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# ELECTORAL RISK ASSESSMENT SOLOMON ISLANDS JUNE 30TH 2018



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## Introduction

This report provides an assessment of electoral risks in the Solomon Islands as the country prepares to conduct a national election in early 2019. The report has been commissioned by the Strengthening the Electoral Cycle in the Solomon Islands Project (SECSIP) II, which is the second phase of an electoral project managed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), funded by Australia and the European Union. The report is intended for a wide variety of electoral stakeholders in Solomon Islands including the Solomon Islands Government, development partners and citizens.

The report is comprised of three parts:

1. A comprehensive assessment of key risks in the lead up to the 2019 national election, including prospects for pre-election, election-day and post-election violence. The report also assesses the state of electoral preparedness in the context of the electoral cycle, and associated risks and opportunities regarding election administration to support the conduct of a credible election;
2. Recommendations arising from analysis in part 1, with a view to mitigating foreseeable risks and capitalising on opportunities to strengthen electoral preparations in support of peaceful and credible elections; and
3. Preparation of a Risk Register outlining risks that will impact on the credibility of elections and proposing management strategies to address such risks.

The assessment was prepared by an expert team comprised of Dr Simon Finley (UNDP) and Dr Julien Barbara (independent consultant) following in-country consultations conducted from 28 May to 1 June 2018. The assessment team met with a broad range of electoral stakeholders from government, civil society and the development community, a list of which is provided at **Annex A**. The report was also informed by a comprehensive desk review of policy documents and academic research. Preliminary assessment results were discussed with key informants at a debrief conducted in Honiara on 1 June.

## Electoral context

The following section provides an analysis of the electoral context in Solomon Islands including an assessment of the broad range of economic, social, political and cultural factors which act to condition elections in Solomon Islands.

Before we consider the electoral context in more detail, it should be recognised that Solomon Islands has a positive history of delivering credible elections in challenging circumstances. The 2014 national election was widely held by international and domestic observers to be well administered and highly credible, which is no insignificant achievement in a fragile post-conflict country. All elections since RAMSI's arrival in 2003 have been largely peaceful, with election related violence confined to the post-election period.

## *Country Context*

Solomon Islands represents a **challenging physical environment** in which to conduct national elections. With a small population of some 580,000 people dispersed over 90 inhabited islands (in an archipelago of some 1,000 islands), delivering elections is logistically complex and expensive.<sup>1</sup>

**Uneven economic development** remains a challenge to this day and forms an important backdrop to politicking in Solomon Islands. Lack of economic opportunity is a major challenge in a country with a rapidly growing population, large youth bulge and where there are few economic opportunities. Economic development since the Tensions has been based largely on logging, which is unsustainable, has resulted in ephemeral economic benefits for many communities, and whose political economy has driven increases in corruption and money politics. The formal economy is largely based on the public sector which is concentrated in Honiara and has formed the basis of a patronage system which impacts upon politics. The Solomon Islands economy is largely informal, with most Solomon Islanders relying on a combination of subsistence and informal economic activities for their livelihoods.

The country is still **recovering from a highly debilitating conflict** known as the Tensions, which erupted in 1998 and ended in 2003 following the arrival of a large scale Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). RAMSI successfully restored peace and subsequent police-building and development efforts have helped restore security and the capabilities of national authorities including electoral authorities.

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank (2017), *Solomon Islands: Systematic Country Diagnostic: Priorities for Supporting Poverty Reduction & Promoting Shared Prosperity*, June 1: 3

The Tensions resulted from a broad range of grievances. The conflict had a strong ethnic dimension, centred on the two predominant ethnic groupings from the largest islands, Guadalcanal and Malaita. The post-war migration of large numbers of Malaitans to the capital, Honiara, based on Guadalcanal, gave rise to a broad range of social and economic grievances as communities from Guadalcanal communities felt increasingly dispossessed. But the Tensions also reflected community grievances over limited development opportunities, uneven economic development and frustration at the diminishing capabilities of the post-colonial state to deliver basic services. **Many of the root causes that lead to the tensions, such as uneven economic development, corruption, community frustrations over limited government capabilities to deliver much-needed services, burgeoning (unplanned) urbanisation, remain unresolved.**

The 2019 national election will be the first in Solomon Islands since the departure of RAMSI. RAMSI's draw-down began in 2013 with the normalisation of its development programs including electoral support. In 2017, RAMSI's policing mission ended. RAMSI's programs were transitioned to bilateral and regional development partners. Australia currently has a strong police partnership with the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF). Nevertheless, RAMSI's departure marks a significant transition in the country and there remains a degree of anxiety about the capacity of the Solomon Islands Government to maintain security.

### *Political context*

**Solomon Islands is a fragmented political community.** The country is highly ethnically and culturally diverse, with over 70 languages spoken across the archipelago. Eighty percent of the population live in rural areas, and for many the most salient organisational unit is the village. Solomon Islanders maintain multiple identities, with a sense of a national identity often superseded by personal, familial and cultural identities. There is little sense of an over-arching national identity capable of unifying the population in Solomon Islands. Independence, which was only achieved in 1978, was not accompanied by a strong or deliberate nation-building program.

**This political, social and cultural fragmentation has resulted in an unstable electoral politics** in a particularistic form of electoral politics in which personal connections, clan and familial ties play a much stronger role in shaping votes than party or policy.<sup>2</sup> In the absence of class or programmatic political parties, most of those competing for electoral office run as independents or as members of parties which are in effect loose personality-based groupings centred on influential big men. This means that in practice national elections consist of a series of local elections, shaped by very specific political dynamics.

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<sup>2</sup> Steeves (2011) has characterised Solomon Islands electoral politics as “unbounded” in the sense it lacks the stabilising impact of programmatic parties and stable political coalitions. See Steeves, J. (2011), “Unbounded Politics” and the Democratic Model in Solomon Islands: the 2010 National Elections. *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 49(3) July, 342-358.

Planning for elections and managing electoral risks need to recognise the diverse nature of elections on the ground.

This localised dynamic impacts on the tone of electoral competition. Electoral aspirants compete in elections not on the basis of party platform or ideology, but by making promises of valued material goods if elected. As Wood observes, ‘... Solomon Islands voters typically vote for the candidate they think is most likely to help them, their family, or possibly their community, directly. They do not vote on national issues or quality of national governance.’<sup>3</sup>

Being able to win office requires convincing voters that, if successful, an MP will be able to deliver material goods and benefits to supporters. Vote-buying is common as aspiring MPs seek to entice voters to support them.<sup>4</sup> The challenge of securing sufficient votes means that **elections in Solomon Islands have become increasingly moneyed** as political aspirants make promises to secure votes, and then, if successful, use office to repay supporters.

**The moneyed nature of Solomon Islands politics has been compounded by the rapid rise of Constituency Development Funds** - discretionary funds provided to MPs to support local level development. In the lead up to the 2018 elections, incumbent MPs will have had access to an estimated SBD34 million in constituency funding.<sup>5</sup> Loosely regulated, MPs have increasingly used these funds to build political support. The perception in Solomon Islands is that the growth of such funds has given incumbent MPs a significant electoral advantage. This perception has the potential to fuel heightened electoral tensions as non-incumbent MPs feel increasingly disadvantaged.

Historically, **Solomon Islands elections have been hotly contested, with large numbers of candidates running for office and many winning with small voter shares under the first-past-the-post voting system.** Prior to the 2014 election, average turnover at national elections was around 50 per cent per election. A small number of MPs that have enjoyed political longevity either because of the unique circumstances in their electorate or because they have been able to leverage incumbency into material advantage. The 2014 national election was unusual because of the large number of sitting MPs that were returned (around 75 per cent). This possibly reflected the material advantages incumbents now enjoy due to access to sizeable constituency funds. A question for the 2019 election is whether this trend to incumbency will continue.

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<sup>3</sup> Wood, T. (2014), *Understanding Electoral Politics in Solomon Islands*, CDI Discussion Paper 2014/02: 8

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 12

<sup>5</sup> Batley (2015) estimates that grossed up, MP allocations from the development and recurrent budgets amount to some SBD426m, equivalent to just over 12 per cent of total budgeted expenditure for 2015, or SBD8.5m (USD1m) per MP. See Batley, J. (2015), *Constituency Development Funds in Solomon Islands: State of Play*, SSGM In-Brief 2015/67 ([http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/SSGM%20IB%202015\\_67%20Batley.pdf](http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/SSGM%20IB%202015_67%20Batley.pdf))

While hard fought, elections in Solomon Islands have generally been conducted within the margins of acceptable conduct. **Elections since RAMSI's arrival in 2003 have been largely peaceful, although the country has experienced localised election related violence** including the burning of polling stations. While overt election-related violence has been rare, observers have found levels of intimidation within local communities. In 2014 there was an election related shooting incident which remains unresolved. The worst case of election-related violence in the post-Tensions period followed the 2006 national election and occurred in the post-election period as political elites jockeyed to form a coalition government. The “second election” in Solomon Islands remains a significant risk period. It occurs in a context where party affiliation is weak and MPs bargain for advantage as parliamentary coalitions are built to form government. In 2006, significant riots broke out following the announcement of the prime minister.

However, **there are signs of increasing political contestation and sophistication in the electoral strategies deployed by some candidates.** The 2014 national election was notable for heightened campaigning techniques, particularly in Honiara and provincial centres. This was reflected in larger public rallies, the more sophisticated use of social media. The increasingly “high stakes” nature of elections may have resulted in more sophisticated electoral corruption strategies. There is anecdotal evidence that corruption strategies in the 2014 election shifted from a focus on voter roll corruption (inflating the roll, impersonating voters etc.) to pressuring officials to manipulate the count and voting process. This change in focus was as a result of improvements in the integrity of the roll and registration process associated with the implementation of the biometric voter registration.

**While elections have been fought within reasonably peaceful parameters, observers should not be complacent this will remain the case.** Whereas high parliamentary turnover has acted as a conflict safety valve in the past - political elites may feel they will have a reasonable chance of securing office, or re-gaining it, and thus more willing to accept election losses - it is important to consider if increased incumbency will heighten anxieties of political elites frozen out of office and the material advantages it confers. Some interviewees for this risk assessment also noted that 2019 may see a changing of the “political guard” in some electorates, as a new generation of political aspirants vie for office. The case of the Gizo-Kolombangara by-election was offered as a highly significant example of a former prime minister being unsuccessful in getting re-elected. This might

be taken as a signal of a threat by other established politicians, resulting in greater contention around election contests.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to recognise that **not all citizens participate in elections in Solomon Islands equally**. Despite formal electoral guarantees regarding freedom of the vote, not all voters are free to choose. Cultural and social dynamics mean that many voters face significant pressure to vote for clan or chiefly priorities, and communal voting is a significant factor in some electorates. Women and young people face particular challenges in participating politically in Solomon Islands. Women face significant cultural and communal obstacles which limit their ability to vote freely and secretly. Solomon Islands suffers from one of the highest rates of domestic violence which conditions the ability of women to participate safely as active citizen's in formal politics.

The marginalised position of women in elections is best reflected in their very low levels of parliamentary representation. Only one woman was elected to the 50 member parliament in the 2014 national elections, with this number doubling following a by-election in May 2018. But electoral gains by women have proven ephemeral and women have struggled to hold limited gains in electoral representation. Women have fared better at the provincial level but have been unable to translate gains to representation in the national parliament.

### **Election delivery**

Historically, Solomon Islands has benefited from having an established electoral architecture which has provided a relatively stable institutional framework for the conduct of elections. The country has had the same first past the post electoral system since independence and a clear electoral administration framework based around a three-person electoral commission supported by an Office of the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission (OSIEC) led by a Chief Electoral Officer (CEO).

While the institutional framework has been stable, it has nevertheless faced significant challenges both in terms of its institutional robustness and capacity. In this sense, Solomon Islands' electoral system mimics many of the broader fragilities of the post-colonial national state. Constitutionally, the OSIEC has lacked independence which has undermined its ability to play a strong leadership role around elections. For example, the OSIEC has lacked its own budget, being dependent on the Ministry of Home Affairs. The Electoral

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<sup>6</sup> Interlocutors interviewed for this report raised concerns that by-elections held in Western Province in May 2018 ramped up campaigning beyond what was done in 2014. This included the organization of large groups of "supporters" wearing matching clothes, being transported to town centres and polling stations to advocate for "their candidate". While there were no outbreaks of violence the intimidating nature of the rallies raises concerns for 2019 general elections when stakes are higher and security forces will be more thinly spread.



Commission, chaired by the Speaker of Parliament have no job descriptions or resources and are generally absent from anything to do with electoral administration. Administratively, the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) has lacked status and authority to play a strong leadership role in elections. For example, under Solomon Islands' electoral laws, the CEO has been unable to direct returning officers who are responsible for managing elections at the constituency level.

**As the body responsible for delivering elections, the OSIEC has suffered from acute resource challenges.** Uncertain and (in non-election years) inadequate budgets and limited staff has meant it has had no capacity to prepare for elections according to an election cycle approach. Delivering elections has required significant development partner support in the form of staff capacity supplementation (short and long-term international advisers and twinning supports such as with the Australian Electoral Commission) and material supplementation. Development support has historically surged in the lead up to national elections, which itself has posed management challenges. Around election time OSIEC seconds a large number of public servants from the provincial and national governments to manage local election delivery.

While the electoral commission has been able to deliver reasonably credible elections in Solomon Islands, a number of factors over the current electoral cycle have undermined its credibility with the public. The government's failure to appoint a replacement CEO following the departure of the previous CEO created a leadership vacuum which has undermined its capacity to prepare for elections. **The 2019 General Election will occur in the context of increasing concerns about the secrecy of the vote in the Solomon Islands, and allegations of the corruption of the voting process which allows for, in specific circumstances, the identification of voters.**<sup>7</sup> There has been a long-term perception in Solomon Islands that voters can be identified and that MPs have actively sought to ascertain voting decisions to determine how to allocate their constituency funds. This perception has now come to a head with media reports of active breaching of voter secrecy. Apart from being a fundamental breach of democratic rights to a secret vote, the case has undermined the credibility of electoral authorities and presumably added to perceptions on behalf of candidates on the unfair nature of electoral competition in Solomon Islands.

For the 2014 election, Solomon Islands introduced a new biometric voter registration (BVR) system. **The system resulted in a significant improvement in the integrity of the voter roll and was an important factoring behind improved public confidence in the 2014 election.** One of the strengths of the roll was the preparation of a voter lists with identifying photos of registered voters. The system was also able to identify duplicate enrolments leading to the cleaning of the roll. However, the system was costly and complex, requiring major procurements in terms of registration equipment and staffing. The biometric voter process undertaken in 2014 was generally believed to have been well

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<sup>7</sup> Valenzuela, C. (2017), *Secrecy of the Vote in the Solomon Islands - A Review*, April

managed in a timely fashion. However, one of the legacy effects of the BVR process is a more expensive and complex registration process for the OSIEC to manage. As a new system, there remains some confusion about the BVR process. Supporting the new biometric process will remain an ongoing challenge for the OSIEC.

**Financing elections has been an historical challenge in Solomon Islands and will remain so in the lead up to the 2019 election.** At the time of the assessment Solomon Islands has been suffering from a period of prolonged economic crisis. This means the country approaches the 2019 elections with a highly constrained budget and is struggling to find resources to fund elections adequately and in a timely manner. Historically, electoral funding has been late and unpredictable, greatly complicating prospects for orderly election preparation based on an election cycle approach. Like the country more broadly, which is heavily aid dependent, Solomon Islands' electoral authorities have been heavily dependent on development partner support. RAMSI included a large electoral program which was replaced by SECSIP, supplemented by a range of the development partner assistance programs. Such support has helped underwrite election preparations but has also come with complications including placing burdens on electoral authorities and creating moral hazards leading to long-term under-investments in electoral infrastructure by national governments.

### *Electoral reform*

While this electoral system has proven adequate to the delivery of reasonably credible elections in Solomon Islands, the weakness of the system has made it difficult to consolidate electoral capabilities and to introduce systemic reforms to improve electoral deliverability, inclusiveness and credibility. Historically, efforts to reform the system have struggled to gain traction. This is partly because incumbent MPs responsible for passing reforms have little incentive in implementing major changes to the system which delivered them to office. Long term efforts to introduce major changes, such as reserved seats for women have been easily resisted by MPs in the context of weak governing coalitions where the threat of withdrawing parliamentary support is serious.

In the absence of reform, the system has struggled on, but electoral administration has been more difficult than it should be and problems in the system are providing increasing grounds for electoral appeal. This is most evident in the case of election appeals, which have become an increasingly common feature of electoral politics. Unsuccessful candidates frequently use abuses in the electoral process, or a failure to rigorously apply existing electoral laws and regulations, to challenge results.

In 2014 out of 12 petitions lodged and served, 1 case was discontinued and 1 strike out. The length of time for the judiciary to issue the rulings is an issue of concern. For example the Supreme Court ruling on the petition lodged by former PM Gordon Darcy Lilo was

issued on 30 November 2017 and resulted in a by-election held on 23 May 2018. The newly elected MP will therefore have a mandate of less than one year.

While reform is difficult the electoral system is beginning to change. Prior to the 2014 election, parliament passed the *Political Parties Act* which provided for the established of a political parties commission with responsibility for strengthening the party system. That legislation required parties to be registered, provided some capacity building support including modest resourcing supplementation, and included weak provisions regarding party coalitions before and following elections.<sup>8</sup>

Since 2014, the level of reform ambition increased, giving rise to a raft of ambitious legislative and constitutional reform proposals which have been refined over the course of this parliament. This has included proposals to change the electoral system to a limited preferential voting system (now abandoned), on merging the offices of the electoral and political parties commission to form one election management body, and on changes to electoral rules and administration to improve the integrity and efficiency of the electoral process including measures to align provincial and national elections (and give the national electoral commission responsibility for managing both), increasing the status and independence of the electoral commission, and making significant changes to voting procedures. The 100 page electoral reform bill at the time of writing was available on the Parliament of the Solomon Islands website, awaiting debate in the July 2018 session of Parliament. If passed it would create extra pressure on the OSIEC in terms of adjusting and developing new procedures, as well as educating the public of the changes. If it was delayed and passed at a later session of Parliament the time and work pressures for the OSIEC could be potentially disastrous for its ability to administer the 2019 general election.

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<sup>8</sup> Wood (2014), 3

## KEY ELECTION RISKS

Noting Solomon Islands' history of administering credible and peaceful national elections and based on the contextual analysis above, the following section identifies foreseeable risks of relevance to preparations for the 2019 national elections. This section should be read in conjunction with the Risk Matrix provided at **Annex 2**, which includes analysis of the seriousness of each risk in the context of risk management environment. This section breaks risks into three categories:

- 1) Political risks associated with the political environment and political culture, including the nature of electoral competition;
- 2) Security risks associated with maintaining peace and security around elections including the campaign period and post-election period; and
- 3) Administrative risks associated with election management including operational and administrative challenges.

### *Political risks*

While post-Tensions elections have in the main been peaceful in Solomon Islands, it will be important for electoral authorities to recognise the potential for localised conflict and prepare accordingly. The Assessment Team is not aware of specific threats in this regard. However, we note that there is potential for intensified political competition in some electorates arising from a broad range of factors such as increased money politics, the benefits of incumbency afforded by having access to CDFs (and the grievances this may cause with aspiring candidates) and the prospect for generational change as new candidates emerge seeking to displace more established MPs. The prospect of more politically contested elections represents a risk for the conduct of elections in a number of ways:

- *Potential for more intimidatory campaigning* - As elections become more moneyed and contested, there is a potential that some candidates may be tempted to resort to more aggressive campaign tactics. We note learning that occurs between PNG and Solomon Islands in this regard, and trends to more aggressive forms of campaigning in PNG in recent elections. The increasing penetration and use of social media may also amplify the intensity of local campaigns.
- *Increased pressure on electoral authorities* - An increasingly contested electoral environment means that some incumbents will be likely to focus on issues of poor electoral administration as a basis for contesting elections.

This will place electoral authorities under a greater degree of pressure and may politicise electoral processes;

- *Increased corruption pressures* - A more contentious electoral environment comes with increased risk that well financed incumbents may redouble efforts to corrupt electoral officials. This risk is heightened given the limited funding available to electoral authorities and the relative weakness of many electoral systems and processes.

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| Recommendation 1 | Account for the potential for more contested elections at the electorate level. Reflect this potential in election planning arrangements, including strengthening local-level situation awareness and ensuring robust protocols for the communication of local risk assessments to electoral authorities.                 | High |
| Recommendation 2 | Ensure electoral preparations adequately account for the potential of increased local contestation. Ensure this recognition is reflected in robust electoral preparations including training and logistical arrangements so that electoral officials will be better placed to respond to pressures applied by candidates. | High |

### Security risks

While there is little prospect for large scale election-related violence in 2019 - and our in-country consultations indicated no prospect for such - it is important electoral authorities and wider stakeholders are not complacent. It must be remembered that Solomon Islands has experienced minor but nonetheless significant instances of election related violence including burning of ballot boxes and efforts to disrupt the transportation of ballot papers. In 2014, there was a serious incident involving a shooting attack on a candidate on a boat. While these incidents have been isolated and often opportunistic they do underscore the potential for election-related conflicts and disputation to take on a violent dimension, even if isolated to specific locales.

There are a number of security-related risks that we recommend electoral authorities should consider:

#### Potential for localised violence

- The potential for localized election-related violence remains low but may be exacerbated if political competition becomes more contentious, as foreshadowed in the previous section. Electoral preparations should account

sufficiently for the potential for election-related violence through robust security preparations.

- Election-related violence can be expected to be localised in origin. Local communities, and key local institutions such as churches, will have an important role to play in helping manage election related conflict and electoral preparations should consider how to engage and incorporate communities into election planning and security arrangements.

#### Post-RAMSI policing

- This is the first post-RAMSI election and will be the first since the Tensions when there has not been a formal police operation in Solomon Islands. The RSIPF was implicated in violence during the Tensions and confidence in the police has been, and remains, an issue in Solomon Islands. The capacity of the police has improved significantly since the Tensions. The RSIPF also benefits from a significant institutional strengthening program supported by the Australian Federal Police. Nevertheless, election security planning should account for continuing community concerns about police operations around elections. Security planning should account for this possibility and include a sufficient focus on police training and community outreach as part of election-related security operations.
- When RAMSI was present in Solomon Islands, election preparation benefited from robust security arrangements and reasonably strong whole of government coordination mechanisms. RAMSI included a large-scale police mission and provided a form of *de facto* security guarantee. RAMSI also brought a level of material support including police numbers and transport and communications capabilities which contributed to robust policing approach to elections. In the assessment Team's view, there has been insufficient consideration given to what the departure of RAMSI means in operational gaps in Solomon Islands. It will be important to understand where these gaps lie, what they mean in terms of the provision of election security and what contingencies must be put in place to address them.

#### Weak security coordination arrangements

- Effective security planning and preparation requires robust coordination between security forces, electoral authorities, national and provincial

governments and communities. To date, election-related security planning has been relatively informal and at an insufficiently high level. We note that the RSIPF has commenced planning for policing efforts for the 2019. There has been some dialogue between the RSIPF and OSIEC at the working level. While this dialogue is welcome, there is a need to elevate planning the level of planning and to broaden the number of actors involved in it. This will require more formalised and high-level coordination arrangements that include key agencies such as the PMO, Ministry of Home Affairs and MoFT, and provincial governments, in addition to the SIEC and OSIEC. Strengthened coordination arrangements will be particularly important if electoral authorities are to respond effectively to security-related intelligence regarding potential security issues in specific electorates.

- The Assessment Team notes efforts underway during the assessment mission to formalise a Memorandum of Understanding between the OSIEC and RSIPF. Such efforts are welcome but should be sufficiently broad to cover security preparations, training and general coordination issues.

#### Insufficient resourcing for security operations

- Financing security operations for national elections in Solomon Islands is a major challenge and needs to be considered as a key element of election preparations in the Solomon Islands. At the time of the assessment, there had been insufficient consideration or provision of the resourcing requirements for security arrangements for the national elections. RSIPF planning, while underway, was being funded through its existing budget. There is as yet no budget provision for the 2019 election, which will require funding under the annual budget that will be passed in December 2018.
- The OSIEC's operational plan makes no provision for security planning or financing. It should be noted that security arrangements for the 2019 national election will likely be more expensive given the election will occur during the cyclone and wet season, which will likely make logistic and transport arrangements more expensive. It should also be recognised that, given RAMSI's departure, Solomon Islands will no longer enjoy an indirect security subsidy provided by the mission. This subsidy included the option to request use of RAMSI police assets in the case of security and the broader peace-keeping benefit of having an external security mission present in the

country. Assessing the scale of the gap left by RAMSI's departure and factoring this in to security - and broader electoral - planning should be a priority.

- The recent Gizo-Kolombangara by-election highlighted challenges regarding the operational capabilities of police. In particular, the by-election exposed challenges regarding transport and communications. The capacity of the police to support an effective transport and communication capability will be important in their ability to provide effective security. A key priority of election planning should be the identification of police capability gaps and contingency arrangements developed as part of ongoing operational planning.

#### Insufficient understanding of intersection between elections and security

- The Assessment Team's discussions with police representatives suggested that security discussions about the role of police in the 2019 have been largely focused on crowd management and managing election-related violence. It should be recognised that in Solomon Islands police frequently play a much broader role in supporting election management and managing local level election dynamics during campaigns, around polling stations on election-day and during the count. Effective community-focused policing around elections can play an important role in defusing potential conflict situations and improving the overall credibility of the election. The ability of police officers to play a positive role around elections requires them to have a basic understanding of the electoral process and the role of officials. This aspect of election-related policing should be factored into election preparations, with police supported by targeted training and incorporated into broader planning and coordination processes.

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| Recommendation 3 | Without overstating the prospect, security and planning arrangements should account sufficiently for the potential for isolated incidents of violence and plan accordingly. | Medium |
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| Recommendation 4 | Security coordination arrangements across government should be strengthened. Such arrangements should include an encompassing MOU between OSIEC and RSIPF. In addition, security coordination arrangements should be strengthened at a whole-of-government level, with security issues being a key issue considered at any whole-of-government election coordination body being established (see Recommendation x)                           | High |
| Recommendation 5 | An assessment should be undertaken to identify security (and operational) gaps arising from the departure of RAMSI. This review should consider an explicit and implicit gaps arising from a lower operational presence of development partners in a post-RAMSI environment, particularly in relation to communications and transport assets available. Appropriate contingency planning should be developed to address any gaps identified. | High |
| Recommendation 6 | Recognising the significant gap in security resourcing for elections, OSIEC and RSIPF should move quickly to develop a realistic budget proposal regarding security relating financing and work to ensure appropriate account of the costs of providing security is included in budget planning underway.  | High |
| Recommendation 7 | Election planning should account for the role of police and other security personal in supporting credible elections. This planning should recognise explicitly the additional role security officials often plan in contributing to perceptions of credible elections at the local level. Security planning should include training for police on elections and the role of security officials on election day.                             | High |

### Administrative risks

The OSIEC has had significant experience in delivering credible elections in challenging electoral circumstances in Solomon Islands. However, while this record of delivery shows electoral authorities have the capacity to deliver a credible election, past performance should not be taken as guide for future efforts.

The Assessment Team has identified a number of risks in relation to election delivery:

#### Timing and Operational Planning

- Based on an election cycle approach, electoral authorities should be well into the final pre-election phase, characterised by a significant increase in tempo as authorities implement election plans and prepare for the delivery of a complex national election. Anticipating an election in early 2019, it is the Assessment Team's view that electoral preparations sufficiently progressed. This is best reflected in the relatively late finalisation of an electoral operations plan in April 2018, which itself is of a relatively high strategic level and needs to be further developed. While delays in preparation are understandable given the circumstances outlined above, there is now very little scope for delay and slippage in preparations. With the appointment of a new CEO in April 2018, it will be important that the OSIEC exert leadership to galvanise electoral stakeholders across government about the scale of the challenge and the urgency of timely support.
- Robust whole of government election coordination arrangements such as an election coordination committee have yet to be activated. This is making the adoption of a coordinated approach to elections across the broad range of election stakeholders (national, provincial, police, donors) difficult. Coordination mechanisms would ideally be established to facilitate high level engagement. They should also be established at an operational level with a focus on identifying and addressing working level gaps in a timely manner. Existing donor coordination mechanism could be used as a basis for this operational discussion.
- Given the tight timeframes before the election there is little scope for slippage in operational planning. Noting that the OSIEC has recently developed an operational plan, the assessment team considers more detailed planning will be required to progress the plan and begin to implement arrangements for the election. For example, the current operational plan includes high level timelines for various aspects of election delivery (procurement, awareness, training etc.). This is a welcome framework but will require much more detailed planning at the operational level. For example, transport planning around ballot box delivery and the movement of polling materials etc. would ideally be outlined in some detail, along with corresponding resource and personnel requirements.
- We would like to underline again particular risks around transport and communications. As noted above, the Gizo-Kolombangara by-election

exposed significant gaps in terms of police communications and transport capabilities. This was for a focused by-election with relatively generous and cautious resourcing. These gaps will be considerable at the national election. A number of interlocutors stressed to us the significant limitations regarding available transport and communications assets in the post-RAMSI environment. Noting that police and other security assets will ideally not be made available to support electoral operations, such assets are already limited relative to need. Much more detailed planning will be required regarding the distribution of available transport and communications assets to support critical election areas. Negotiations with development partners regarding the availability of supplementary assets to support election operations should also be progressed as a matter of priority, with appropriate risk management strategies developed around foreseeable operational gaps.

#### Electoral reform

- As noted above, election preparations are proceeding in the context of ongoing uncertainty about proposed legislative reforms to the electoral system. At the time of writing, there is still uncertainty about the nature of the reforms, their timing and, indeed, if parliament will pass a reform package before the 2019 election. We note electoral officials and advisers we interviewed have expressed confidence in their ability to implement any measures passed at a July sitting of Parliament, reflecting their understanding that significant elements of the package will be deferred until after the election. However, we note that the reform package in the assessment team's view constitutes a significant risk, including the potential that reform is passed at a November sitting of Parliament.
- While it is beyond the capacity of the electoral commission to provide legislative certainty, the passage of even a modest electoral reform package at this stage of the electoral cycle poses a significant risk. Development of the package over the course of the electoral cycle has already consumed a significant proportion of OSIEC resources and capabilities. Legislative deliberations continue to consume significant time of the newly appointed CEO. Removal of this uncertainty, either by passing a legislative package that substantially defers most reform initiatives until after the 2019

election, or by delaying parliamentary consideration until after the election, is important.

- The Assessment Team did not get a strong sense that electoral stakeholders recognise sufficiently the scale of this risk and the potential burden that even modest reforms to the electoral system would pose in terms of timely electoral preparation. These include changing updating training procedures, procuring additional polling materials and developing appropriate security arrangements, to name a few. Having to prepare for these uncertain reforms is adding an additional layer of complexity to an already stretched OSIEC. We note in particular proposals to amend the electoral act that will enable out of constituency voting. This would be a significant change both in terms of past electoral practice and in terms of administration. Currently, and notwithstanding legislative requirements that voters vote where they live, it is common practice for voters to return to their home village to vote at national elections. This results in an exodus of voters to their villages. It is also a vector through which money politics is channelled, as candidates seek to fund the passage of supporters to their home constituencies. For many voters, being supported to return to their home village is itself a valued electoral good. It is not clear what impact the introduction of out of constituency voting may have, but particular care should be taken to consider the possible consequences and put appropriate arrangements in place. This may include having a larger number of voters in Honiara on Election Day, complicating security arrangements in one of the key security areas. It is also not clear what arrangements will be necessary to manage account for Honiara-based votes and how they will be incorporated into the counting process. We can expect, for example, that preparing to implement out-of-constituency polling will impose significant increases in electoral costs associated with establishment of Honiara-based polling stations. We are not aware of pre-emptive planning for such arrangements in anticipation of reform measures being passed by parliament.
- It should also be noted that any change to the electoral process - particularly changes to voting arrangements - should be accompanied by a significant voter awareness campaign, to communicate the nature of the changes and what it means for citizens intending to vote. We are not aware of any plans regarding the communication of legislative reforms. This reflects uncertainty about whether such reforms will be passed. Recognition

of the need to develop a timely awareness program is insufficiently factored into electoral preparations as they currently stand. Failure to do so may contribute to confusion around the electoral process and in the context of more hotly contested elections could contribute to local level conflict.

#### Financial challenges

- At the time of the assessment mission, electoral authorities had insufficient financial resources to progress timely preparations for the 2019 elections. We understand the electoral commission has been allocated SBD27 million to support an update of the biometric voter roll. In addition, the electoral commission has been allocated around SBD10 million for operational preparations. There has been no separate budget allocation for security preparations. Additional funding is expected to be allocated in the 2019 budget for election delivery next year. The budget process for the 2019 budget commences in June.
- While current budgetary allocation for elections is welcome, it does not appear sufficient relative to the anticipated cost of election delivery. As noted above, the cost of the 2019 election is likely to be higher than the 2014 election, given the season and absence of RAMSI.
- There are also risks regarding the timeliness of dispersal of approved budget allocations. Timely dispersal of allocated funding will be key to the electoral commission's capacity to undertake preparations in a timely manner. Past experience points to significant delays in accessing allocated funds. Electoral planning should include contingency for delays in funding and make provision for high level advocacy and liaison with MoFT to facilitate timely dispersal of agreed funds, and adequate provision for additional funds during the budget process.

#### Managing surge staffing support

- OSIEC's capacity to prepare for elections in a timely manner has been undermined by inadequate staff capabilities. Critical gaps over this election cycle have included the vacant position of CEO and vacancies at the operational level. This is of course has been a long term challenge in Solomon Islands where donor support has played an important role in compensating for under-investments in staffing. However, such gaps have

been particularly acute since 2014 and have impacted on the timeliness of preparations for 2019. It is welcome that significant steps have now been taken to address some of these critical gaps, including the appointment of an externally-funded CEO. SECSIP has also supported the establishment of a graduate program and has also recently recruited additional technical support in the form of an operations adviser. Additional support is being planned from development partners such as Australia Assist and the AEC. Such support will be invaluable but comes with its own challenges including the need to manage surge support in a coordinated way and direct it towards areas of greatest need. This will require additional planning with a focus on operational level gaps.

#### Voter registration

- The OSIEC will need to update the BVR in preparation for the 2019 election. The electoral commission currently has planned for a two-month update process. As per the plan of the Secretariat endorsed by SIEC, the field operation is due to start on 27 July. However, the latest is that commencement may be deferred until 20 August 2018. This will provide new voters or those that have changed their residence with an opportunity to register, and allow the electoral commission to cleanse the roll of deceased voters. The OSIEC has been provided SBD27 million to support the registration process and planning is underway to recruit and train staff and procure materials and equipment. Planning has been based on the 2014 model in terms of allocated timing and approach.
- It is not clear if current planning has been sufficiently robust in preparation for a short registration period. For example, it has recently been discovered that a number of generators required to support the registration process have gone missing. An audit of available generators identified a shortfall of around 100 generators out of required 300. This has resulted in the need for SECSIP to urgently procure new generators. We are not clear if identified generators have been tested to make sure they are working. This issue has the potential to delay registration efforts. It also points to a deeper issue regarding the thoroughness of planning to date.
- The original vendor of the voter registration system (ESI) has recently been requested by OSIEC to provide support and software upgrades. The terms of

reference of this support request have not been widely shared, so it is unclear whether the old contractual conditions would be maintained. The initial process to recruit the company is believed to have been a direct (no-bid) procurement process. Given the issues surrounding the trust of the system in the public (heightened by concerns of voter data being sold), another direct procurement process of any company poses an enormous risk to the credibility and transparency of electoral process in the Solomon Islands.

- The assessment team is unsure why the vendor has been invited back, given the risks and problems outlined with the vendor in previous assessments. The original contract maintained a vendor lock with the system that was significantly below international standards in terms of process and data integrity. It also meant that ownership and sustainability have remained low.
- Following these issues, a 2015 commissioned report on the BVR system prompted SECSIP to begin three years of work attempting to make the BVR system more sustainable. The recommendations made by UNDP through SECSIP, if they had been fully implemented, appear to offer a cost-effective and nationally owned solution to issues raised with the current system. Risks to interoperability would have been limited with best practices in IT project management and engineering followed. The database design was well understood, as it had been reverse engineered during previous backup operations which were fully tested for integrity and completeness.
- The reasons for abandoning this line of work remain unclear. Apart from the late change in an already tight timeframe, moving back to a vendor without the appearance of due process or transparency in the decision making process pose significant risks to the credibility of the OSIEC as it seeks to rebuild trust around issues of privacy with the registration system and its data. The BVR has the potential to be the fault line of technical risk for the 2019 General Elections.
- In a politically contested election, irregularities in the voter roll can become an important factor undermining the credibility of the election and leading to post-election conflict. Disgruntled candidates can use voter roll irregularities, real or perceived, to challenge electoral results. The recent Gizo-Kolombangara by-election provided an opportunity to test the integrity of the BVR. Prior to the by-election, update processes were supported in Western Province and Choiseul, meaning that the roll used in Gizo-

Kolombangara was cleansed. Observers and a number of interlocutors interviewed for this assessment indicated anecdotal problems with the roll used (there were unverified claims of up to 300 registered voters turned away) , centred on allegations that a large number of voters who thought they were registered to vote could not be found on the roll. There are of course many reasons why a voter may not be on a roll, including that they are registered elsewhere or that they have had their names deleted from the roll because they are ineligible. It could also be possible that voters have had their names removed following an appeals process. The veracity of such claims remains to be established but the allegations point to uncertainties regarding the BVR update process and confusion regarding the registration process. The key point is confusion over the roll clearly remains an issue which has the potential to contribute to election-related conflict and undermine the credibility of the election. Addressing such confusion will require robust and transparent registration processes that are preceded by a sufficient awareness program and which incorporate sufficient time for an accessible appeals process. We are not clear if these factors have been sufficiently incorporated into current plans for the registration update process. We note the CEO has expressed an interest in some form of supplementary external or independent “audit” support around the BVR process to address concerns about the integrity and transparency of the process. This request should be considered in the context of planning currently underway for the BVR process.

#### Voter awareness

- Development partners have in the past made significant investments in voter awareness. While democracy is well entrenched in Solomon Islands and there is a reasonable level of community understanding of democratic processes, it will be important for sufficient support for awareness activities in the lead up to the 2019 election. As noted above, this will be particularly important in relation to the BVR update process, with the BVR remaining relatively new and community understanding of the registration and review processes limited. Timely awareness will also be critical depending on the nature of any reform measures passed by the current parliament. The



Assessment Team understands the OSIEC, with support from SECSIP, is currently developing its awareness strategy. Given the tight timeframe before the election, it will be important awareness efforts are targeted to the most important issues. This would include awareness on the BVR process and a focus on any changed voting procedures introduced before the elections.

- In addition to operational issues, it will also be timely for electoral authorities to actively build public confidence in the electoral process. Public perceptions that voter secrecy is compromised constitutes a major risk to the authority of the OSIEC and its ability to run credible elections. The appointment of a new CEO provides an opportunity for the electoral commission to play a strong leadership role in engaging the public on elections and the efforts in place to ensure a credible election.

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| Recommendation 8  | Efforts must be taken to address a general complacency regarding electoral preparations and the very tight timeframes involved. The appointment of a new CEO provides an important opportunity for leadership in relation to election preparations and opportunities should be identified for advocacy with electoral stakeholders regarding the need for stepped up preparations for a 2019 election.  | High |
| Recommendation 9  | As a priority, electoral coordination mechanisms should be activated to facilitate more structured cooperation amongst electoral stakeholders. The CEO should convene a high level coordination group to discuss on a regular basis strategic issues including risks and risk management arrangements. This should be complemented with a working level body that meets on a regular basis (we would suggest weekly) with a focus on operational issues. This working level body would ideally include donor representatives along with representatives from key national ministries, police and provincial government. | High |
| Recommendation 10 | While the development of a high level operations plan is welcome, more detailed planning is required including consideration of security requirements. It would be advisable for any coordination groups established to be involved in such planning.   |      |
| Recommendation 11 | Uncertainty regarding possible electoral reforms represents a significant risk. While passage of any reform package is beyond the control of electoral authorities, effort should be taken to communicate clearly the risks associated with any reform package in relation to timely election preparations. Contingency planning should be commenced regarding the implementation of possible reforms.  |      |

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| Recommendation<br>12 | Noting current budgetary allocations are insufficient to support the full breadth of electoral preparations required, it will be important for the electoral commission to remain actively engaged with MoFT and the budgetary process. Coordination with RSIPF would also be desirable to ensure the police submit a realistic budget bid. Consideration should be given by development partners about the desirability of specialist short term advisory inputs to support the development of more costed budgetary proposals and associated advocacy efforts regarding the budget process. |  |
| Recommendation<br>13 | Managing an anticipated surge in development partner support will be important to ensure assistance provided is targeted to areas of highest need and does not overwhelm already stretched management systems. This will be helped by strengthened coordination mechanisms proposed in Recommendation 9. Supplementary advisory support to coordinate anticipated donor support may be warranted.   |  |
| Recommendation<br>14 | Plans to update the voter roll should be reviewed to ensure they have given sufficient weight to key risks, including sustainability, transparency and credibility of the system. Others include: procurement of equipment and materials needed to update the roll and developing a voter awareness program to accompany BVR efforts.   |  |
| Recommendation<br>15 | Efforts to development awareness activities are underway. Given the tight timeframes it will be important to ensure awareness activities are targeted at issues of highest need including the BVR update process and implications of any reform measures adopted.   |  |

## **Annex 1 - Stakeholders consulted for this risk assessment**

Azusa Kubota, UNDP Country Manager

Ambassador HE Leonidas Tezapsidis, EU Embassy

Fiona Hoggart, Counsellor (Political), Australian High Commission

Narelle Hallion, Second Secretary (Political), Australian High Commission

Alexandra Little, Second Secretary (Political), Australian High Commission

George Erick, Undersecretary Ministry of Provincial Government and Institutional Strengthening (MPGIS)

Phil Whelan, Adviser, Electoral System Strengthening Programme (ESSP)

Walter Rigamoto, Adviser, Electoral System Strengthening Programme (ESSP)

Dr Cendric Alependava, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs (MWYCFA)

Taeasi Sanga, Commissioner SIEC

Elvis Kikolo, Inspector, Honiara City Council

Elison Mani, Chief Education Officer, Honiara City Council

Hon Ajion Nasiu, Speaker for the National Parliament and Commissioner

Atenia Tahu, Chief Executive Officer, Media Association of Solomon Islands (MASI)

Ruth Liloqula, Executive Officer, Transparency Solomon Islands (TSI)

Harry Kuma, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Finance and Treasury (MoFT)

Calvin Ziru, Registrar, Political Parties Commission (PPC)

Mose Saitala, Chief Electoral Officer (CEO)

Bakhodir Burkanov, Country Director UNDP Pacific Office in Fiji and Head of Pacific Regional Programme and Policy

Dyfan Jones, Head of the Effective Governance, UNDP Pacific Office in Fiji

