based education schemes such as the Taukei Affairs, and Multiethnic Scholarships. The tertiary scholarship system was changed to the National Toppers Scheme, which selects recipients of scholarships according to the recipients' marks at the secondary level, and market conditions for particular professions (TSLB Fiji, 2019) without considering ethnicity of applicants. The government also prevented the release of the ethnic breakdown of the 2017 Population Census data, a critical set of figures for social science studies provided in all previous population censuses, as well as analytic papers of censuses published by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics (FBS, 2008; 2013 a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j).

Since exit polls were not taken in Fiji's 2014 and 2018 elections, it was very difficult to estimate ethnic voting patterns in the country. However, analysis of the 2014 election results by Baker & Nakagawa (2015) suggested that the FFP's sweeping victory was due to the appeal of its rural infrastructural development for Taukei voters, and on nation-building for Fijians of Indian descent (hereinafter Indian

[1] Just before releasing the final version of the current constitution, Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum stated, "So the idea is that we have a focus on elected members of parliament having a focus on all parts of Fiji, and to ensure that political parties focus on national policies" ("Fiji Government releases final version of constitution", 2013).

Fijians) and other ethnic minority voters, including Chinese, Europeans, Rotumans, non-Taukei Pacific islanders, and their descendants, including children of inter-marriages (Naidu et al., 2013). Indian Fijian and other minority voters preferred political stability and wanted to reduce ethnic tensions and the possibility of another coup. According to an estimate, in the 2014 general election FFP was overwhelmingly supported by Indian Fijian voters (71%), and about half of the Taukei voters (Ratuva, 2016, p. 34). Another study estimated the extent of Taukei support for FFP to be 40% (Fraenkel, 2019, p. 3). Other factors that were thought to have played a part in 2014 included the glaring pork barrel politics of the incumbent government, restrictions imposed on the media and civil society organisations, and the FFP leader's successful presentation of himself as an agent of change (Robertson, 2017).

Expectations and Outcomes

Before the 2018 election, an Australian diplomat stated in Munro (2018) that there would be no possibility of FFP losing the election because "any other outcome would be unacceptable to Bainimarama." The GDP growth rate of the economy had slowed down to 2.5% in 2016, mainly because of Tropical Cyclone Winston, but it was a more robust 5.4%, and 3.5% in 2017, and 2018 respectively (World Bank, 2019). Good economic performance would be an electoral advantage for an incumbent government anywhere in the world. Opinion polls published in the mainstream media also indicated strong support for FFP ("Bainimarama tops Fiji pre-election poll", 2018). It seemed that there had not been much change in the general conditions of the nation prior to the 2018 election from 2014, even though opposition parties, particularly Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) and National Federation Party (NFP), seemed to have adopted more strategic and pragmatic approaches to win votes in the OLPR system. For instance, these parties substantially increased media advertisements, including emphases on the candidate numbers assigned to their candidates compared to their campaigns in the 2014 election. One of the speculated reasons for FFP's popularity in 2014 was that it posed itself as an agent of development, and SODELPA and FFP announced in their 2018 campaign their versions of nation-building visions, including plans for social welfare and infrastructure development (Mudaliar, 2018).

Quite surprisingly for most people in Fiji, the 2018 general election result gave FFP a thin-ice majority. FFP obtained 50.02% of total valid votes cast, which was a full 9% less than the proportion of votes it secured in the previous election. Although the party retained its hold on the government, it lost its domination in parliament, having

had 32 seats in the 50-seat assembly since 2014. The difference between the FFP and its combined opposition in seat numbers was 14 in 2014. In the parliament following the 2018 general election, FFP only obtained 27 seats in the 51-seat assembly. The combined opposition secured 24 seats. The difference between FFP and the combined opposition in seat numbers was now only 3.

It is important to note that there was a relatively large drop in the voting rate in the 2018 election – 71.9% compared to 84.6% in 2014. One of the main reasons for the lower voter turnout was the highly adverse weather conditions. Voting at 22 flood-affected polling venues in Korovou, Rakiraki, Nausori, Levuka and some areas in the Central Division had to be adjourned to 17 November from the original polling date of 14 November 2018 (Fiji Electoral Commission & Supervisor of Election, 2018; Krishant, 2018). Bad weather in the form of torrential rain was generally observed in many other areas on the official voting day, which would have certainly affected voter turnout. The FFP leader Voreqe Bainimarama blamed the bad weather for the drop in support for him and his party ("Fiji's election winner blames rain", 2018).[2] Other possible reasons for the lower voting rate could be apathy towards the election due to a lack of convincing party choices (Fraenkel, 2019, p. 23), and concerns for safety among Indian Fijian voters, which had been pointed out in the 2001 election (Lal, 2006, p. 211). However, it is difficult to measure the effects of "lack of convincing party choices," and "safety concerns" would be hardly applicable during the 2018 election.

This paper examines voting patterns in the 2018 general election using national, provincial, and urban-rural demarcations to seek the reasons behind the significant swing in voting in the 2018 Fiji election compared to the general election held four years earlier. The main data source for this paper is the official election results released by the Fijian Elections Office (FEO, 2018). Divisional and provincial demarcations were matched with the voting results by administrative divisions, which were announced after the initial data release based on FEO's geographic divisions of polling venues/stations. Since the released FEO data did not provide aggregations by provinces, these were computed by the author using FEO's data by polling venues/stations and by candidates. For identifying urban and rural demarcations, polling stations were further divided into urban and rural ones by the author using polling venue addresses on the bases of urban-rural divisions used in

[2] The comparison of the numbers of votes between the 2018 and 2014 elections show lower voting numbers in almost all provinces except for a small province of Namosi, but reduction is most pronounced in provinces of Naitasiri, Serua, and Nadroga-Navosa.

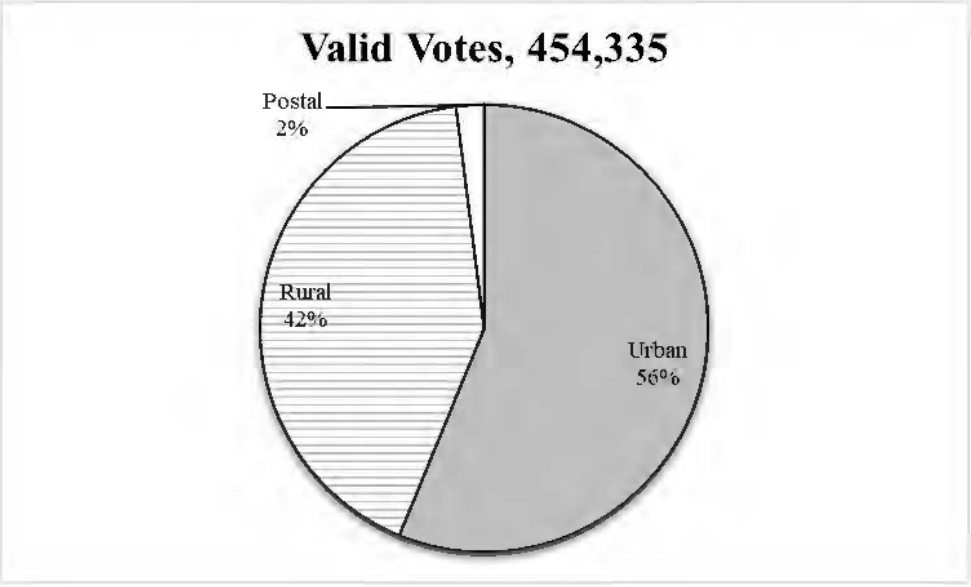
the 2017 Census.

The following sections begin by identifying national and urban-rural voting patterns, followed by comparison between 2018 and 2014 election results by province. Then, analyses of urban-rural voting patterns by province and votes for FFP and SODELPA leaders are provided. This is followed by an examination of voting patterns by urban centres and then voting pattern analyses by candidates. The penultimate section provides some analyses of the reasons for voting swing, and this is followed by concluding remarks.

National and Urban-Rural Voting Patterns

The aggregation of votes in this study shows the urban, rural, and postal voting proportions of valid votes in the 2018 election to be 56%, 42%, and 2% respectively (see Figure 1), a distribution that is in line with the findings of the 2017 Census that estimated 56% of Fiji's population to be residents of urban and peri-urban areas (FBS, 2018).

Figure 1. Pie Chart of Valid Votes by Rural, Urban & Postal Categories



Source: author's calculations based on Fijian Elections Office data, 2018

Urban areas constituting over 56% of Fiji's population favoured FFP in the 2018 election. The party collected 54.5% of urban votes relative to 43.1% of the combined votes for SODELPA (35.0%) and NFP (8.1%), as shown in Table 1. In rural areas, SODELPA and NFP were favoured with 52.5% (46.1% for SODELPA and 6.4% for

NFP) of votes to FFP's 44.3%.

Table 1. Percentages of Rural/Urban/Postal Votes by Political Parties

	Fiji First		SODELPA		NFP		Other		Total
	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes
Urban	139,050	54.5%	89,475	35.0%	20,563	8.1%	6,200	2.4%	255,288
Rural	84,117	44.3%	87,525	46.1%	12,196	6.4%	6,081	3.2%	189,919
Postal	4,074	44.6%	4,072	44.6%	756	8.3%	226	2.5%	9,128
Total	227,241	50.0%	181,072	39.9%	33,515	7.4%	12,507	2.8%	454,335

Source: author's calculations based on Fijian Elections Office data, 2018

Comparison between 2018 and 2014 Election Results by Province

Table 2. Provincial Votes for Parties in Percentages in 2018 and 2014 Elections

	2018				2014			
	FijiFirst	SODELPA	NFP	Rest	FijiFirst	SODELPA	NFP	Rest
Naitasiri	47.3%	43.0%	6.9%	2.8%	58.0%	30.6%	4.9%	6.4%
Namosi	34.3%	57.4%	6.3%	1.9%	39.1%	53.9%	2.2%	4.7%
Rewa	41.0%	48.5%	7.7%	2.7%	51.7%	36.1%	5.5%	6.7%
Serua	40.7%	50.0%	6.9%	2.4%	53.1%	35.1%	5.9%	5.9%
Tailevu	45.0%	43.6%	8.7%	2.7%	59.4%	29.9%	4.0%	6.8%
Bua	30.2%	63.6%	3.3%	2.9%	40.1%	51.4%	2.7%	5.7%
Cakaudrove	30.2%	64.8%	3.3%	1.6%	40.4%	49.7%	2.8%	7.2%
Macuata	58.7%	30.6%	8.9%	1.7%	62.6%	24.4%	6.4%	6.7%
Kadavu	12.6%	83.5%	2.9%	1.1%	27.0%	68.2%	1.0%	3.7%
Lau	17.6%	78.1%	1.8%	2.5%	19.5%	74.2%	2.3%	4.1%
Lomaiviti	21.5%	74.7%	2.1%	1.7%	29.4%	59.3%	3.1%	8.2%
Ba	63.6%	25.5%	8.3%	2.6%	69.8%	14.8%	6.8%	8.5%
Nadroga-Navosa	53.8%	35.0%	5.1%	6.1%	69.1%	18.5%	6.1%	6.3%
Ra	48.0%	37.4%	10.8%	3.8%	59.7%	23.7%	5.8%	10.8%
Rotuma	52.6%	14.2%	30.7%	2.6%	84.1%	5.1%	1.6%	9.2%
Postal	44.6%	44.6%	8.3%	2.5%	54.7%	32.7%	7.3%	5.3%
National Total	50.0%	39.9%	7.4%	2.8%	59.2%	28.2%	5.5%	7.2%

Source: author's calculations based on Fijian Elections Office data, 2018 and 2014

This section shows where the voting swing from FFP to SODELPA eventuated by province. Table 2 summarises the provincial-level, total votes in percentages for the leading three parties and the rest for 2018 and 2014 elections. In the 2014 election, FFP beat SODELPA in the more urban provinces with large populations, such as Naitasiri, Rewa, and Ba, and SODELPA obtained more votes than FFP in the more

rural provinces with small populations, such as Namosi, Kadavu, and Lomaiviti. In that year, in the 14 provinces and Rotuma, FFP had won in eight provinces and Rotuma, and SODELPA emerged victorious in six provinces. In the 2018 election, SODELPA received more votes in eight provinces, including Rewa, to FFP's six and Rotuma. However, when we compare the two elections, FFP lost and SODELPA gained support in all provinces and Rotuma as well as in postal votes in 2018, as shown in Table 3. SODELPA gained 11.7% in its share of the total national votes in 2018 compared to 2014. In contrast, FFP lost 9.2% of the total national votes. The gains for SODELPA and losses for FFP were more than 10% in a majority of provinces except for Namosi, Macuata, Lau, Lomaiviti, Ba, and Rotuma.

Table 3. Differences in Provincial Votes in Percentages for Political Parties in 2018 and 2014 General Elections

	FijiFirst	SODELPA	NFP	Rest	2018 weight
Naitasiri	-10.7%	12.3%	2.0%	-3.6%	17.8%
Namosi	-4.8%	3.5%	4.1%	-2.8%	0.6%
Rewa	-10.7%	12.4%	2.2%	-4.0%	9.9%
Serua	-12.4%	14.9%	1.0%	-3.4%	1.5%
Tailevu	-14.4%	13.7%	4.7%	-4.0%	6.2%
Bua	-9.9%	12.1%	0.6%	-2.8%	1.0%
Cakaudrove	-10.2%	15.2%	0.5%	-5.6%	3.0%
Macuata	-3.9%	6.3%	2.5%	-4.9%	9.6%
Kadavu	-14.4%	15.2%	1.9%	-2.6%	0.3%
Lau	-1.9%	3.9%	-0.5%	-1.6%	0.3%
Lomaiviti	-7.9%	15.4%	-1.0%	-6.5%	0.7%
Ba	-6.3%	10.7%	1.5%	-5.9%	37.2%
Nadroga-Navosa	-15.3%	16.5%	-1.1%	-0.2%	6.4%
Ra	-11.7%	13.7%	5.0%	-7.0%	3.4%
Rotuma	-31.5%	9.1%	29.1%	-6.7%	0.2%
Postal	-10.1%	11.9%	1.0%	-2.8%	1.8%
National Total	-9.2%	11.7%	1.9%	-4.4%	100.0%

Source: author's calculation based on Fijian Elections Office data, 2018 and 2014

It should be noted that Ba and Macuata voters in all likelihood saved FFP from losing its hold on the government in the 2018 election. The extent of losses for FFP in the largest province of Ba (37.2% weight) and fourth largest of Macuata (9.6% weight) were not extensive at 6.3% and 3.9% respectively, relative to other provinces where

the FFP losses in the larger provinces exceeded 10% (15.3% in Nadroga-Navosa, 14.4% in Tailevu, and 10.7% in Naitasiri and Rewa). It is also noteworthy that the swing of votes to SODELPA was across almost all provinces and small changes were only observed in Namosi and Lau, where support for the party had been already quite high in 2014.

On the other hand, the National Federation Party (NFP) kept, and even strengthened its status as the third party and a potential alternative choice for the future. As shown in the bottom of Table 2, it drew a higher percentage of votes (7.4%) in 2018 relative to 2014 (5.5%). However, the D'Hondt method of seat allocation meant that NFP's seats in parliament remained at three. It would be important to point out that the traditionally Fijian Indian based party now has two Taukei MPs, which indicates that the party was supported by a good number of Taukei. This result reinforced the trend seen in the 2014 election when the NFP's Taukei candidate, Tupou Draunidalo received 2,966 votes.

As shown in the bottom of Table 2, the marginalisation of minor parties other than the three leading ones was another characteristic feature of the 2018 election; the three minor parties together received only 2.8% of the total valid votes in 2018. This proportion was much less than the 5% threshold required for eligibility to obtain a seat in parliament. By contrast, as shown under the "Rest" column in Table 2, in the 2014 election four minor parties and two independents received 7.2% of the total valid votes among them. Table 3 shows that in 2018 the "Rest" category lost 4.4% in total votes compared to the aggregate votes received by minor parties and independent candidates in 2014. This table also shows that the losses of the "Rest" group occurred in all provinces and Rotuma and even in postal votes.

It is interesting to note that the gains of SODELPA and NFP would not only be from the losses of FFP, but also from the losses of the "Rest" group, because those who voted for this group in the 2014 election would likely be critical of the FFP government. In other words, the marginalisation of minor parties in 2018 probably benefitted SODELPA and NFP mostly.

Further, the marginalisation of minor parties, particularly the Fiji Labour Party (FLP), can also be explained by the policy of FFP government and its unelected predecessor governments disempowering and de-politicising labour and farmers unions, the traditional main support bases of the NFP and FLP (Fraenkel, 2019). This included the banning of union officials from becoming political party officials. Also, a splinter party of FLP, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which had secured

3.2% of total votes in the 2014 election, had a coalition agreement with SODELPA in the end of 2017 to run their candidates on SODELPA's list. The PDP party leader at the agreement, Lynda Tabuya, eventually moved to SODELPA (Chanel, 2017) and this further weakened PDF's support base.[3]

Other two minor parties, the Unity Fiji Party (UFP) led by the former Governor of Reserve Bank of Fiji, Savenaca Narube, and the Humanity Opportunity Prosperity Equality (HOPE) Party led by ex-parliamentarian and ex-President of NFP, Tupou Draunidalo, received considerable media attention before the election. Narube was reasonably popular and received 2,811 votes and other candidates of his party received 4,085 votes in total but the sum of 6,896 votes was only 1.5% of the total national votes. Draunidalo, the daughter of the late Adi Kuini Speed, the former Deputy Prime Minister deposed in the 2000 coup, received only 650 votes in 2018, which was only a fraction of 2,966 votes she had obtained as a NFP candidate in 2014. Her party's total votes in 2018 were only 2,811 or 0.6% of the total national votes.

Urban-Rural Preferences and Votes for FFP and SODELPA Leaders

The votes for the two leading parties and their leaders are examined next, as these leaders secured more than half of the total valid votes between them (FFP leader 36.9% and SODELPA leader 17.0%), and there was a peculiar concentration of votes for these leaders within their political parties. As shown in Table 4, the FFP leader Vorege Bainimarama obtained 73.8% of the total votes received by the 51 FFP candidates. In other words, the rest of FFP's 50 candidates only received 26.2% combined, or slightly more than one quarter of the total votes for the party. In the 2014 election, a similar, but more moderate concentration of 69.9% of total votes had gone to the same leader of the party (Baker & Nakagawa, 2015). As shown in Table 4, this concentration of votes for the party leader of FFP was more accentuated in urban areas where Bainimarama received 41.2% of the total urban votes, which were more than three quarters of the total votes received by party candidates in urban areas.

[3] Later the PDP was disqualified by the Fijian Elections Office in 2018 before the election for not submitting its statement of assets and liabilities to the registrar of political parties by the deadline (Mala, 2018).

Table 4. Votes for FFP and its Leader by Rural, Urban, and Postal Voters

	Total	Fiji First	Vorege Bainimarama (VB)	Fiji First Share in Total	VB Share in Total	VB Share in Fiji First
Urban	255,288	139,050	105,284	54.5%	41.2%	75.7%
Rural	189,919	84,117	59,513	44.3%	31.3%	70.8%
Postal	9,128	4,074	2,935	44.6%	32.2%	72.0%
Total	454,335	227,241	167,732	50.0%	36.9%	73.8%

Source: author's calculations based on Fijian Elections Office data, 2018

Table 5. Votes for SODELPA and its Leader by Rural, Urban, and Postal Voters

	Total	SODELPA	Sitiveni Rabuka (SR)	SODELPA Share in Total	SR Share in Total	SR Share in SODELPA
Urban	255,288	89,475	51,460	35.0%	20.2%	57.5%
Rural	189,919	87,525	24,042	46.1%	12.7%	27.5%
Postal	9,128	4,072	1,538	44.6%	16.8%	37.8%
Total	454,335	181,072	77,040	39.9%	17.0%	42.5%

Source: author's calculations based on Fijian Elections Office data, 2018

Table 5 shows that the main opposition SODELPA's leader received 42.5% of the total votes obtained by the party's 51 candidates. These were not as high as his counterpart's in FFP. However, votes for Sitiveni Rabuka were much more pronounced than in the 2014 election, in which his predecessor received 35.4% of SODELPA's total votes (Baker & Nakagawa, 2015). This concentration of votes for the new SODELPA leader was also more extensive in urban areas (57.5%) relative to rural areas (27.5%). This concentration of votes for the party leaders of FFP and SODELPA could have been proxy votes or votes not specific to a candidate but for a party. This premise is supported by the fact that the previous party leader of SODELPA, Ro Teimumu Kepa, received 6,063 votes in the 2018 election, only a fraction of the 49,485 votes she had received in 2014. However, all the votes for the leaders of the two largest parties would not be proxy votes for their parties. In other words, if different leaders had led these parties, the choices of voters may have significantly altered because of factors such as the values and policies attached to party leaders, as well as implications for political stability they represented.

Most of the Indian Fijians who had voted for FFP in the 2014 election seemed to have kept their loyalty to the governing party in 2018, particularly in urban areas. They kept their faith in FFP's multi-racial nation-building, which had been supported by the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF). As described in Baker and

Nakagawa (2015), Indian Fijians also preferred political stability and the elimination of affirmative policies in favour of Taukei. These policies had been perceived by them as discriminatory. Some Indian Fijian voters may also have been suspicious of NFP, which had formed a multi-ethnic coalition with the Rabuka-led Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT), a predecessor of SODELPA, in the 1999 election (Robertson, 2017).

Urban Votes by Population Centres[4]

In the 2014 election, FFP received 61.6% of urban votes to SODELPA and NFP's combined total votes of 31.4%, and the party secured more votes than SODELPA and NFP in most population centres. The only exception was Lami, where FFP received 40.5% of votes to SODELPA and NFP's 53.2% (Baker & Nakagawa, 2015).[5] In the 2018 Election, FFP received 54.5% of urban votes to SODELPA and NFP's 43.8%, but in several major population centres FFP lost against SODELPA and NFP combined. These included Lami and Suva. FFP votes almost tied with the votes received by SODELPA and NFP combined in Nasinu (see Figure 2). It can also be seen that, in Lami, support for FFP ebbed significantly with the party securing only 23.9% of votes. Actually, in the urban areas of the Central Division in total, SODELPA and NFP combined secured slightly more votes (49.1%) than FFP (48.5%) (see Figure 2).

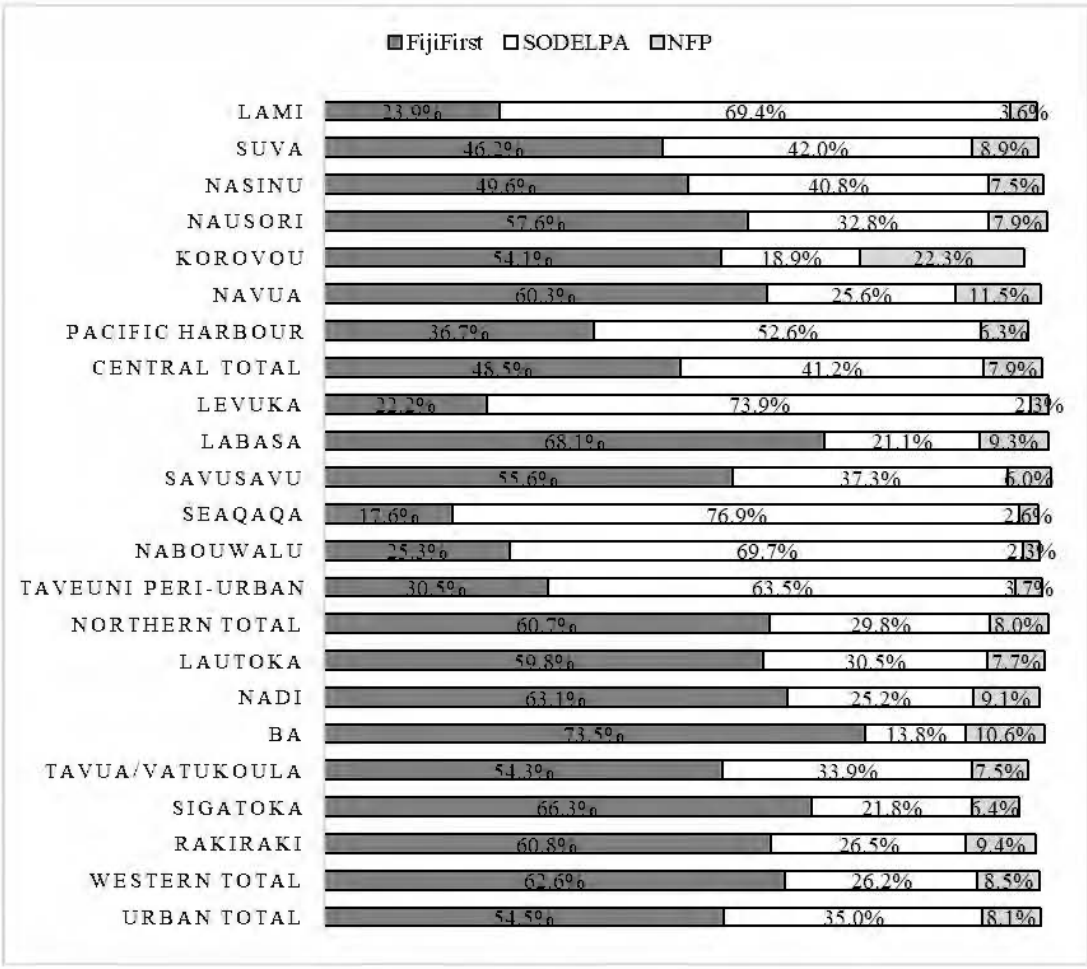
Although not as extensive as in the 2014 election, unwavering support for FFP in 2018 can be observed in urban centres in Ba, Lautoka, Nadi, and Sigatoka in the Western Division. In these urban areas, support for FFP was 62.6% in total to SODELPA and NFP's 34.7%. In the urban areas of the Northern Division, FFP also kept the lead by securing 60.7% to SODELPA and NFP's 37.8%.

These distributions may be partially explained by ethnic polarisation, with a significant majority of Taukei voters supporting SODELPA, and Indian Fijian and other minority voters overwhelmingly supporting FFP, but this explanation would be too simplistic to adequately explain voting patterns in some urban centres.

[4] In this paper, urban areas include peri-urban areas adjacent to and beyond city/town boundaries.

[5] The urban-rural demarcations of the 2014 election results used in Baker & Nakagawa (2015) were based on the 2007 census in which urban and rural populations were almost equal. Therefore, direct comparisons between the two data sets are not possible.

Figure 2. Urban Party Votes of Leading Three Parties by Urban Centre



Source: author's calculations based on Fijian Elections Office data, 2018

Table 6 is derived from a series of publications from FBS analysing 2007 census data (FBS, 2013 a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j) show ethnic group numbers in some of the population centres measured by the "Usual Place of Residence" (UPOR). SODELPA's securing of nearly 70% of votes in Lami can be explained by Taukei predomination in the town (80% in 2007), but FFP edged over SODELPA in Suva and Nasinu in 2018, where Taukei population is greater than Indian Fijian and other minorities. A reason for this would be support for FFP by a substantial proportion of Taukei. They could have been public servants, military personnel, and workers in public enterprises. Support for FFP from them as a group would not be as extensive in 2018 compared to 2014 because of the introduction of an open, merit-based recruitment system by the Public Service Commission in October 2016, and contract-based employment for public servants seeking promotion in 2017. Probably, only

those who had been gaining from the new arrangements would have kept their allegiance to FFP.

Table 6. Ethnic Group Numbers in Urban Centres of Fiji in 2007

City/Town	UPOR	iTaukei	Indians	Others	% Taukei	% Indians	% Others
Ba	19,443	5,690	13,188	565	29.3%	67.8%	2.9%
Labasa	27,460	9,542	16,950	968	34.7%	61.7%	3.5%
Lami	19,930	15,904	1,396	2,630	79.8%	7.0%	13.2%
Lautoka	59,189	26,026	29,853	3,310	44.0%	50.4%	5.6%
Levuka	1,959	1,319	249	391	67.3%	12.7%	20.0%
Nadi	42,410	19,730	19,572	3,108	46.5%	46.1%	7.3%
Nasinu	89,638	47,000	36,617	6,021	52.4%	40.8%	6.7%
Nausori	40,710	16,793	22,230	1,687	41.3%	54.6%	4.1%
Navua	4,174	1,386	2,559	229	33.2%	61.3%	5.5%
Nabouwalu	544	496	44	4	91.2%	8.1%	0.7%
Rakiraki	4,805	2,098	2,639	68	43.7%	54.9%	1.4%
Savusavu	6,394	2,865	2,753	776	44.8%	43.1%	12.1%
Seaqaqa	765	271	476	18	35.4%	62.2%	2.4%
Sigatoka	9,332	4,363	4,521	448	46.8%	48.4%	4.8%
Suva	81,098	45,101	23,473	12,524	55.6%	28.9%	15.4%

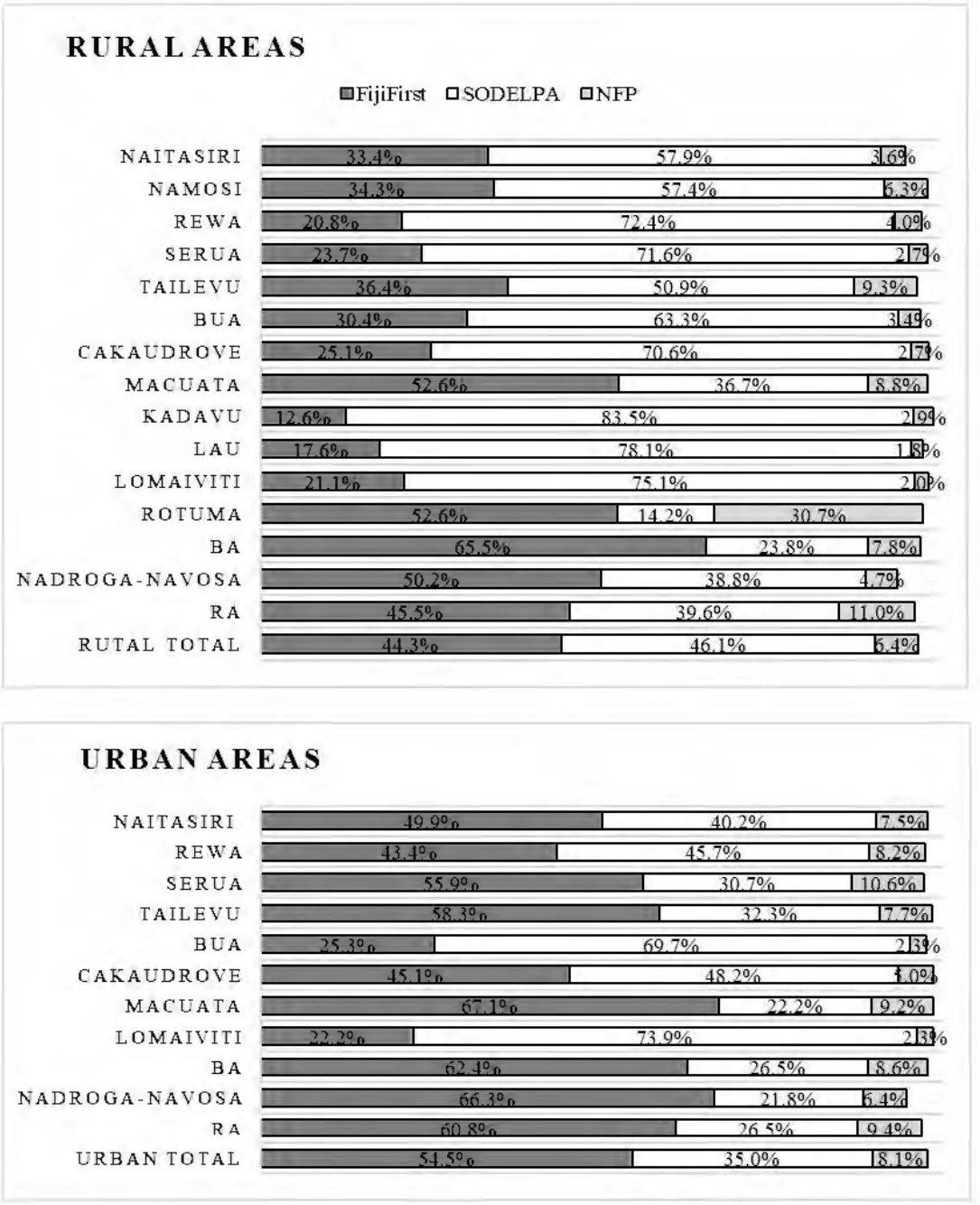
Source: FBS, 2013 a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j

The success of FFP in urban centres of the Western and Northern Divisions can be explained by their substantial Indian Fijian and other minority populations. However, Taukei populations are also quite substantial in a few urban centres of the Western and Northern Divisions, as shown in Table 6, and in 2018, the Taukei proportion of the population of these municipalities would have increased substantially from the ones in 2007. This would indicate that some Taukei in these urban centres voted for FFP in both the 2014 and 2018 elections.

Rural-Urban Votes by Province

At the provincial level, in a majority of rural areas SODELPA secured more than 50% of votes, except for rural areas in the Western Division, and in Macuata and Rotuma, as shown in the upper rows of Figure 3. This can be explained by ethnic distributions of voters who are mainly Taukei. The domination of the party is particularly glaring in the rural areas of provinces of Rewa (72.4%), Serua (71.6%), Cakaudrove (70.6%), Kadavu (83.5%), Lau (78.1%), and Lomaiviti (75.1%).

Figure 3. Rural/Urban Votes of Leading Three Parties by Province



Source: author's calculations based on Fijian Elections Office data, 2018

On the other hand, FFP received more than 50% of the votes in rural areas of the provinces of Macuata (52.6%), Ba (65.5%), and Nadroga-Navosa (50.2%), where Indian Fijians and other minorities constitute substantial proportions of the population. Other than these three provinces, FFP secured more votes than

SODELPA in rural areas of Ra (45.5% vs. 39.6%). In aggregation of all valid votes in rural areas, SODELPA received 46.1% of the total votes to FFP's 44.3% and NFP's 6.4%. This distribution indicates that substantial numbers of Taukei who had voted for FFP in 2014 shifted to SODELPA in the 2018 election. However, sizable numbers of them still voted for FFP if we take into account the predominance of the Taukei population in rural areas in general.

FFP does appear to have attracted a higher number of votes in urban areas relative to rural areas in most provinces if we compare the upper and lower rows of Figure 3. Calling FFP an urban party might be premature, but this party's popularity is evident from its share of votes in the large provinces with the biggest urban centres. Besides ethnicity, FFP's popularity in these localities could be explained by its relative success in urban development compared to rural areas of the country.

Voting Patterns by Candidates

Baker & Nakagawa (2015) reported patterns of concentration of support in particular provinces and municipalities for most candidates in the 2014 election, and this tendency was repeated in the 2018 election. Despite the abolition of ethnic constituencies and the establishment of the single, nation-wide constituency that would not favour an ethnic party (Carnegie & Tarte, 2018), and the emphasis by government on nation-wide representation by all MPs, SODELPA had adopted a strategy of naming a majority of its candidates by particular provinces or municipalities. At the same time, some of their candidates were called national candidates, selected to represent the country as whole. Ratuva (2016) described a similar approach used by SODELPA in 2014.

The party opposed the nation-wide, single constituency to start with and many of its candidates had strong regional ties as high-ranking chiefs, or as "commercial buccaneers" based in a particular region (MacWilliam, 2016). MacWilliam (2016) considered this strategy to be an anachronism, with the 2014 election results being "the high-water mark for the party dominated by high chiefs, particular rural concerns and the Taukei buccaneers who were once prominent" (pp. 225-226). In contrast to this view, Ratuva maintained that this SODELPA strategy "was quite innovative and commendable because it won the party most of their seats" in the 2014 election (2016, p. 35).

The strategy may have also provided guidance to SODELPA supporters to spread their votes among the party's candidates. A clear example of this was the designation of Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, Tui Cakau (Paramount Chief of Cakaudrove and of the

Tovata Confederacy) as a national candidate for the party, and Dr Ratu Antonio Lalabalavu, his son, as a candidate for Cakaudrove East. The father who secured a parliamentary seat received 2,165 nation-wide votes (29% from Cakaudrove), while the son also secured a parliamentary seat with 5,016 votes, 96% of which were from Cakaudrove Province. In the 2014 election, the father received 6,668 votes, 77% of which was from Cakaudrove (Baker & Nakagawa, 2015).

The Brazilian elections strategy resonates with the SODELPA approach. Ames (2001) points out a typical election strategy of moderately popular candidates under the OLPS in Brazil as follows: they estimate roughly how many votes they need based on the previous election outcomes, given that more popular, star candidates of their parties would secure a substantial proportion of votes for their parties. Then they concentrate their efforts to secure enough votes from some identifiable groups that could be regional, religious, or ethnic. This suggests that a moderately popular candidate needs really strong and popular comrades in the same party to raise the total votes for the party. However, at the same time, other candidates from the same party can become the aforesaid moderately popular candidate's worst enemies as they may "steal" her/his votes from the targeted group, and end up higher ranked among party candidates, thereby becoming MPs in the OLPS. In this context, Mere Samisoni, a SODELPA candidate, was quite unhappy with the strategy adopted by the party headquarters that suggested to Lami voters in her urban stronghold "to vote for the party if they were not happy with the local SODELPA candidate." This would have shifted substantial Lami votes from her to other SODELPA candidates, particularly to the party leader who visited the town at the end of the campaign period (Delaibatiki, 2019).

Table 7 shows patterns of voting in the 2018 election in terms of regional voting concentrations for all winning candidates of SODELPA. Most of these candidates had more than 50% concentration of their votes from certain provinces and/or municipalities.

Some of the most concentrated voting patterns, equal to or more than 80% of all valid votes, can be observed for Dr Ratu Antonio Lalabalavu (96% from Cakaudrove Province), Jese Saukuru (96% of votes from Ba Province), Peceli Vosanibola (92% of votes from Lomaiviti Province), Mitieli Bulanauca (93% of votes from rural areas of Bua Province), Ratu Tevita Navurelevu (91% of votes from Macuata Province), Mosese Bulitavu (91% of votes from Macuata Province), Simione Rasova (87% of votes from Kadavu), Mikaele Leawere (86% of votes from Serua Province), and Adi

Litia Qionibaravi (86% of votes from rural areas of Tailevu Province).[6] It should be noted that the concentration of their votes was particularly strong in rural areas of a province where the dominant population are Taukei.

Table 7. Regional Voting Patterns for Winning SODELPA Candidates

# of Votes	Name	Voting Pattern
77,040	Sitiveni L. Rabuka	Dispersed in many areas of Fiji but 67% were from urban areas.
8,795	Lynda D. Tabuya	Dispersed in many areas of Fiji but 74% were from urban areas.
6,036	Ro Teimumu Kepa	54% of her votes were from Rewa Province where she is from and urban areas of Naitasiri Province. She also received some votes from Western District, particularly from Ba Province (17%).
5,342	Mosese Bulitavu	91% of his votes were from Macuata Province where he is from.
5,187	Niko Nawaikula	77% of his votes were from rural areas of Cakaudrove Province where he
5,016	Dr Ratu Antonio Lalabalavu	96% of his votes were from Cakaudrove Province where he is from.
4,287	Anare Jale	60% of his votes were from Lau Province where he is from.
3,730	Peceli W. Vosanibola	92% of his votes were from Lomaiviti Province where he is from.
3,536	Viliame R. Gavoka	68% of his votes were from Rural areas of Nadroga Province where he is from.
3,299	Jese Saukuru	96% of his votes were from Ba Province where he is from.
3,286	Simione R. Rasova	87% of his votes were from Kadavu where he is from.
3,279	Ratu Suliano Matanitobua	56% of his votes were from rural areas of Namosi Province where he is from.
3,031	Mitieli Bulanauca	93% of his votes were from rural areas of Bua Province where he is from.
2,835	Ro Filipe Tuisawau	67% of his votes were from Rewa Province where he is from.
2,724	Inosi Kuridrani	91% of his votes were from Nadroga-Navosa Province where he is from.
2,354	Mikaele Leawere	86% of his votes were from Serua Province where he is from.
2,312	Aseri M. Radrodro	62% of his votes were from rural areas of Naitasiri Province where he is from.
2,235	Salote Radrodro	67% of her votes were from urban areas of Naitasiri Province which are parts of Nasinu and Suva.
2,195	Adi Litia Qionibaravi	86% of her votes were from rural areas of Tailevu where she is from.
2,165	Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu	29% of his votes were from Cakaudrove Province and about a half were from urban areas of Fiji such as Lami, Suva, Nasinu, Lautoka and Nadi.
2,010	Ratu Tevita	91% of his votes were from Macuata Province where he is from.

Source: author's calculations based on Fijian Elections Office data, 2018

[6] Among SODELPA candidates who received more than 1,000 votes but were not successful to get a parliamentary seat, the following candidates had high concentration of their supports from a certain province. They are Ratu Pacelli Rina Kama (80% votes from rural areas of Naitasiri Province), Esrom Y. Immanu'el (80% of votes from rural areas of Naitasiri Province), George Shiu Raj (87% of votes from Ba Province), and Ro Kiniviliame Kiliraki (89% of votes from Naitasiri Province).

Among successful SODELPA candidates, only three lacked one or two concentrated support bases where more than 50% of their votes were received. They were Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, the party leader Sitiveni Rabuka, and Lynda Tabuya. They received votes from diverse areas around the country and half or more of their votes were from urban areas. The former leader of SODELPA, Ro Teimumu Kepa, also had a wider support base, but 54% of her votes were from Rewa Province.

The geographical concentration of votes is a phenomenon not limited to SODELPA, and many FFP winning candidates also had significant support from particular localities. This is shown in Table 8. FFP candidates with more than 50% concentration of votes by locality were Joseph Nand (68% from Nadroga Province), Vijendra Prakash (59% from Naitasiri Province), Dr Salik Ram Govind (62% from Nadroga Province), George Vegnathan (77% from Macuata Province), Rohit Sharma (69% from Nausori, Nasinu and Suva), Viam Pillay (86% from Ba Province), Premila Devi Kumar (59% from Suva, Nasinu and Nausori), Parveen Bala (85% from Ba Province), Jale Sigarara (82% from Bua Province), Ashneel Sudhakar (68% from Ba Province), Rosy Akbar (55% from Ba Province), Selai Adimaitoga (95% from Ba Province), Sanjay Kirpal (74% from Ba Province), and Osea Naiqamu (86% from Ba Province and rural areas of Nadroga Province). Many other candidates had relatively concentrated voting patterns from more than two geographical areas, but they were less extensive.

The only FFP candidates with nation-wide support were the party leader Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, party General Secretary Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Alipate Nagata (candidate number 668, which might have been confused with party leader 688), Mereseini Vuniwaqa, and to lesser extent Dr Mahendra Reddy and Veena Bhatnagar.

As the two faces of government for more than 10 years, FFP's leaders, Bainimarama and Khaiyum, have had considerable media exposure and are well known to voters. They have held several important ministerial portfolios, especially in the period immediately before the 2018 general election. These factors would explain the preponderance of votes for the party leader, and the increased number of votes for Sayed-Khaiyum in 2018 relative to 2014. Many FFP candidates had electoral success because of the huge number of votes for their party leader, including proxy votes for the party. This meant that many successful FFP members of parliament received less than 1,000 votes, as shown in Table 8. It is noteworthy that, in 2014, only six out of the 32 of successful candidates of FFP had less than 1,000 votes, but in 2018, 13 out of 27 elected FFP candidates obtained less than 1,000 votes.

Table 8. Regional Voting Patterns for Winning FFP Candidates

# of Votes	Name	Voting Pattern
167,732	Josaia V. Bainimarama	His votes were dispersed in many areas of Fiji but 63% were from urban areas.
17,271	Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum	His votes were dispersed in many areas of Fiji but 59% were from various urban centres of Central and Western Districts as well as Labasa.
6,876	Alipate T. Nagata	His votes were from various areas around Fiji.
5,063	Parveen K. Bala	85% of his votes were from Ba Province. He is from the Province and was an elected mayor of Ba Town.
2,256	Vijay Nath	46% of his votes are from Nausori town where he is living. He also received 12% of votes from rural area of Tailevu where he is from.
2,081	Dr. Mahendra Reddy	37% of his votes were from Ba Province where he is from and 29% were from the urban areas of the Central District such as Suva, Nasinu and Nausori.
1,379	Premila Devi Kumar	59% of her votes were from Suva, Nasinu and Nausori. She is from Suva and also received supports from Lautoka and Nadi (14%).
1,349	Joseph F. Nand	68% of his votes were from Nadroga Province. He is living in Sigatoka and was a football coach for Nadroga.
1,280	Viam Pillay	86% of his votes were from Ba Province where he is from and residing.
1,251	Inia B. Seruiratu	59% of his votes were from rural areas of Tailevu Province where he is from and Cakaudrove Province.
1,167	Mereseini R.	Her votes were dispersed in many areas of Fiji.
1,147	Sanjay S. Kirpal	74% of his votes were from Ba Province where he is from.
1,129	Osea Naiqamu	86% of his votes were from Ba Province and rural areas of Nadroga Province. He is from Ba and was the CEO for Fiji Pine Trust.
1,019	Alvick A. Maharaj	49% of his votes were from Macuata Province where he is from and 13% were from urban areas of Naitasiri which can be related to his residence and business.
944	George Vegnathan	77% of his votes were from Macuata Province where he is from.
888	Semi T. Koroilavesau	53% of his votes were from Kadavu where he is from and Ba where his company is located.
849	Jone Usamate	43% of his votes were from Suva, Nasinu and Nausori. Another 18% were from Cakaudrove Province.
821	Rohit R. Sharma	69% of his votes are from Nausori, Nasinu and Suva.
755	Ashneel Sudhakar	68% of his votes were from Ba Province where he is from and currently residing.
743	Dr. Ifereimi Waqainabete	52% of his votes were from Rewa and Naitasiri provinces. He is a medical doctor practicing in Suva.
718	Selai Adimaitoga	95% of her votes were from Ba Province where she is residing as a cane farmer.
705	Rosy S. Akbar	55% of her votes were from Ba Province where she is from.
697	Jale Sigarara	82% of his votes were from Bua Province where he is from and currently residing.
596	Vijendra Prakash	59% of his votes are from Naitasiri Province where he is from and currently living.
577	Veena K. Bhatnagar	61% of her votes were from Ba and Ra Provinces.
572	Alexander D. O'Connor	46% of his votes were from Cakaudrove Province. Another 22% were from Ba Province where he is living.
559	Dr. Salik Ram Govind	62% of his votes are from Nadroga Province where he is from.

Source: author's calculations based on Fijian Elections Office data, 2018

As shown in Table 9, votes for all successful NFP candidates were dispersed widely and Biman Prasad and Lenora Qereqeretabua received more than 50% of their votes from urban areas, whereas Pio Tikoduadua received nearly 70% of his votes from various rural areas.[7] Therefore, Tikoduadua is a more rural-based politician compared to the other two successful candidates of his party.

Table 9: Regional Voting Patterns of Winning NFP Candidates

# of Votes	Name	Description
12,137	Prof. Biman C. Prasad	His votes were dispersed in many areas of Fiji but 74% were from urban areas.
2,684	Pio Tikoduadua	42% of his votes were from rural areas of Tailevu where he is from. Another 26% of his votes were from various rural areas of other provinces.
1,811	Lenora Qereqeretabua	Her votes were dispersed in many areas of Fiji but 50% were from the urban areas of Central District, particularly Suva and Nasinu.

Source: author's calculations based on Fijian Elections data, 2018

Among the candidates of the three minor parties only Savenaca Narube, the party leader of UFP received more than 1,000 votes. His 2,811 votes were from widely dispersed areas, but 54% were from the urban areas of Central and Western Districts.

Reasons behind the Swing in Votes

As shown above, between the 2018 and 2014 elections there was a substantial swing of votes from FFP (-9.2%) to SODELPA (+11.7%) and NFP (+1.9%). Gains of these two opposition parties were also taken from the marginal, minor parties (-4.4%). The swing was almost universal and not limited to Cakaudrove, the well-known stronghold for the new SODELPA party leader, Rabuka. This shift of voter preference occurred in both urban and rural areas, but was more accentuated in the rural localities.

As indicated by a previous analysis of the election data, the swing in votes seemed to have occurred mainly among the Taukei population (McWilliam, 2019). A number of reasons can be discerned for the change in Taukei voter behaviour. Carnegie & Tarte (2018) note that the FFP government has been a "competitive authoritarian" regime, which had not collaborated with the opposition on policy making, but sternly

[7] Another two NFP candidates who were unsuccessful in the election but managed to secure more than 1,000 votes were Charan J. Singh (1,102 votes) and Kiniviliame Salabogi (1,614 votes). Singh obtained 64% of his votes from his home province of Macuata whereas 50% of Salabogi's votes were from his home province of Ra.

rejected policy compromises and treated the parliamentary opposition with disdain. Among the Taukei voters, the swing in votes between 2014 and 2018 is likely to have been because of disillusion with policies implemented by the FFP government and the treatment of the predominantly ethnic Fijian opposition. The governing party largely retained the support of Indian Fijian and other minorities for reasons of security and stability.

As described by Fraenkel (2019), FFP also seemed to take advantage of ethnic insecurity among Indian Fijians by pointing out NFP's weak response to racist remarks made by SODELPA MPs in parliament (p. 3).[8] He pointed to other factors to explain the swing in Taukei votes, such as the party leader Rabuka being a well-known potential "alternative leader," particularly in urban areas, as a former military strong man and prime minister. Another reason pointed out by Fraenkel (2019) was that SODELPA was able to choose locally prominent candidates whose personal votes at their provinces were stacked up (p. 24).

A further reason for the swing was the boosting of the image of Rabuka just before the election by the publicity relating to his prosecution. His candidacy was almost disqualified because of the charge of failure to declare his assets, income, and liabilities correctly at the end of December 2017, in violation of the Political Parties Act. The Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) brought the case against him and a guilty verdict would have disqualified him from contesting the 2018 election. However, a magistrate court found Rabuka not guilty on 26 October 2018 (Narayan & Turaga, 2018).

Then, at the hastily called High Court session, Chief Justice Anthony Gates dismissed the FICAC appeal on 12 November 2018, only two days before the election ("Appeal against Rabuka dismissed", 2018). If the Chief Justice had ruled against Rabuka, it would have been disastrous for SODELPA because it was already within the two-day election media blackout period, and the party would not have been able to announce the new party leader. The verdict of dismissing the FICAC appeal was greeted with euphoria among SODELPA supporters, boosting Rabuka's image among Taukei (Fraenkel, 2019).

[8] Because of marginalisation of political parties such as Fiji Labour Party, the only viable alternative choice for most Fijian Indian voters for FFP was NFP in the 2018 election.

Conclusion

This study examined the 2018 general election results by provinces, rural, and urban localities, as well as by candidates. The patterns of voting in these geographical areas changed since the previous general election of 2014. However, patterns of vote concentration for political party leaders, and concentrations of votes for candidates based on their province of origin were similar in the two general elections. The study shows that support for FFP ebbed in all provinces with corresponding gains for SODELPA and NFP. SODELPA and NFP also gained at the expense of the three minor parties. The swing in votes characterised Taukei voters generally but especially in rural areas. FFP retained its support among Indian Fijian and other ethnic minorities. However, sizeable numbers of Taukei also continued to vote for the governing party in urban areas, and especially in Ba and Macuata provinces.

There is little doubt that the current FFP government will work hard to keep its Indian Fijian support and seek to regain support of Taukei voters for the 2022 general election. SODELPA strategy in the 2018 general election, which repeated its 2014 election approach of identifying provincial, urban, and national candidates, appeared to have produced positive results. It is likely that the party will continue this strategy in 2022. The NFP has significantly changed its image from being a party for Indian Fijians to one that is more broadly multi-ethnic. With two of its three MPs being Taukei, the party is likely to continue to gain more indigenous Fijian support.

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Religion and the New Media: Discourses and Debates in the 2018 Fiji General Election Campaign

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Jacqueline Ryle[1] *and Jope Tarai*[2]

Abstract

This article explores discourses and debates on secularism, religion, and politics in social media in connection with the 2018 Fiji general election campaign, and in interviews with leading figures in churches and religious organisations. It discusses how people responded to these issues. It shows that there is still a pervasive lack of clarity in the Fijian population as to what the terms Christian state, secular state, secularism, and secularisation mean, how people understand, discuss, and debate them, and how this lack of clarity was used politically during the campaign.

Keywords: Fiji Elections; New Media; Christian State; Secular State; Secularism

[1] Senior Lecturer, School of Social Sciences, The University of the South Pacific, email: jacqueline.ryle@usp.ac.fj

[2] Assistant Lecturer, School of Government, Development and International Affairs, The University of the South Pacific, email: jope.tarai@usp.ac.fj

Introduction

On 1 August 2018 Fiji residents woke to campaigning billboards across the country stating, "Embrace Godliness. Reject racism and bigotry". "Mmm. New slogan, these things are like riddles", noted one Facebook user (Facebook Post, 2018). "Embrace Godliness"? I thought Fiji was declared a secular state under your government", noted another tweet (Tweet, 2018).[1] On 1 August 2018 the election campaign was nowhere near underway. The Writ of Elections was not issued until 1 October 2018, yet the posting of this billboard message was, in effect, an unofficial launching of the campaign. Social media feeds and subsequent interviews in late 2018 and 2019 with prominent Fijian religious figures indicated that it was among the most notable of Frank Bainimarama's FijiFirst Party slogans – in terms of generating debate and remaining something people clearly remembered even long after the campaign. As the social media comments and interview statements show, it was effective in so much as it caused surprise, indignation, anger and confusion, as well as connecting at deep levels with many people's faith.

This paper explores discourses and debates on religion and politics in the new media and media in connection with the 2018 Fiji general election campaign. It focuses on a number of specific moments in the debates. These are responses to the 1 August billboard; the Budget Roadshow by FijiFirst, where they stated that "God is in the budget", on 17 August; and Roman Catholic Archbishop Peter Loy Chong's "Pre-election homily reflection on economic justice", on 7 October. The paper's timeframe extends beyond the 14 November Election Day to the culmination of negative profiling of Archbishop Loy Chong in the *Fiji Sun* with the article by Jyoti Pratibha, in which she states, "Archbishop Peter Loy Chong is the biggest loser of the Elections",(Pratibha, 2018), and Archbishop Loy Chong's response to this on Facebook on the same day.

The paper focuses on media, in particular social media discussions of these specific moments in the election campaign, and reflections by leading figures in churches and religious organisations on these themes. We start by discussing the complex and shifting landscape of religion and secularism in Fiji, the rapid development of social media in the country, and the place of political debate in social media as a powerful political force. What the paper shows is the depth of religious complexity in Fiji, the immense differences in perspectives depending on one's religious affiliation and

[1] The author clearly assumed the billboard texts emanated from the government. Yet, there was no acknowledgement of source on the billboards – unless, that is, you stood very close to the billboard and could see the small print at the bottom.

experience, and the ways in which these were utilised politically.

Religion and secularisation in Fiji

Fiji's city and landscapes, interspersed as they are with churches of various denominations, temples, mosques, Hindu prayer flags, crosses, billboards, buses and cars with religious slogans, and the sight of the religious faithful making their way to and from their places of worship, bear witness to the vibrancy of faith practices in everyday life in the country. In the Census of 2007, which provides the most recent available figures on religious affiliation in Fiji, 64.5% of the population were Christians, 28% Hindu, and 6.3% Muslim (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2007). The Methodist Church is by far the largest of Fiji's churches, its membership totalling almost 35% of the whole population at that time. From the mid-1980s until the coup of 2006 the ideal of declaring Fiji a Christian state, closely linked to certain strong factions within the Methodist Church, was debated in several waves. It gained particular political prominence around the time of the May 1987 coup, at subsequent Methodist Church conferences, during the 1995 Constitution Review Commission, from the 2000 coup until the 2006 coup, and again during the 2012 Constitution Review Commission led by Professor Yash Ghai.

Yet, as noted by the late Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi (interview, 2015), this is the agenda of a minority of indigenous Fijians,[2] as also reflected in the figures noted by White (2017, p. 74) that "of the 7,091 individual submissions logged by the 2012 Constitution Commission, 846 declared in favour of Fiji being a Christian state".[3] At the same time, the pervasive confusion about what is meant by the term "Christian state" plays into these figures. It is highly unlikely that all submissions in favour of a "Christian state" concerned a *de jure* one. As Ryle has argued elsewhere,[4] prior to the adoption of the 2013 Constitution those debates raged between Christian conservative theological perspectives of the exclusivity of Christianity in Fiji, inevitably linked with understandings of indigenous Fijian ethnic superiority, contra inclusive Christian theologies, embracing multicultural ideals and advocating

[2] In 2012, the then-military government changed by decree the designations of different communities in Fiji. The term "Fijian", rather than denoting indigenous Fijians, became the politically correct designation for all Fiji citizens, regardless of their ethnicity. iTaukei (lit. owners) became the term to denote indigenous Fijians. Indo-Fijians retained their denotation, while from 2012 also officially becoming "Fijians". While recognising these official changes, in this paper we use the term "indigenous Fijian".

[3] Similarly, a survey on democratic development in Fiji in 2011 noted a significant lack of interest among respondents to the Christian state issue (Boege et al., 2013, p. 41).

[4] (2004; 2005; 2009; 2010; 2015).

ecumenical and interfaith dialogue among Fiji's ethnic groups.

Since the declaration of Fiji as a secular state in 2013 by the then-military government headed by Frank Bainimarama, the idea of a Christian state has often been viewed as the opposite of the secular state. For many people this is linked with anger and frustration at the way in which the widely accepted 2012 Yash Ghai Draft Constitution, the result of extensive and open consultation, was thrown away by the military government and replaced by decree with the 2013 Constitution.

While Fiji remains a country deeply formed by religious beliefs and practices that are closely interwoven with culture, processes of globalisation are impacting on and changing the former taken for granted, solid place of faith practices in everyday life, particularly in urban contexts.

Rapid economic, political and sociocultural changes within Fiji society since the Second World War are increasingly eroding traditional social structures and social control mechanisms within families, clans and villages, as is migration and increasing seasonal migration, social mobilization and urbanization (Ernst, 2012, p. 36; Ernst, 2006, p. 75). Halapua (2003, pp. 175-176) emphasises how the coups of 1987 and 2000 affected a "breakdown of moral order". And Tomlinson (2013) points out how the Methodist Church's involvement in the 1987 and 2000 coups "seems to have accelerated movement away from the established church and fractured the religious landscape" (Tomlinson & McDougall, 2013, p. 15). These many changes are challenging the taken for granted status of religion and religious practice in Fijian society. Added to this are the virtual realities accessible through social media that closely link with Western secularism.

The now-increasingly contested secularisation thesis within the study of religion claims that all societies will universally evolve from religious to secular, rational thinking. In secularisation, privatised forms of religion replace public forms, and rational, scientific thinking replaces religious beliefs (Berg-Sørensen, 2013, p. 3). Secularisation also denotes the processual decline of the power and influence of religion and religious institutions in society, meaning that "the lives of fewer people … are influenced by religious beliefs" (Bruce, 1992, p. 6). Yet, religion has not disappeared from society, even in secularised Western societies, but is changing its form. As Taylor argues, though "the developments of Western modernity have destabilized and rendered virtually unsustainable earlier forms of religious life, new forms have sprung up" in a continuing, complex process of "destabilization and recomposition" (Taylor, 2007, p. 594). The complex, shifting dynamics of

Christianity in Fiji over the past decades exemplify this, as does the central place of religion in societies across the Pacific Island region, and the increasing role of religion in twenty-first century national and world politics.

At the same time, secularisation has also, Bhargava notes (2013, p. 18), become a political doctrine, claiming the separation of religion and politics as "normative", fixed in content, and timeless. Yet, as Bhargava emphasises (2013, p. 18), there are many different forms of secular state, and each needs to be understood as developing within and pertaining to specific historical, political and sociocultural processes. Fiji's form of secular state is a case in point, arguably styled in response to and in order to restrain and contain religio-ethno-nationalist movements that advocated, especially at the time of the coups of 1987 and 2000, that Fiji be declared a Christian state.

Critics of the Christian state have argued that the ideal is more about power relations than religion. As former Methodist Church President, the late Rev Paula Niukula sharply noted, "The issue of the Christian state has nothing to do with Christianity but rather the strengthening and accumulation of power and wealth by those in power" (Casimira, 30 November 2002). This point was echoed by Winston Halapua, Dean of the Anglican Holy Trinity Cathedral during the 1987 coups. The slogan used by Christian state advocates, *noqu kalou, noqu vanua* (my God, my land), he wrote, "manipulated a majority of Fijians because of the apparent appeal to the deep cultural values of the Fijians. In reality such a cry was a smokescreen for naked power grabbing and wealth accumulation" (Halapua, 2003, p. 108).

While the 2013 constitutional declaration of Fiji as a "secular state" has shifted the balance of these power relations, the lack of clarity of what it means and entails has created other challenges. Since its inception, the terms "secular", "secularisation" and "secularism" have appeared increasingly in English language use in Fiji among faith groups. However, there is still very little clarity as to what exactly these terms mean, in particular what a secular state is. This lack of explanation at the national level of the new terminology has given rise to the erroneous understanding among many Christians that Fiji *has become* a secular state.

The often-expressed understanding among Christians in Fiji is that the 2013 Constitution changed Fiji's status from being a Christian state to that of a secular state. Yet Fiji has always been a secular state, even though, as Trnka points out, Sitiveni Rabuka's introduction of the Sunday ban after the second coup he led in 1987, forbidding all non-church related activities, in effect transformed Fiji into a *de*

facto Christian state, until the ban was repealed in 1995 (Trnka, 2011, p. 75; see also Trnka, 2008). Christianity was granted special mention in Fiji's previous constitutions and freedom of religion was "a tacit agreement" guaranteed by previous governments though not formerly written into the constitutions (Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, interview, 2015; Mahendra Chaudhry, interview, 2015; White, 2017). But these facts are far from the general conception of many Christians in Fiji, for whom Fiji's shift to a *de jure* secular state in 2013 is seen as having deprived them of something existentially precious.

In contrast to this, leading figures from the religions the majority of Fiji Indians belong to see the secular state as legally guaranteeing religious freedom and giving greater protection and reassurance to those of non-Christian faiths. Reflecting on threatening experiences of stones being thrown onto the roofs of houses during prayers, and the burning and looting of temples, Arya Samaj Vedic priest and Interfaith Search Fiji council member Pandit Bhuwan Dutt believes that the constitutional enshrining of Fiji as a secular state gives non-Christian believers greater protection. "[There's] assurance that [should] anyone should disturb you in your prayers, you … have recourse to the law … that the law should protect you … [should there be] any … misbehaviour against any religion" (interview, July 2019). This was echoed by Mr Sarju Prasad, national president of the Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha Fiji, who said, "That was the sunrise for us. We were very happy … that now there will be less burning of temples" (interview, July 2019).

However, while offering re-assurance and protection to non-Christians, to the majority of indigenous Fijian Christians, the secular state is still confusing. As Methodist Church President Rev Dr Epineri Vakadewavosa expressed it, voicing sentiments other leading figures in churches have also expressed, "From day one up till now many people in the Church do not understand, even the teachers. It's quite difficult to come to terms with secularism and the secular state" (interview, June 2019).

Catholic Archbishop Peter Loy Chong points out that "secular" is a new term for Fiji (Ryle, 2015). There is no Fijian word for this. One translation could be, according to Archbishop Loy Chong, *vanua vakavuravura* meaning "a worldly country". Another translation could be *matanitū sega ni yavutaki e na lotu* meaning "a state not based on the Church/Christianity" (Paul Geraghty, pers. comm., March 2020). The translation of "secular state" in the 2013 Constitution (Clause1:4) is *matanitu vuravura* (a worldly state) (The Republic of Fiji, 2013). To indigenous Fijian Christians all these terms indicate a society devoid of God, of faith and of spirit and

appear to threaten one's freedom to be a person of faith and to practice one's faith. In fact, these are the very fears that non-Christian believers have lived with for decades due to the political threat of Fiji being declared a Christian state.

Whatever guarantees advocates of the Christian state purport to have for securing freedom of religion (cf., Ryle, 2005, 2010), it is difficult to see how this in effect would be possible, and it is these fears the 2013 Constitution now allays for believers of non-Christian religions. It is notable that, although the Fiji Council of Churches did not agree with the move to constitutionally declare Fiji a secular state, all the historic mainline member churches fully embrace the separation of church and state.[5] In 2014, Roman Catholic Archbishop Chong sent out a pastoral letter to all parishes emphasising the Catholic Church's position on church and state (Ryle, 2015).

In 2018, President of the Fiji Mission of the Seventh Day Adventist Church Pastor Luke Narabe sent out a letter of ministry to all Adventists, reminding "all church leaders and members about our position as a Church". In the final section of his letter, "Pray for our Nation", he quotes from the Department of Religious Liberty of the General Conference of the Seventh Day Adventist Church:

> The Seventh-Day Adventist Church makes its position clear toward politics. 1) It is actively neutral in party politics, 2) It is not neutral in moral issues; 3) It does not dictate how to vote, 4) It stands for separation between church and state … The Adventist Church welcomes people of all political beliefs. While church members should vote [according to] their conscience [,] for the church to take a position on any particular candidate or political party would inject the church into a debate that would interfere with its spiritual mission (Narabe, 27 September 2019).

Yet when churches express that the terminology surrounding the secular state is unclear, their points of view are often interpreted as being against a secular state and so therefore *for* a Christian state. The lack of open and informed debate is unfortunate, as it perpetuates and entrenches polarised, stereotypical representations of different positions, simultaneously maintaining a blurred picture and making it

[5] Founded in 1963, the Fiji Council of Churches belongs under the aegis of the World Council of Churches. Member churches are the Anglican Church, Catholic Church, Congregational Church of Samoa, Coptic Orthodox Church, Fiji Baptist Convention, Fiji Community Churches of Christ, Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma, Presbyterian Church, Salvation Army. Churches that are not members include the Seventh Day Adventist Church, and Pentecostal churches such as Assemblies of God and Christian Mission Fellowship.

impossible to explore nuanced perspectives.

To fully grasp the complexities of the Christian state vs secular state debate in Fiji, Ryle has argued at length[6] that these concepts need to be understood in relation to the so-called Three Pillars of Fijian society, *vanua, lotu*, and *matanitū* (see Niukula, 1994, 1997, and Tuwere, 1997, 2002,[7] both former Methodist Church presidents). *Vanua,* a complex term of deep existential meaning to indigenous Fijians, encompassing paths of kinship relations, nurture and mutual obligations, connects place, people, pre-Christian gods and spirits and Christian beliefs with the past, the present and the future (Ryle, 2010, xxxix). *Lotu* means church, faith, Christianity. *Matanitū* in its pre-colonial meaning, was the most powerful manifestation of divine chiefly governance. From at least 1870, *matanitū* has come loosely to be understood as state or government in the Western sense. After Cession to Great Britain in 1874, it came to be equated with colonial governance. However, it never completely lost its perceived connection to chiefly power.

Vanua lotu vāKarisitō means "land of the Church", or "land of Christian faith". It also denotes "Christian state", entangling within it all the complexities of *vanua*. Addressing this confusion, Revd Dr Ilaitia Sevati Tuwere, Methodist Church President (1996-98), who advocated strongly against the Christian state ideal, emphasised in-1998 (Ryle, 2010, p. 58) an important distinction between what he termed *vanua vāKarisitō* (a Christian land) and *matanitū vāKarisitō* (a Christian state). Noting that the term "*matanitū*" entails complex legal aspects, he stressed, "we can simply live according to the principles of the Christian faith" (Ryle, 2010, p. 58).

It seems that often, when indigenous Fijians refer to a Christian state, they are not referring to the legal frameworks of a *de jure* state as such, but to what they perceive as essential: living according to Christian principles and values, embedded as these are within traditional values of *vanua.* There is therefore lack of clarity as to what people mean when they speak of either a "Christian state" or a "secular state". The terms are used loosely, very rarely defined, yet each continues to engender anxiety in different communities. This paper argues that the lack of clarity was employed politically in the election campaign to fuel this pervasive anxiety. Judging from

[6] (2004, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2015).

[7] The Three Pillars is not the same as what is known as "the three-legged stool". This expression, developed by Ratu Sukuna, referred to the mutually dependent ethnic groups of Fiji society during colonialism, the Fijians, the Indians, and Europeans, the Fijians providing the land, Europeans the capital and skilled manpower, and Indians their cheap labour (B. Lal, 1988, p. 60; see also Sukuna, 1983) (Ryle, 2010, p. 55).

comments made, especially on social media, many people considered that the "God card" was played with a deft hand on several occasions and served to confuse, woo and seduce the electorate.

New Media – Social Media in Fiji

New media refers specifically to social media in Fiji and its access through digital technologies. In recent years, social media access has expanded dramatically in Fiji due to increasing interconnectivity, competitive internet costs and affordability of digital devices (Tarai, 2019; Tarai et al., 2015; Cave, 2012). Rising social media access has provided greater space for more spirited and at times controversial political discussions. An increase in social media political discussions has become compounded by Fiji's restrictive media landscape, being a symptom of its most recent, 2006 Coup (Tarai, 2019; Tarai, 2018). The continued constraints of Fiji's traditional media landscape have seen a rise in social media discussions and debates on Fiji's politics (Robie, 2016; Singh, 2015; Tarai, 2018). As such, social media has increasingly become an indicator for public discourse on specific issues.

To capture these discussions, two key approaches and tools were utilised and reviewed. First, social media analytics tools[8] were utilised to extract quantitative data on Fiji's new media landscape and demographics. Certain social networking sites, such as Facebook, actively provide social media analytic data in terms of its "Audience Insights". Second, digital ethnography[9] was utilised as an iterative-inductive approach in critically examining online discussions informed by context-based insights and analysis.

A number of social networking sites (SNS) comprise what may be referred to as social media in Fiji. These include but are not limited to Tumblr, Pinterest, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. Out of these SNS, Facebook is the most populated and popular across Fiji's demographic distribution. In 2018, there were a little over 500,000 estimated Facebook accounts in Fiji (Audience Insights, 2018; Tarai, 2019). Despite the fact that this figure would include multiple accounts that could be owned by one person, it does indicate an extensive audience that is over

[8] Social media analytics tools derive quantitative (and to some extent qualitative) data from social networking sites and have been extensively used in business marketing and specialized academic research (new media/social media, digital technologies, e-governance, etc.).

[9] Digital Ethnography is an iterative-inductive approach to examining and studying online and offline related dynamics, usually through a mediated form of contact (digital technologies) and participant observation (Pink et al., 2016). These dynamics are subject to the context and content of what is being examined and how it is being examined.

half of Fiji's 884,887 estimated total population (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Fiji's Central Division is estimated to have the largest amount of active Facebook accounts, with 68%, followed by the Western Division at 28%, with the Northern Division at 3%, and 1% for the Eastern Division (Audience Insights, 2018).

Out of the estimated 500,000 or so active Facebook accounts in Fiji, accounts that have participated in or expressed interest in political and social issues are estimated to number 150,000 to 200,000 (Audience Insights, 2018). This is by no means a surprise since one of Fiji's most controversial and at times highly political Facebook forums, *ChatFiji* has a little over 200,000 members (Tarai & Drugunalevu, 2018; Tarai, 2019). This forum has demonstrated the capability to create viral content and propel the public interest, simply because of its extensive Facebook account membership and discussion momentum (Tarai & Drugunalevu, 2018; Tarai, 2019). In essence, social media expanse and depth is massive and increasingly reflective of the general public's concerns, views and debates.

The explosion of more interactive and pronounced social media political discussions in Fiji can be traced back to 2011, to Facebook forums such as *Letters to The Editor Uncensored (LEU)* (Tarai, 2019).[10] These were forums designed as reactions to the ongoing implications of direct censorship in traditional media newsrooms. They accommodated a little over 10,000 accounts at the time, with varied activity over the years. In the lead up to the controversial establishment of the 2013 Constitution in 2012 and 2013, Facebook became a site of rigorous debate and discussions. A wide range of key political and social issues relating to the constitutional process and contents were debated. One of these was the heated debate on the Christian state and secularism. However, the online debates shifted from this to the processes involved when the 2012 constitutional draft came to an abrupt stop, as Fiji Police shredded and burned the finalised copies of the 2012 Draft Constitution (Morris, 2013).

Online debates and discussions on the Christian state and secularism re-emerged in 2014 in the lead up to Fiji's first elections under the newly enforced 2013 Constitution. The 2014 general election was the first election in Fiji's history that saw the involvement of social media (Tarai et al., 2015). Out of all the social media platforms, Facebook was the most populated and active SNS during the 2014 general election. In January 2014, a total of 260,000 estimated Facebook accounts were active in Fiji (Tarai et al., 2015). This figure rose to an estimated 298,000 by the

[10] There were online political discussions in 2009, when the 1997 Constitution was abrogated, but these were more limited to blogsite discussions, which were not as prominent and interactive as Facebook political discussions.

polling month of September 2014 (Tarai et al., 2015), which indicated increasing interest in accessing Facebook specifically for political information, discussion and debates.

Social media was used in campaigning and debating key issues among voters and directly with particular candidates. Most of the online discourse on the Christian state and secularism involved Fiji's biggest opposition party SODELPA and their supporters. SODELPA is composed of Fiji's indigenous conservative elites who have strong views on the ideals of the Christian state and secularism. These debates were limited in scope as they predominantly involved like-minded users who typically expressed similar views, limiting the scope and duration of exchanges.

In the 2018 general election, however, online discourses on the Christian state and secularism were no longer limited to or instigated by opposition parties, but were now initiated by the ruling FijiFirst party. This began with the FijiFirst billboards in August stating, "Embrace Godliness [sic]. Reject racism and bigotry".

"Embrace Godliness [sic]. Reject racism and bigotry" – a memorable slogan

From January 2018, oversized billboards with jet black backgrounds and an enormous, Fiji-flag blue font with simplistic soundbite slogans became common aspects of roadsides and cityscapes across the main islands of the Fiji group. Examples of some slogans include: "Honesty and Justice; Stability and Equality"; "Youth empowerment and Women's Rights"; "More students in schools and universities than ever before"; "All Fijian Families Matter"; "Reject Lies, Embrace truth". But the message on 1 August 2018 stood out: "Embrace Godliness [sic]. Reject racism and bigotry."

Of all the billboard slogans, this engendered particularly strong responses. The use of "Godliness", employing an unusual capitalisation, was arguably no error but a strategy to ensure the reader made a connection to "God" as in the God of Christianity.[11] FijiFirst deployed the slogan simultaneously on its two social media platforms, on Facebook and Twitter, from 13-14 August 2018. The majority of FijiFirst supporters lauded the 1 August billboard message on social media, thanking the Prime Minister and the Party for the slogan, stating "FijiFirst the best, God bless FijiFirst" (Facebook Comment, 2018). However, more critical voters questioned the sudden use of religion in FijiFirst's campaign: "Ironic how a secular state uses 'Godliness' in their billboard. Reject hypocrisy!" (Facebook Comment, 2018);

[11] In this paper, we use the spelling "godliness".

"Confused much from a so called [sic] secular state" (Facebook Comment, 2018) "The billboards accuse all Fijians of being ungodly, racist bigots" (Facebook Comment, 2018). The critical comments gathered increased attention and focus during the campaign because of the confusion that the slogan created.

In contrast to the immediacy and intensity of these social media reactions in August 2018, retrospective responses to the billboard by prominent figures of Fiji's different religions, when interviewed in 2019, were quietly reflective. Despite different definitions of the terminology and different perspectives on the words of the billboard, there was consensus that "embracing godliness" is essential to all religions and religious life.[12] But there were many different interpretations of the place and use of this religious terminology in the election campaign, and how it worked.

The majority of religious leaders interviewed saw the words of the billboard slogan as fundamental values of individual faith, religious practice and for the good of all society. "We would love to see a government that promotes godly values", Pastor Luke Narabe, President, Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDA), stated (interview, July 2019). "Well, 'embrace godliness' ... that is what the call to holiness is all about, about living in harmony and tolerance with one another", Revd Dr Epineri Vakadewavosa, President, Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma noted, continuing:

> It's a very profound message. If you want to have a good society, you must have godliness … They have been mentioning about a secular state, but to value that, is very interesting ... [it] is another way of saying that … godliness is genuine in a good society (Interview, July 2019).

Revd Dr Tevita Banivanua, President, Fiji Council of Churches (FCC) noted, "I think the billboard was a good one, 'to embrace godliness' and of course to reject in the political sense, racism and bigotry … was the very thing that we were trying to embrace … I was happy when I saw that' (Interview, July 2019). To Pandit Bhuwan Dutt, Arya Samaj Vedic Priest, these words were "long overdue":

> These are important principles of life which we in Fiji, like anywhere else, should embrace and practise … it was reassuring … and people were able to connect to it … Because … placing God on top of everything is very important in any process … because without God, nothing exists. And without godliness human beings won't become good people … we need to remind our people of

[12] See also Newland, 2016, p. 115 regarding notions of a "godly" government in the 2014 elections, and see Newland, 2007 for discussion of religion in the 2006 elections.

> these very important principles of life (Interview, July 2019).

Head priest, Bhai Preetam Singh Shokar, Sikh Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, Suva, saw the billboard as reminding people of values common to all religions: "Under godliness, there are all these good deeds; the billboard is just a reminder", adding a universal understanding of the divine: "Ram, Allah, Jesus - means the same" (Interview, November 2018).

Dr Rajesh Maharaj, President, Hari Krishna, pointed out that the words of the billboard "should not just be for the sake of it"; they need to be lived out. He, similarly, saw the message as expressing universal religious values and the universality of God. As he emphasised, "God is neither Hindu nor Christian. God is God" (interview, November 2018). To Sanatan Hindu Pandit, Mr Ramesh Sharma, the billboard slogan was "a wake-up call to see and activate yourself" (interview, November 2018). National President of the Hindu Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha, Mr Sarju Prasad, expressed:

> To me it means that we want to promote religion in this country and promote secular state and secularism. We want to merge as a society ... reject racism and bring about unity in diversity … this is a blessing to this country because Fiji is enjoying a very diverse society, diverse traditions and diverse culture and races, and everyone has the freedom to pray their way, act their way and do things, what may be a little alien to other people, within this society … If this is a genuine statement, I wholeheartedly support this (Interview, July 2019).

The negative commentary in many social media posts indicated that many people found the religious terminology an odd choice and incongruous with the Government's promotion of Fiji as a secular state. But from Sanatan Hindu perspectives, Mr Prasad explained, there is no clash between "godliness" and "secular state", "they complement one another" (Interview, July 2019).

Some interviewees questioned the use of complex and contested terms as "racism" and, in particular, "bigotry" in a billboard slogan. "It's quite a big word, eh? I hope the average people understand", Major Uraia Dravikula, Salvation Army, reflected (interview, July 2019). Some Christian interviewees saw the wording as a politicising of religion:

> I thought there was some politicisation of religion there: to 'Embrace Godliness' – that would go well with a lot of people. In Fiji if you're a politician [and] if you don't embrace religion you [will have difficulties]. But how thick is their

> secularism? This secular state ideology seems to be on a theoretical level but in real life that is not happening. They say 'secular state' but in practice religion is still very important in most government institutions (Interview, Archbishop Peter Loy Chong, March 2019).

Major Uraia Dravikula of the Salvation Army, was possibly most emphatic:

> You talk about 'embrace Godliness' and you want to take out Christianity from the equation … Godliness is from God, to embrace Godliness is from God, that's a capital 'G', it's not a small g. I think it's like a fishing net … like a drag net: catch the Christians. Because … the average Christian will ... associate 'Godliness' with the God of Christianity, with Christ ... And yet at the same time … you are trying to say that this is a secular state … It's sending out mixed signals to the people. And to me, it makes people angry because it's like somebody's playing a game with them … You are trying to play the people's emotions (Interview, July 2019).

Responses to "reject racism and bigotry"

Several Indigenous Fijian Christians interviewed took issue with the "reject racism" part of the slogan. As with many of the social media comments, there was a sense that the slogans were stereotyping, labelling certain sections of the population. Indigenous Fijians expressed a sense of being labelled racist just by virtue of being indigenous Fijians. There was also a sense that the slogan was blowing out of proportion something that was not a major issue in Fiji:

> 'Reject racism' – to be proud of your own race … to accept that I'm a Fijian, I'm not being racist … in myself being a proud Fijian does not mean I am racist … [or mean] to say that my Fijianness overrides everything. Like I said before [Ryle 2015, p. 44], if my Fijianness goes against the values and the principles of Christianity, of Christ, then I take this Fijianness away … But the thing is that people twist it. It is only a thin line and they put a broad brush … It is their own agenda (Major Dravikula, Salvation Army interview, July 2019).

The billboard slogan buys into the debate of whether equality is gained by eradicating any mention of "race" or "ethnicity" contra multicultural approaches to equity by celebrating and protecting diversity:

> 'Reject racism' meaning Fiji's made up of various racial groups and the Constitution says now we are all Fijians. Therefore, we should realise that by

> rejecting racism and not speaking of any racial categories, all people [are] of God with equal rights, and therefore we need to adjust our thinking (Pandit Dutt, interview, July 2019).

The choice of the term "bigotry" was puzzling to many. There was a general lack of clarity as to its precise meaning. As with "secular" and "secularism", it seems that a new term was introduced into Fiji society with no explanation. "I thought to myself, what would people in the rural areas make of this word?" Anglican Archbishop Emeritus Dr Winston Halapua mused (interview, December 2018). "They probably should have chosen words that were easier to define, from the perspective of others", Rev Dr Banivanua (FCC) pointed out, "but you know for media, these are the words that sparks [sic] the light", he added, emphasising that the same could be said for the use of the term "racism" (interview, July 2019).

The National President of the Hindu Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha saw the message as positive, "Reject racism and bigotry": 'I and Sanatan … strongly support these sorts of remarks … and billboards … that serves to strengthen this unity in diversity. But we must understand: race is a fact of life in this country" (Prasad, interview, July 2019). Pandit Dutt reflected, "How does one define bigotry? … I thought it was too heavy a word for [ordinary] people … they should have put a simpler word there", he added, suggesting that a positive message might have worked better:

> People have different types of belief in God in Fiji … but the common thread [is] that everybody believes in God, whatever form of God they have … people have the belief that there's a Creator above us, he's an all-powerful and we need to recognise that … there are different ways of going to God. There is one God, the same God, but different people believe differently. This word means there's one God there … It says Godliness, meaning 'you should respect God' … godliness, be respectful to God, and also do things which are good for everybody …

At the same time, he queried:

> [But] when you embrace godliness, does it really mean that you do something good, or do you just embrace it? … Does it mean that you simply say 'Okay, I'm in a secular state, I'll embrace my own God … and the others are not important?' … embrace which type of godliness? ... It might have been better [to] say 'Always tell the truth, be friendly to everyone', those things are more important and more understandable to the common people (Pandit Dutt,

interview, July 2019).

"God is in the Fiji budget": The Budget Roadshow

In the Budget Roadshow, the Minister for Economy travels from place to place, talking about the budget and what it has to offer the people. On 17 August 2018, the FijiFirst Campaign Facebook page presented a statement by the Minister for Economy who, judging from his wording, must have been responding to a question or critique: "I think it is preposterous to say there's no God in this. I'm sure God also means that we need to look after the poor, the sick and the needy. And that's what this budget provides for. It pays for the needy, for the poor. It gives them insurance. Giving mothers' maternity leave and fathers' paternity leave" (FijiFirst Party, 2018). This moment was when FijiFirst started linking the billboard message with the announcement of the 2018 budget and the Budget Roadshow. The video gathered over 144 reactions, 17 of which "Loved" the video by reacting with the "heart" emoticon. Interestingly, this included the FijiFirst page itself.

Responses from the interviewed religious leaders to this message were mixed. "I'm glad that comes from the Government. It's another way of saying that the secular state that they represent, that … they are getting the sources of their leadership through God, through Christ", Rev Dr Vakadewavosa, MCF, noted (interview, July 2019). Pandit Dutt was clear:

> It is good … because Fiji is a very God-loving country … we all believe in God, whatever we do, whatever way we do it, it's still different but we are a God-loving, God-fearing country … When it says God there, I believe the government is trying to revive the thinking that this is a God-loving country … you know, the poor and the needy … if you are reminded about God, you are likely to do the good things (interview, July 2019).

On the one hand, religious leaders saw the inclusion of a reference to God in the budget and linking the budget with God and with the poor as making sense, since from religious perspectives God should be part of how life and society are framed.

> To me, it's a balanced approach to the distribution of funds where we also need to look at people who … are unfortunate, we need to take care of them. I see that there is sense in what he is saying, if we do that. If they are genuine in what they are doing, not only to win hearts of people for the campaign. It should be part of what we need to do because God put the poor and people who are less fortunate than us, who may be around us, also to test us, test our faith … whether

> we really care – as a nation, as a people, as a Church, as individuals, as families. The people who are around us, we need to take care of them. The Lord also spent most of his time going to villages, healing the sick, healing the blind, healing leprosy. For me I sense a lot of sense in what the Minister of Finance is saying (Pastor Narabe, interview, July 2019).

On the other hand, one Christian interviewee asked, "Which God is [the Finance Minister] referring to?" Many Fijian Christians cannot accommodate within the doctrines of their faith or their own beliefs the concept of a universal God who is defined and addressed differently, depending on one's religion. Another point raised, was that any mention of "God" in Fiji is likely to catch many people's attention. And again, attention was drawn to the incongruence of mentioning God during an election campaign while otherwise strongly advocating Fiji as a secular state:

> Most of us, we are more alert … whenever the name God is mentioned. And to use it in such a way … is not fair to the concept of God and … what we believe by the concept of God. [People] revere the concept, and [for it] to be associated with the budget … Looking after the poor and underprivileged, that's a social thing that any government should do … presenting their manifestos … but to use the concept of God needs more explanation.
>
> And at the same time … the issue of secular state was quite a big challenge, it still is, eh? So, to counter that with the use of God, the word, was sort of bringing in something that they don't believe. I mean … in the Constitution there is no word about God, about Christianity, and yet they want to use it in their manifesto …. In order to win people, you sell your everything, something like that … They were looking for words that could move them away from their emphasis, from what they were really trying to do (Rev Dr Banivanua, interview, July 2019).

Roman Catholic Archbishop Peter Loy Chong's "Pre-Election Homily Reflection on Economic Justice" (7 October 2018)

As mentioned earlier, during the 2014 Election campaign Catholic Archbishop Peter Loy Chong sent out an Episcopal Pastoral Letter that was read out at Mass in all parishes, emphasising the Catholic doctrinal position on the separation of church and state. "The Church must remain independent of any particular political or economic system", he wrote, at the same time noting the importance of Catholics bringing together religious principles and values in voting (Ryle, 2015, p. 40). In a similar vein in the 2018 election campaign, the Archbishop sought to inform and educate the Catholic faithful on five core issues of Catholic social teaching: social justice, family

life, education, domestic violence, and ecological justice. As in his Episcopal Pastoral Letter of 2014, in the 2018 election campaign, Archbishop Loy Chong emphasised that his purpose was not to instruct the Catholic faithful whom to vote for or against, but to encourage well-informed individual political conscience and responsibility in voting. His idea was to circulate a sermon on each of these central topics among his clergy for five weeks to be read out at Mass. Catholic faithful in all parishes across Fiji would thereby receive the same foundation for making a decision at the ballot box, solidly informed by Catholic religious principles.

The first sermon, "Pre-Election Homily Reflection on Economic Justice", was to be read out on Sunday, 7 October 2018. Solidly founded on biblically-based, Catholic social teaching on economic justice, it emphasised concerns about rising levels of poverty in Fiji. It focused on the moral dimensions of economic life and the Catholic Church's vision of divine worth, noting "Our Catholic social teaching teaches that a fundamental moral measure of any economy is how the poor and vulnerable are faring" (Chong, 2018). As such, poverty levels and their impact on the most vulnerable become a moral measure of an economy. In expressing this, Archbishop Loy Chong drew on statistics on poverty by Professor Waden Narsey from 2004-2005 and 2010-2011. The sermon also highlighted that taxation in 2006 had burdened the poor in Fiji.

This created a firestorm of media responses, spearheaded by Jyoti Pratibha in the pro-Fijifirst government's newspaper, *Fiji Sun*. Archbishop Loy Chong was accused of sharing false information based on out-of-date data. The matter galvanised public opinion and debate. Two key letters in the *Fiji Times* "Letters to the Editor" section in October 2018 amplified the two sides in the ongoing debate. At one end, critics argued that Chong was too political. This was evident in a letter by vocal FijiFirst party supporter and religious critic, Mr Simon Hazelman from Savusavu. In his 6 October letter, he argued that the major Christian Churches such as the Methodist and Catholic Church "should not get involved in politics" and must "remain consumed with worship, praise and blessing" (Hazelman, 2018). In a 9 October letter, Mr Hazelman furthermore argued that, "…in Fiji poverty is nothing more than a choice".

Challenging this view, Mr Kositatino Tikomaibolatagane from Navua argued that sentiments such as those of Mr Hazelman were "shallow" because, he maintained, Christ himself "…stood up to be the voice of truth and justice challenging political power structures" (Tikomaibolatagane, 2018). Interviewed religious leaders fully supported Chong's speaking out on social inequality and social justice in his sermon.

"Peter was on the right track", Major Dravikula said: "You cannot leave the poor behind. To march with progress, you must march with the marginalised", he emphasised (interview, July 2019). "We are together with Peter at Fiji Council of Churches", the President of Fiji Council of Churches stated:

> To help the poor is to awaken their life to the goods that are around them, it's not spoon-feeding … Fr Barr[13] … when he was in ECREA (Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy) every year when the budget comes, there was a shadow budget that comes with it from [the] angle [of the poor] and it almost destroyed the emphasis of that other budget (Rev Dr Banivanua, interview, 2019).

President of the Methodist Church, Rev Dr Vakadewavosa expanded on the prophetic role of the churches in society:

> We cannot divorce ourselves from the society, we are part of the society. The church is part of society, Christ himself was born in society … the mission of the church is a mission in society, in the community … that is the basic role of the church - to bring the love of God to the people, to be well-versed in what the people are confronting … The church must be very well versed with what is happening in society and the church walks along with the government of the day. At the same time the church has the freedom to speak on behalf of God on anything that is perhaps incorrect in society, in the care and the life of the people, the role of the government, the church has the right to speak the truth about what the people are facing and call the government to respond accordingly – whether they like it or not. That is the responsibility of the church. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, give to God what is God's. We walk alongside the government; we respect the rule of law (interview, July 2019).

Responding to the criticism vented against him, Archbishop Loy Chong apologised for using poverty figures from 2008, which his critics deemed out of date. At the same time, however, he emphasised that social issues such as poverty in Fiji should and must remain a concern in the election (Bolanavanua, 2018).

But the issue did not end there. The Prime Minister also used the accusations against the Archbishop at a campaign rally in Nasinu to a predominantly non-Christian

[13] Australian Catholic missionary, the late Fr Kevin Barr (1936-2020) played a strong role over almost four decades in Fiji as advocate of the poor. As part of his many endeavours to raise awareness of and fight for social injustice and the alleviation of poverty, he.t, co-founded and directed the NGOs ECREA and People's Community Network.

audience. He stated:

> The Christian State will be tied to the Christian but we don't know what Christian denomination is going to take over, whether it's going to be the Methodist, whether it's going to the Catholic. You've heard what the Catholic Archbishop is saying he is all wrong, so you might end up listening to somebody who has been listening to somebody who is giving you wrong stats all the time. That's what's going to happen if you turn this place into a Christian State (Talei, 2018).

In effect the Prime Minister further discredited Archbishop Loy Chong by linking him to the ideal of the Christian state. This is particularly ironic since the Catholic Church in Fiji has long been the most vocal church in speaking out against the Christian state ideal (Ryle, 2005, 2010).

Right after the election, *Fiji Sun* journalist Jyoti Pratibha continued her personal attacks on Archbishop Loy Chong, labelling him as one of the election's "Biggest Losers" (Pratibha, 16 November 2018). The same day, Chong posted an unequivocal response on his Facebook page, labelling Pratibha's writing as "fake news" because in it she claimed that "he came under fire from his own flock" (Chong, 16 November 2018). Rebutting this, Chong stated that he had "the full support from key bodies within the Catholic Church", emphasising his prophetic role as Archbishop under the Pope to speak out on social injustice.

Government and pro-government media organisations aggressively targeted religious leaders such as Archbishop Loy Chong. It was evident that the social justice messages of Catholic social teaching were perceived as political threats during the campaigning period. In addition, they exposed the Government's weak record on socio-economic issues, repeatedly raised by economists.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed complexities of religion and the new media during the 2018 Election campaign. We focus on certain key moments during the campaign when religious messages were accentuated in different media contexts, interweaving immediate reactions to these on social media at the time with retrospective reflections by religious leaders interviewed in late 2018 and 2019.

FijiFirst clearly employed a campaign strategy of regularly referring to "God" and "religion". Several religious leaders intimated that campaign references to God and

religion demonstrate recognition on the part of the Government of the central importance of God in Fijian society. They agreed that the values espoused in the religious slogans and phrases were universal values that all well-functioning societies should be based on. However, their views on the actual use of religious slogans and phrases in the campaign differed, depending on their religious affiliation. Hindu leaders were those who viewed the billboards most positively.

Among indigenous Fijian Christian leaders, the lack of clarity as to the meanings of the terms secular state, secularism and secularisation was accentuated. They found it puzzling and incongruous that a government that strongly promotes these ideals could simultaneously use God and religion in campaign slogans and debates. A notable number of social media postings also focused on this.

Our findings suggest that this lack of clarity and confusion was employed as a political strategy to create controversy and attention in campaigning. In the 2018 general election, discourse on secularism, religion and politics was closely guarded and manoeuvred to create a moral political position for the government on "religious freedom". This was posited against the straightjacketing of opposition parties within a politics of the past. Ironically, religious freedom was somewhat limited for leaders such as Archbishop Peter Loy Chong, who sought to emphasise Catholic social teachings on social justice in relation to the economy.

A nuanced and open discourse could help build trust within the nation. But discourse on secularism, religion and politics in the 2018 general election was strictly defined and determined by the ruling government. Ultimately, this strategy kept the discourse unclear, constrained within static and unnuanced oppositional narratives, polarising political perspectives. This is expedient as a source of moral political capital and in maintaining power but offers few options for moving forward as a nation.

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Personal Communication

Dr Paul Geraghty, The University of the South Pacific, personal communication to Ryle concerning Fijian translation of 'secular state', March 2020.

Interviews conducted

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