

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

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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

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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.

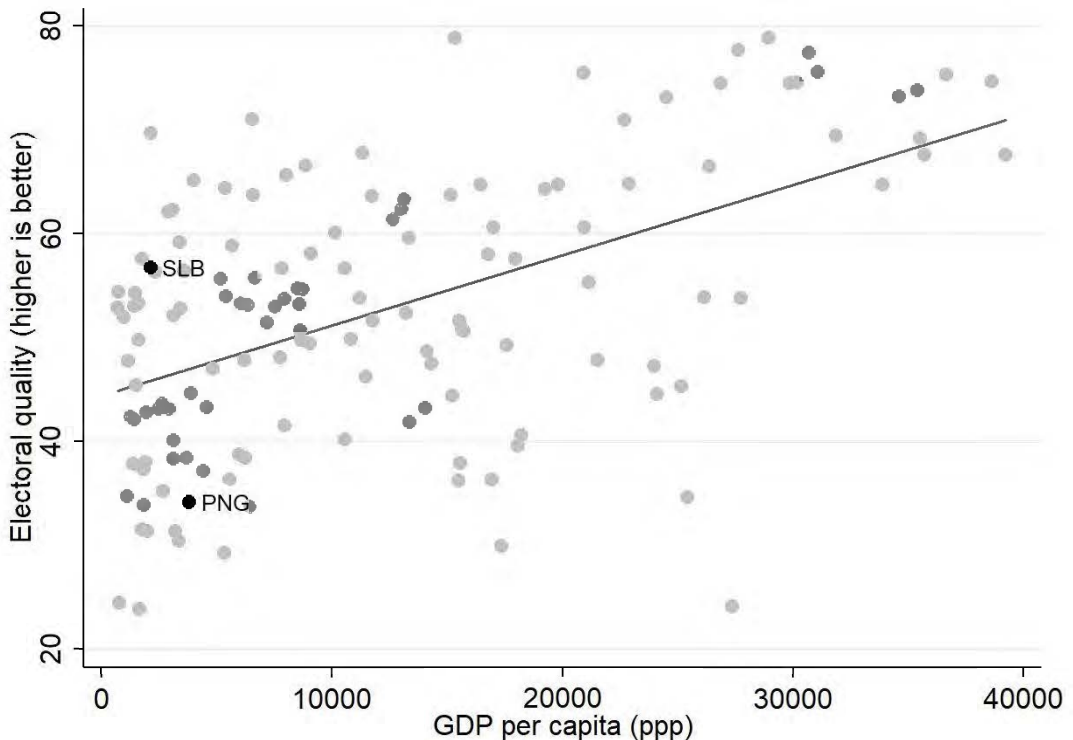
Electoral Quality in Solomon Islands

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).

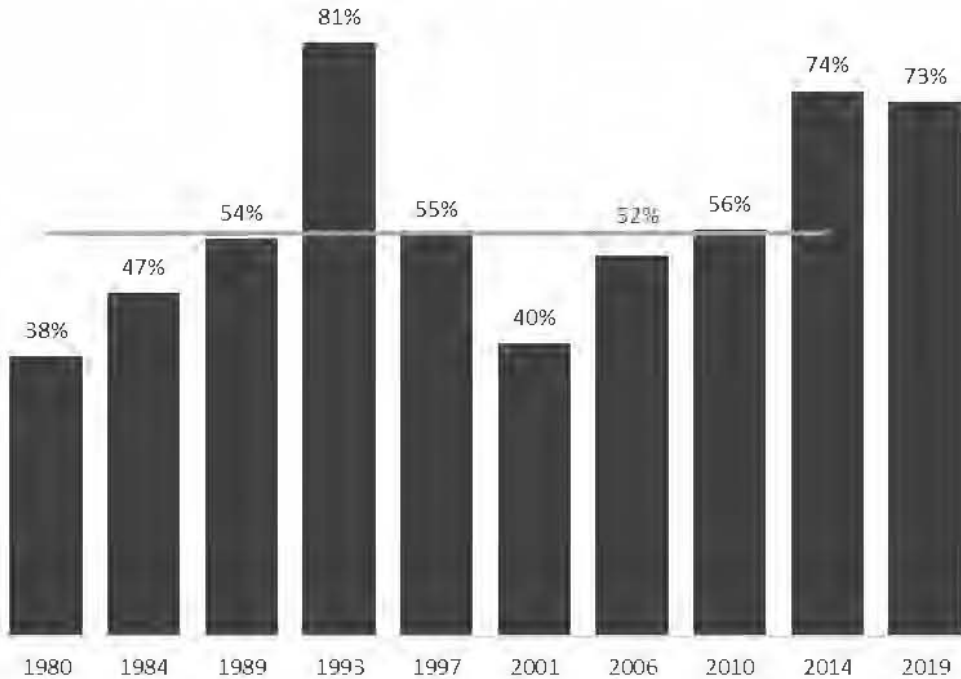
Candidates and Winners

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).

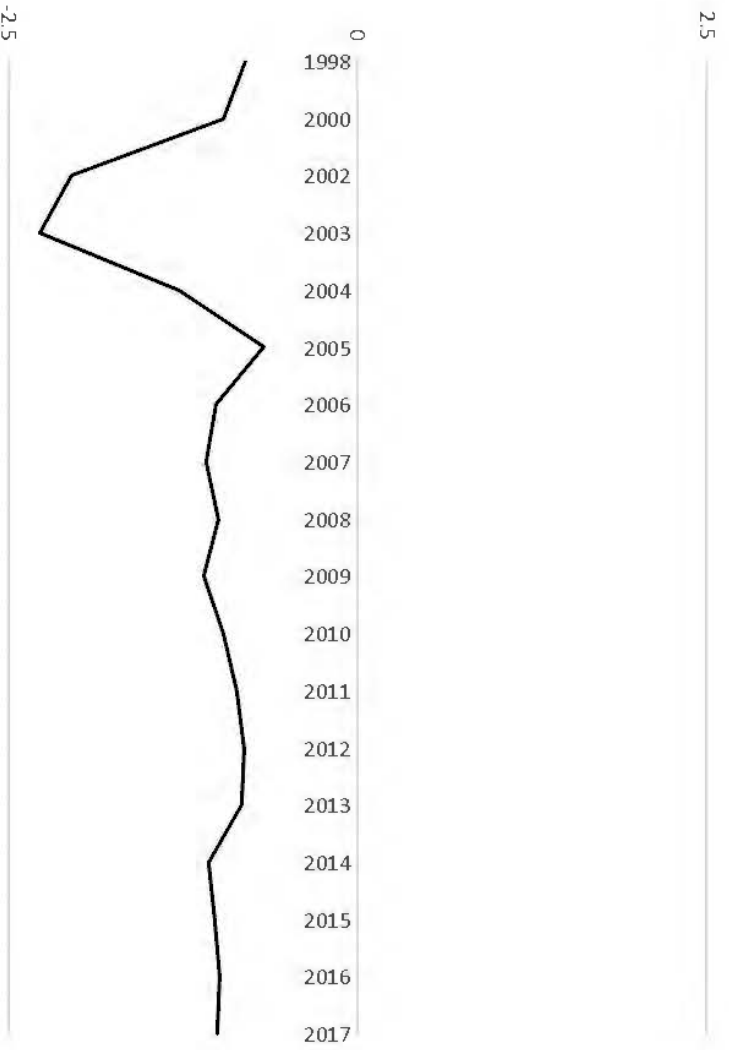
In 2019, ongoing negotiation between candidates ultimately led to a situation where Manasseh Sogavare headed one political grouping, competing with long-time reformer Matthew Wale and popular newcomer Peter Kenilorea Jr. (Radio New Zealand, 2019). Sogavare had once been a popular politician himself. 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



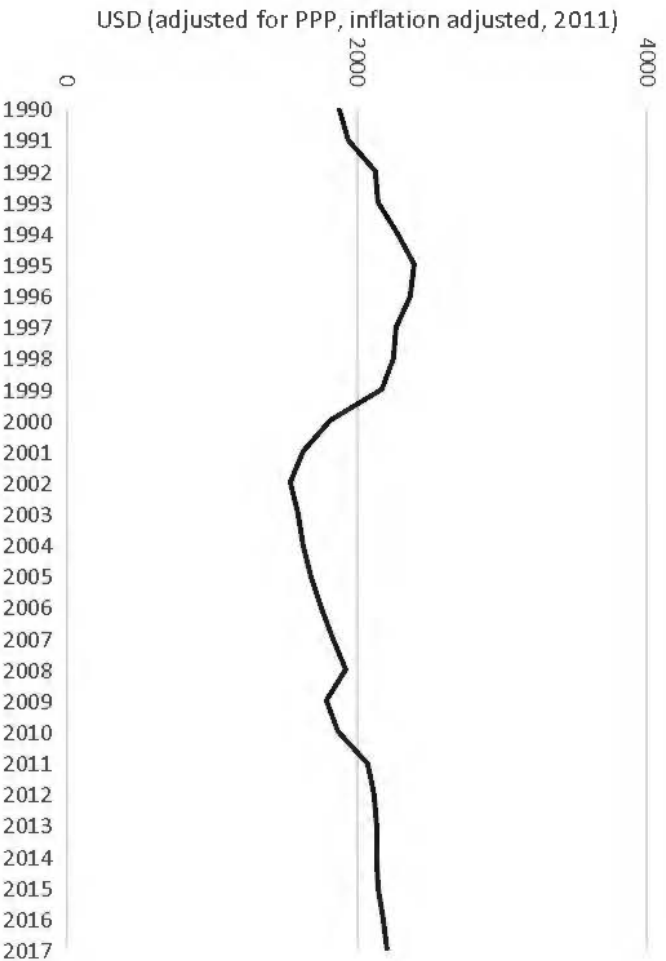
Source: World Bank, 2019

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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