

With Solomon Islands due to go to the polls in late 2014, it is timely to reflect on how elections in Melanesia are trending, and what we might expect with the upcoming polls. Rather than improving, the integrity of elections in Melanesia is diminishing. Over the course of the past few elections, fraud and malpractice have increased in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to varying degrees (Haley and Zubrinich 2013; ANUE 2010; Charles Vatu pers. com. 2014). Money politics has also proliferated in all three countries, and information and communication technology (ICT) environments have changed profoundly (Logan 2014). Indeed, PNG voters most frequently identified the 2012 national elections as worse than the 2007 and 2002 elections, both in terms of the prevailing security environment and in terms of fraud and malpractice (Haley and Zubrinich 2013), while Solomon Islands' citizens participating in the 2010 Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) People's Survey focus groups considered the 2010 elections 'the worst ever in terms of bribery, intimidation, abuse of opponents by supporters of other candidates and abuses of voter registration' (ANUE 2010:14). The withdrawal of the military component of RAMSI, coupled with this increasingly complex electoral environment, amplifies the likelihood of election-related violence and a further deterioration in the electoral environment.

Elections in Melanesia

Elections in Melanesia attract large numbers of candidates and are robustly contested. Voter turnout is typically high. With each election, candidate numbers have tended to increase, and, as a consequence, members of parliament (MPs) have, over time, been elected with smaller and smaller mandates. Compounding this, MPs are directly involved in service delivery through their Constituency Development Funds (CDFs), and the weight of evidence suggests that service delivery favours those who vote for their local MP.

There has been a five-fold increase in candidate numbers in Vanuatu since independence and record numbers contested the 2010 Solomon Islands elections and the 2012 PNG elections. At its most recent

elections, Vanuatu fielded one candidate per 650 citizens, Solomon Islands one candidate per 1000 citizens, and PNG one candidate per 2000 citizens. Despite these numbers, few women contest. Historically, they have accounted for less than five per cent of all candidates in all three countries, and most have received a small overall vote share.

Money Politics

A proliferation of money politics has been noted across Melanesia over the past decade (Haley and Zubrinich 2013; ANUE 2010; Alasia 2008; Kama 2010; Dorosday Kenneth pers. com. 2014), although it continues to be most pervasive in PNG. In the 2012 PNG elections, candidates were observed to have spent huge amounts of money offering incentives to voters. Vote buying was reported in each and every electorate in which observations took place, and there was an unprecedented amount of gifting with food, pigs and other material items including boats, trucks and ambulances. It is particularly noteworthy that political gifting and money politics have spread beyond the Highlands and are now evident in parts of PNG where there are no 'big men' and where cultures of competitive exchange are largely absent.

Although few citizens participating in the 2010 RAMSI People's Survey noted the receipt of money (three per cent) or gifts (1.9 per cent) as a determining factor when voting in the 2010 Solomon Islands elections, focus group participants involved in the same survey expressed the view that bribery and vote buying was rife (RAMSI 2010). Certainly, there is nothing to suggest that money politics will be less important in the forthcoming elections, and if the growth in CDFs and the PNG experience are anything to go by it is likely to be far more pronounced, thereby increasing both the stakes and the security challenges.

Security

For the past decade or so, elections in Melanesia have been underwritten by huge investments in security. Over 8000 regular, reserve and auxiliary police, PNG Defence Force and Correctional Services personnel were engaged to provide security for the 2012 PNG general elections. Likewise, the RAMSI Participating

Police Force and military contingent provided critical support to the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) in the security operations for both the 2006 and 2010 Solomon Islands elections (Fepulea'i 2011), with the RAMSI force bolstered in the lead-up to the 2010 elections.

Tight security ensured that the most recent elections in both countries were largely event free, apart from some localised incidents of election-related violence. However, despite their overall success securing elections, the security forces in PNG and Solomon Islands have thus far proved largely incapable of intervening to deter voting irregularities. Further guidance and training is needed to ensure a broader contribution to electoral governance. Moreover, based on experience from PNG, money politics clearly increases the security challenges around elections. As such the forthcoming elections may well see RSIPF capacity tested.

Information and Communication Technology

ICT environments in Melanesia are changing rapidly and profoundly (Logan 2014), especially with mobile phone penetration now around 60 per cent. Mobile phones and social media were used to great effect in the 2012 PNG elections: to mobilise citizen protests concerning the proposed deferral of the elections; to engage in political debate; to record voting irregularities and to improve results capture. They were also used during the campaign period to mobilise citizens to obstruct and curtail campaigning and candidates' movements. On polling day, citizens, observers and security personnel used digital technologies to record voting irregularities. A domestic observer was assaulted as a consequence, another was threatened at gunpoint and forced to delete photos and video footage from his camera, and yet another witnessed a local school teacher beaten to death after photographing polling irregularities on his mobile phone (Haley and Zubrinich 2013). In addition, mobile phone footage (an audio clip and five photos) taken by a Correctional Services officer formed part of the evidence that saw the Gumine Open result declared null and void (Kuman v Dekena [2013]).

The electronic transmission of results has also been made possible by recent telecommunications advancements. For the first time ever, in 2012, progressive tallies were transmitted via the mobile net-

work to PNG Electoral Commission headquarters and thence regularly updated on its website and through the media, thereby increasing the transparency of the count. Polling officials in East New Britain and Central provinces were also observed to ring through to other polling teams to see if people who could not be located on the roll were in fact enrolled elsewhere, neutralising potentially volatile situations.

Prospects for the Solomon Islands Elections

Early signs such as the growth in CDFs suggest voting irregularities and money politics will likely be more pronounced than in any previous Solomon Islands election, giving rise to more complex security, electoral and governance challenges.

In the face of such challenges, and in the absence of the RAMSI military contingent, it is unclear whether a safe, secure and credible election can be delivered.

Author Note

Nicole Haley is Convenor of the SSGM Program and Head of the Politics, Elections, Leadership and Governance research cluster at ANU. She is currently writing about electoral politics and political culture in PNG, and women's political participation across the Pacific.

References

- Alasia, S. 2008. Rainbows Across the Mountains: The First Post-RAMSI General Election. In S. Dinnen and S. Firth (eds) *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands*. Canberra: ANU Epress, 120–47.
- ANUE (ANU Enterprise) 2010. *People's Survey 2010 Summary*. Canberra: ANUE.
- Fepulea'i, J. 2011. RAMSI and Solomon Islands: History and Challenges for Civil-Military Interaction. *Civil-Military Working Papers 4/2010*. Queanbeyan: Asia Pacific Civil-Military Centre.
- Haley, N. and K. Zubrinich. 2013. *2012 Papua New Guinea General Elections Domestic Observation Report*. Report prepared for Cardno Emerging Markets.
- Kama, J. 2010. Overview of National Election Results 2006 and 2010. Unpublished report prepared for WISDM.
- Kuman v Dekena [2013] PGNC1; N4941 (15 January 2013). <<http://www.pacii.org/pg/cases/PGNC/2013/1.html>>, viewed 15/7/2014.
- Logan, S. 2014. Electoral Integrity, Citizens and ICT in Melanesia. *SSGM In Brief* 2014/9. Canberra: SSGM, ANU.

