

Hotel time! The murky world of selecting Solomon Islands prime ministers



by Terence Wood

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Polling is over, but the 2024 election in Solomon Islands is far from done. No party managed to win a majority – they never do – and so the country is now in the midst of the turbulent process of cobbling together a governing coalition.

As I type, aspiring prime ministers will be camped in different hotels trying to garner the support of MPs, while MPs themselves will be furtively scurrying from hotel to hotel promising their support if they are offered something – money, a plum ministerial position – in return. The arrivals terminal at the airport will be bustling too, as party agents wait for newly-elected, unaffiliated MPs to land, so they can whisk them away before their rivals get their hands on them.

The process of government formation in Solomon Islands is like this, not because the country's politicians are, as a whole, unusually venal (although some certainly are). Rather, it's so fluid, and uncertain, because no clear ideological, religious or ethnic divides give MPs cause to coalesce into coherent parties. There are often loose groupings of MPs – reformers versus business as usual, for example – but these have never been large enough, or coherent enough, to guarantee an easy pathway to power.

The world might be watching, the New Cold War might be simmering, but 2024 will be no different from previous elections in this respect.

It could have been: if most of the [32 incumbent MPs](#) that signed up to Manasseh Sogavare's OUR party had been re-elected, he would have been the clear frontrunner. Unfortunately for Sogavare, OUR party MPs, and incumbents more generally, had an awful election. His parliamentary party is much diminished as a result. The chart below (Figure 1) shows MPs by party now the election results are in.

Figure 1: Elected MPs by party, 2024 Solomon Islands elections

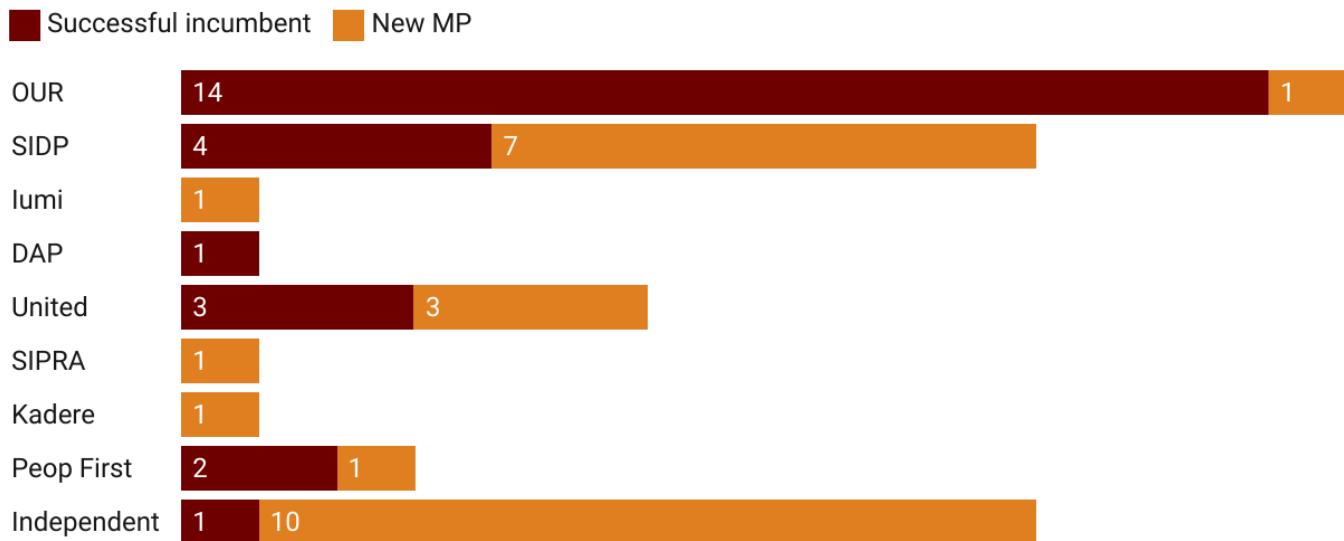


Chart based on the author's calculations using data from the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission.

Created with Datawrapper

The OUR party still has more MPs than anyone else. However, the Solomon Islands Democratic Party (SIDP), the Iumi for Change (Iumi on the chart, and sometimes called “United for Change”), and the Democratic Alliance Party (DAP) are a formal coalition of reformers (or perhaps, more accurately, strenuous opponents of Sogavare). The United Party (United on the chart) also holds shared values (and a shared dislike of Sogavare). Together, the parties have 19 MPs between them on paper, which would seem to leave them better placed to form government.

Paper, however, is only of very limited use when governments are formed in Solomon Islands.

For a start, while there's a chance that the SIDP, Iumi for Change, DAP and the United Party will be sustained as a bloc by shared animus to Sogavare, it's not guaranteed. Personal rivalries, as well as strategic manoeuvring, could cause their shared bonds to break.

Worse still, it's not guaranteed that anyone's party will actually survive negotiations intact. In theory, there are rules which should slow MPs' ability to switch parties – an impediment during rapid fire coalition negotiations. In reality, though, it's not clear the rules will be followed. In all of the larger parties there will be core groups of MPs who are loyal, but there will also be others who don't feel so strongly bound.

To complicate matters further, any party, or group of parties, will need to acquire the support of some of the newly elected independent MPs to have the 26 MPs they will

need to govern. All bar one of these independents are new to parliament and so are unlikely to be strongly aligned with anyone at this point. Their loyalties will need to be won, and maintained, one at a time.

And if that isn't enough, there's Gordon Darcy Lilo, a former prime minister, who lost his seat in a remarkable upset in 2014 but who won his way back into parliament (in a completely different seat) this election. It's already apparent he wants the top job again.

Lilo is the sole member of his party in parliament, but he's wealthy and a master of transactional politics. It's quite possible he could emerge as prime minister after the dust settles. Even if he doesn't, he will, at the very least, be a major player in coalition negotiations.

Then, finally, there's the post-election advantage of joining the winning side before a vote actually occurs. If you're on the losing side you won't end up in charge of a ministry or something similarly desirable. This means that some MPs will switch sides depending on which way they think the winds of fortune are blowing. (It also explains why we'll see political heavyweights posting group photos of themselves and 25 smiling MPs who have all, apparently, joined their coalition and sharing those photos with the media.)

I have no idea who will emerge from this on top. I'm not even sure how long it will take. The only thing I know for certain is that it will be a busy, and exhausting, period of time. And that politics of this sort are not conducive to a well governed state.

You can download [the data here](#).

This is the second of [two posts](#) by the author on the election results and the fifth in a [series](#) on the 2024 Solomon Islands elections.

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