

Maintaining accurate voter registers (electoral rolls) has proven a significant administrative challenge for Melanesian countries (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and [Vanuatu](#)). Despite repeated attempts to improve the PNG roll with the support of donors and electoral stakeholders, it remains riddled with irregularities (Haley and Zubrinich 2013). Citizens, international observers, and [domestic observers](#) have expressed little confidence in voter enrolments, highlighting that enrolled voters consistently exceed the number of eligible citizens (see Haley and Anere 2009; Ladley, Holtved and Kantha 2010; Commonwealth Secretariat 2012; Haley and Zubrinich 2013).

Recent experiences in Fiji and Solomon Islands provide examples of roll improvements supported by [biometric technology](#), although the true costs and benefits associated with biometric voter registration (BVR) in Melanesia are yet to be established. Drawing on election observations undertaken by SSGM scholars in the context of the 2007 and 2012 PNG national elections and the 2014 Solomon Islands elections, this In Brief offers a somewhat sobering assessment of voter registration reforms in Melanesia.

Voter Registration Reforms

Over the past decade, the Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission (PNGEC) and Solomon Islands Electoral Commission (SIEC) have both undertaken major electoral roll reforms, utilising different methods and with different outcomes. In PNG's case, a new electoral roll was developed on the back of a nationwide re-registration exercise undertaken in the 18 months leading up to the 2007 national elections, while SIEC, with substantial donor support, opted to construct a new voter register for the 2014 elections using [biometric voter registration](#). The accuracy and reception of these new rolls differs greatly. In PNG, there is renewed dissatisfaction with the roll, while the new Solomon Islands voter register is considered a real success story. On the face of it, this may suggest BVR is the way to go; indeed Vanuatu looks set to adopt BVR ahead of their [2016 national elections](#),

but critical questions remain as to the cost effectiveness and maintenance of such approaches.

The New Electoral Roll in PNG

Recognising the parlous state of the roll utilised in the 2002 PNG national elections, which contained in excess of 2 million enrolments, the PNGEC determined to do away with the old common roll. Commencing in late 2005, PNG embarked upon the mammoth task of a nationwide re-registration exercise. The resulting roll was markedly smaller (1.4 million fewer enrolments) and welcomed as much more accurate than those used in 1997 and 2002.

Nevertheless, election observers noted a significant degree of disenfranchisement, receiving complaints from people who claimed that they were not on the roll and saw voters turned away from polling stations on polling day (Haley and Anere 2008, 19). Observers also noted major faults with the voter re-registration and verification exercises, reporting duplications and 'ghost names', as well as omissions. Specifically, less than 25 per cent of the 5000+ adults surveyed pre-polling and post-polling as part of the 2007 Domestic Observation had completed a Claim for Enrolment form (*ibid.*).

The re-enrolment exercise, overseen by election managers in each province, was undertaken by district officials engaged and funded by the PNGEC. A common criticism across the country concerned the partisanship of the local officials engaged to undertake this task (Haley 2011; Ladley, Holtved and Kantha 2010) and the hurried nature of the exercise. Added to this, the verification exercise was cursory, giving little time for people to register objections and, in some cases, not carried out at all.

Similar processes were used to update the roll ahead of the 2012 elections, and these saw problems identified in 2007 compounded, demonstrating that the initial gains of the nationwide re-registration process were difficult to maintain. The final roll prepared for the 2012 elections contained more than 4.87 million names — 900,000 more than expected based on estimates from the 2000 census (Haley and

Zubrinich 2008, 31). Like earlier rolls, it was replete with duplicate entries, and included minors (enrolled by virtue of fictitious birthdates), deceased individuals, and those ineligible to be enrolled. Omissions of individuals and families and the disenfranchisement of whole communities were also noted.

The New Voter Register in Solomon Islands

Ahead of the 2014 election, SIEC also embarked on a nationwide re-registration exercise, but using BVR. This required each eligible citizen to register at a roving voter registration centre where their photo was taken and recorded alongside registration details. Duplicate enrolments were identified and removed using facial recognition software, ensuring eligible citizens appeared only at the place where they first registered.

The process was highly successful, reducing the overall number of enrolments by more than one-third. The resultant voter register, with only 287,567 registered voters, was well received, enjoys popular support, has raised confidence in the integrity of the electoral process, and has reduced the scope for widespread electoral fraud. Nevertheless, there were reports not all eligible citizens were able to register during the registration period, and that some voters, particularly in Honiara, experienced difficulty locating the polling station at which they were registered.

Is BVR the Way Forward?

At over US\$60 per voter, PNG elections are amongst the most expensive in the world. In comparison, Afghanistan's elections cost US\$24 per voter, while elections elsewhere in the world ordinarily cost US\$5 per voter (Henderson and Boneo 2013). With the introduction of BVR, the 2014 Solomon Island elections were reputedly even more costly again. In PNG's case, initial gains around the integrity of the roll in 2007 have proven transitory. Moreover, recent work on the roll in the post-2012 election period, including a number of biometric pilots, has highlighted continued challenges with the roll, both in terms of inflated enrolments and weak PNGEC systems to support effective roll cleansing.

Although donors and other electoral stakeholders might well be delighted with the new Solomon

Islands voter register, it is unclear whether the improvements are sustainable. In fact, biometrics may institutionalise an expensive delivery approach over the long term. Moreover, money politics and electoral fraud continue to proliferate despite voter registration reforms. This suggests roll probity, while important, is not a panacea, and donors and electoral management bodies in Melanesia should be wary of overspending on this front. Perhaps the former PNG electoral commissioner was quite right when he observed in 1997 that: 'Compiling an accurate register of voters ... continues to be a seemingly impossible task ... Attitudes have to change ... before satisfactory electoral rolls can be compiled' (Kaiulo 2002).

Notes on Authors

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