

The 2019 National General Election in Solomon Islands — A Personal Perspective: Navigating a Maze of Challenges

Transform Aqorau

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On 3 April this year, the people of Solomon Islands will go to the polls to elect their representatives in the national parliament for the next four years. The term ‘representatives’ is used loosely here as the typical member of parliament (MP) is elected with just over a third of the votes, meaning the majority of the electors did not in fact choose the winning candidate to represent them. This will be the tenth election since 1978 when the country gained full independence from the United Kingdom.

As is always the case at a national general election, there is a heightened sense of excitement and expectation from observers, the general public and donors. A number of prominent civil servants have resigned to contest this year’s election. One in particular has generated considerable interest: Peter Kenilorea (Jnr), former permanent secretary for foreign affairs. Peter (Jnr) is a figure of interest and represents an existential threat to the incumbent member for East ‘Are’are, who is caretaker Minister for Lands, Housing and Survey. Peter (Jnr) is the son of Solomon Islands founding prime minister, Sir Peter Kenilorea. An international lawyer by training, Peter (Jnr) worked in the attorney general’s chambers before spending almost 20 years with the United Nations in New York. As a seasoned international diplomat grounded in a household that negotiated Solomon Islands’ independence, much is expected of him by the people of East ‘Are’are. The rumours are that there will only be two contesting that seat: Peter (Jnr) and the incumbent.

There are a lot of what is known in Solomon Islands colloquial political parlance as ‘good people’ contesting the election, although it is not known how many candidates will be running. The term ‘good people’ implies those who have a good track record of leadership and are untainted by corruption. There are no shortages of names, however, being discussed and, even with the increase in fees and costs to stand, a national election still attracts many people who are willing to put their bank accounts on the line to get into parliament. The new electoral rules allow candidates to

spend up to a maximum of SB\$500,000 — an increase from the former limit of SB\$50,000, although some candidates are rumoured to have spent more in previous elections. Getting into parliament is an expensive exercise: at the baseline there is the geographic dispersal of the islands, isolation of the villages and distances that have to be covered to campaign. Then food that has to be bought to feed people during political rallies and meetings and on top of that, voters use the occasion to extract whatever support they can by way of funding from the candidates. One prospective candidate had, by June 2018, received requests for up to 40 laptop computers, a 23-foot ray boat and a 40-horse power engine — and had to borrow SB\$40,000. Prospective candidates are already getting invoices for school fees, requests for support to transport dead relatives’ bodies back to the villages, even diapers! It is against this backdrop that elections are held in Solomon Islands, making it a complex challenge for candidates. But the rewards make it a worthwhile investment, as [Terence Wood and Julian Barbara](#) wrote in their analysis of the forthcoming election; becoming an MP can be quite lucrative because of the access that members have to discretionary development funds.

Governing in a disparate country, where communities are scattered and isolated, is not easy. Communication is difficult and government services are non-existent in most areas, exacerbating the challenges of governing. In an environment of increasing material expectations of voters, an inherently complex yet weak governance system in Solomon Islands is hindered by the tenuous links between multiple factors: the need for effective policymaking; difficulties in delivering the best possible legislation; and the [undeniable influence of foreign logging](#) and mining companies. The heightened expectations of the general public after each election invariably dissipate quite quickly when the harsh realities of delivering efficient services become apparent.

This will be the first election since the departure of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and its exorbitant attendant expenditure on strengthening the

machinery of government and its financial and accounting systems. I have no doubt that the investment has laid the framework for improvements, at least on paper, in governance arrangements. The government's financial system, the judiciary and other government mechanisms all have augmented controls in some form. Prime Minister Rick Houenipwela and the last parliament should be commended for ensuring that the basic legislative structure to address the endemic challenge of corruption is in place, with the successful passage of the Anti-Corruption Act and the Whistle Blower Protection Act in July 2018. Although the Acts were unpopular pieces of legislation for certain elements of the parliament, it was impossible to quell public demand for parliament to enact this anti-corruption legislation. Thus, it might be argued that the necessary foundations are all in place to build a strong economy, address corruption, create jobs, attract investment and provide for the economic and social well-being of Solomon Islanders.

Unfortunately, elections are never about policies that will build the economy, improve health and education standards and services and, notwithstanding the attractive-looking spiral-bound party manifestos, most rural voters are not really interested in their contents. There are various reasons for this apathy, not least that 'governance' and 'governing' in the Western sense remains a work in progress. In a country that has only been independent for 40 years, we are working through a complex system of government (that has taken hundreds of years to mature in Western democracies) against a backdrop of longstanding customs, norms, traditions and beliefs. Fundamentally, most Solomon Islanders, particularly the large majority who live in the rural areas, feel alienated from government and are disinterested in policy discussions during election campaigns. It could be argued, therefore, that by implication there is little political justification for the policy proposals of the various political parties, as these are not debated and voted on by the people, weakening the links between the people, their needs and those who are eventually elected.

A discernable trend observed in the voter registration process was the attempt to shift voters to align with individuals rather than by their geographic location, an unintended consequence of the flexibility introduced by the electoral commission to allow people to register for a constituency from another location. This abuse of cross-voter registration has simply added to an already complex electoral process.

However, it is not so much the electoral process that matters, even if that in itself has its own attraction due to the increasing level of competition to get elected — as evidenced

by the manipulation of voter registration — but what happens after the elections to address the basic needs of the peoples of Solomon Islands who sadly have to suffer some of the worst medical services of the region.

The outcome of the 2019 national election will not change the core challenges facing Solomon Islands. The surge in unemployable youths, addressing the shortage of medical drugs in hospitals and improving declining medical services are just some of the tasks the new parliament will have to confront. Reducing the dependency on income from foreign logging, improving overall governance arrangements in the mining sector, better processing of work and residency permits and better provision of services without expectations of kickbacks are also key priorities awaiting newly-elected members of parliament.

Author notes

Dr Transform Aqorau is a visiting fellow at the Department of Pacific Affairs.

Endnotes

1. Peter Kenilorea (Jnr) 28/6/2018. Ministry of Foreign Affairs headquarters, Melanesia House, personal communication.

