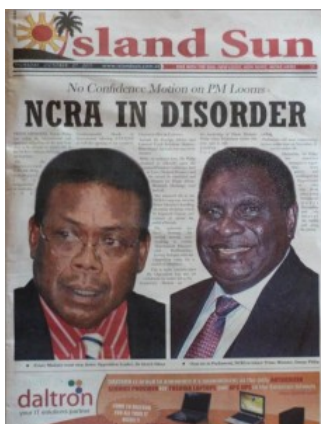


Poor political governance in Solomon Islands – is culture the cause?

By Terence Wood
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It is hard to spend time in the Solomon Islands and not notice just how poor national political governance is. Vested interests wield considerable power, parliament rarely sits, legislation is infrequently passed, political coalitions are unstable, and Ministerial posts are typically awarded based on expediency rather than relevant skills. These political problems contribute to all sorts of development problems, including environmental degradation and poor government service delivery. Given this, a central development question in Solomon islands has to be: 'why is political governance so poor?' And, because Solomons is a democracy,

another important question is, 'why do Solomon Islanders vote for politicians who govern their country so poorly?'

One possible answer is culture. Maybe there is something about Solomons culture that isn't conducive to democratically running a nation state. This sounds plausible. A lot of international evidence suggests that culture contributes to development outcomes (see examples [here](#) and [here](#)) and scholars such as [Robert Putnam](#) have argued that political culture determines political development. What's more, several authors writing about Western Melanesia have linked culture to problems of governance (most notably [Francis](#)

[Fukuyama](#) [PDF] but also see [this](#) [PDF] well argued paper by Michael Morgan.)

Yet, in a series of two posts ([here](#) and [here](#)) on this blog and in a recent SSGM [Discussion Paper](#) [PDF], World Bank Economist Tobias Haque argues persuasively that the problems of Solomons politics can be better explained by a model that posits rational actors following incentives generated by the political and economic structures that they are acting within. To Tobias, culture is largely a red herring.

So who's right?

Over three posts I will examine culture and rational actor explanations in light of evidence that I've gathered while conducting PhD research on electoral politics in Solomon Islands. I will argue that, while simple cultural explanations fail to explain electoral politics in Solomon Islands, there is still more going on than can be captured by models of rational actors acting independently of society.

Elections in Solomons are held under a first past the post electoral system. Candidates are numerous (on average 7.35 per constituency per election), winner vote shares are low (the median winner in the 2010 election won with 35% of the vote in their constituency), incumbent turnover is high (about 50% of MPs lose their seats each election), and political parties are weak – in practice voters almost never vote along party lines.

Any model that tries to explain politics in Solomons ought to be consistent with these and other key electoral features, as well as providing a good explanation for the poor governance felt in the country. A particularly important feature of election results that the model should explain is why there are so many candidates in Solomon Islands elections. This is important because [Duverger's Law](#) provides good reason to expect that, normally, under first past the post elections, electoral races will tend towards two party or two candidate competitions as voters strategically abandon favourite candidates in favour of 'least worst' candidates whose odds of winning are higher.

Given that Solomon's society is cleaved by numerous social divides (particularly divides associated with social structures such as clans) it is easy to envisage a simple cultural model of Solomons electoral politics. One in which people vote for the candidate who they identify most strongly with, one of their 'Wantoks' (literally Wantok refers to a fellow speaker of one's native language; however, in Solomons vernacular it is often applied with reference to relational groupings such as extended families or clans). Voters would vote this way perhaps out of some sort of identity based bond, or perhaps because culture left them feeling that helping one's Wantok was more important than any other electoral outcome. Either way, they would vote within their group. And this loyalty would be reciprocated: the politicians

they elected would focus on supporting their Wantoks rather than governing the country. From this would flow many of the problems of governance that the country experiences.

This explanation would be commensurate with the sheer quantity of candidates standing in each election in Solomons. Yet it struggles to explain another aspect of Solomon Islands election results — dramatic variation across time. From election to election in most Solomons constituencies the number of candidates standing, the number of votes candidates win, and spatial patterns of electoral support, change significantly (I provide some examples of this [here](#)). And yet demographic change occurs only very slowly, meaning that the number of potential voters in different relational groups itself will only change slowly, meaning that – absent some other factor – under a cultural model of Wantok loyalty, we would expect only slow change in candidate numbers and results patterns.

Another, similar, culture-based explanation is that strongly held cultural norms stipulate that politicians and aspiring politicians must earn the ongoing loyalty of their electoral supporters by providing them with private goods or localised public goods — a form of culturally mandated clientelism born of Solomon Islands Big Man traditions. In this explanation politicians deliver support in a clientelistic manner because if they don't they will be seen as norm violators and therefore not worthy of leadership roles. Because of this, they focus on delivering localised benefits at the expense of running the country. And from that fact stems the rest of the country's political problems.

This is an interesting argument, and once again it is somewhat commensurate with patterns of election results. Earning votes through the provision of private goods is expensive, which would explain low winner vote share and also possibly high candidate numbers. And yet, the explanation is still not entirely convincing. Clientelism is not a purely Western Melanesian problem. It is also prevalent in parts of Southern Europe, and in much of Latin America, South East Asia and Africa. And it is prevalent in countries with very different cultural traditions. Clearly, having a Melanesian Big Man culture isn't the only possible cause of clientelism. Moreover, there are other political features that *are* common across almost all countries with clientelist polities. Particularly, states that do a relatively poor job of providing public goods and services. And in states which don't do a good job of providing such items, there are – in line with Tobias' arguments – good rational reasons why people should vote in a clientelist manner. Culture isn't needed as an explanation.

Also, in the Solomons case there are many examples of political outcomes that don't fit models of behaviour that see voters blinded by cultural norms, one example being the election of a Vietnamese national in West Honiara in 2010. If people are already free enough from their cultural ties so as to vote for a candidate from South East Asia, it seems unlikely

that they would still be trapped in pre-colonial norms of what constitutes a good leader.

Ultimately, simple cultural explanations such as these are unconvincing because they are at odds with a range of features of electoral outcomes. To this extent, Tobias is right to argue that we need better explanations of Solomons politics. However, where I perhaps depart company from Tobias is that I wouldn't want to go on to say that culture plays no role in shaping political outcomes in Solomons. There are instances where culture does play an important role, such as the way that gender norms make it very hard for women to win elections. More importantly, even if culture isn't a simple determinant of political outcomes in Solomons, it does still influence voter choices. I will expand on this argument in my next post, in which I'll discuss Tobias' rational choice explanation, and its limitations.

This blog is a part of a series on political governance in the Solomon Islands. Other blogs in this series can be found [here](#).

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