

Solomon Islands elections: who won on the night and why?

by Terence Wood

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Voting in the 2024 Elections

Photo Credit: [Solomon Islands Electoral Commission](#)

Polling is over in Solomon Islands. There might be recounts. And there will certainly be electoral petitions in which losers challenge results in court. But that's all for the future. For now, results have been announced for all 50 of the country's electorates. And the MPs-elect will be the people who choose the country's next prime minister.

If you're looking for a clear winner from the elections the only person I can think of is David Hegarty. Hegarty is the Australian academic who first identified the relationship between candidate numbers and election outcomes in Melanesia. As I [wrote previously](#), Hegarty's Law suggested more MPs would lose their seats in 2024 than had been the case in 2019 or 2014. It also appeared to indicate that 2024 wouldn't be a good election for the Ownership Unity and Responsibility (OUR) party led by Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare either.

I wasn't brave enough to make any confident claims at the time, but it turns out that Hegarty's Law predicted the overall 2024 outcomes almost perfectly. Only 52% of sitting MPs who defended their seats managed to win, and 18 of the 32 MPs who entered the election under the OUR party banner were defeated. (Interestingly, the law didn't perform well in predicting individual electorates. When I ran regressions looking at electorate-level results there was no relationship. Nevertheless, it got overall results patterns right.)

Why was 2024 such a bad election for incumbents, and OUR party incumbents in particular?

I don't want to disappoint anyone, but there's no evidence that Solomon Islands' voters spurned the OUR party because its leader had become too friendly with China.

It's certainly true that the OUR party had a very bad election. However, although the Solomon Islands Development Party (SIDP) and the United Party, led by Sogavare's main rivals in national politics, Matthew Wale and Peter Kenilorea Jr, did manage to win new seats, they also saw 40% of their sitting MPs lose. The biggest

winners in the election were independent candidates, who were elected in large numbers, despite having no track record regarding China.

And then there’s Malaita. The province was supposedly the home of the most fierce anti-Chinese opposition in Solomon Islands. Led by its firebrand anti-China governor Daniel Suidani, Malaita refused Chinese aid projects. And Malaitan protesters are said to have sparked the anti-Sogavare riots in 2021. Yet as you can see in the chart below (Figure 1), which shows the performance of OUR party incumbents across provinces, half of the OUR party’s incumbents won their seats back in Malaita. Not great, but actually better than their performance nationally.

Figure 1: Performance of OUR party incumbents by province

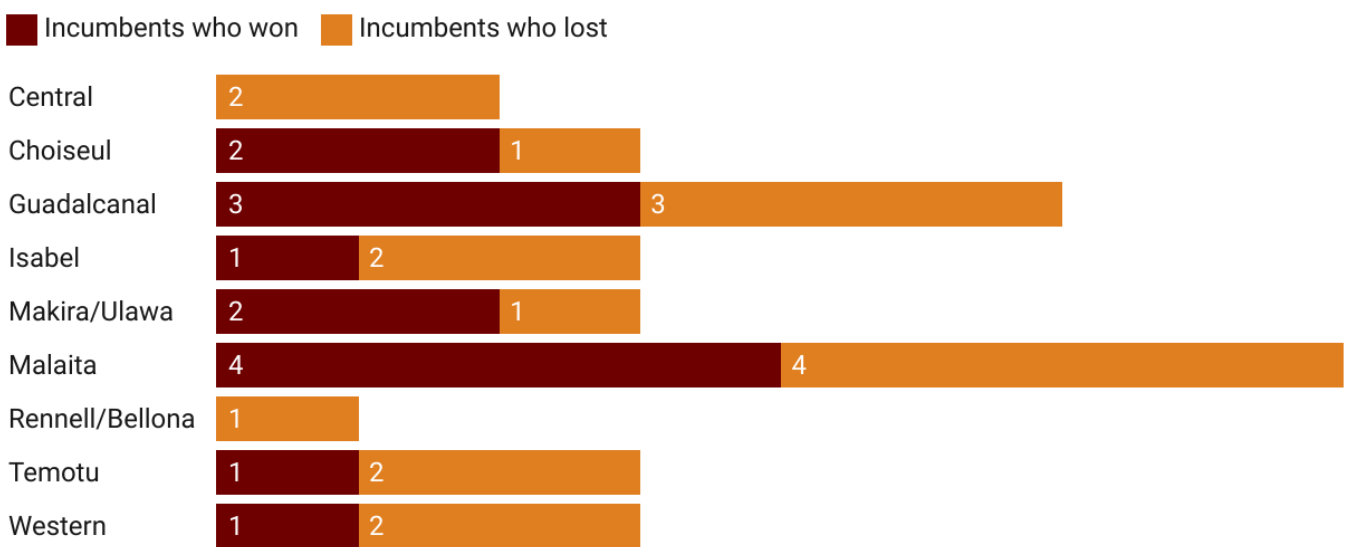


Chart based on the author’s calculations using data from the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission.

Created with Datawrapper

Suidani was re-elected to his ward seat in the Malaitan provincial government. But even in Fataleka, where he is from, anti-OUR party sentiment can’t have been that strong. Rexon Ramofafia, the sitting Fataleka MP in the national parliament and member of the OUR party, won 66% of the vote, handily dispatching his challenger from Suidani’s lumi for Change party. Next door in Baegu/Asifola the race was closer, but OUR party MP Tagini Makaro still beat lumi for Change candidate and **anti-China propagandist**, Celsus Talifilu.

I’m sure a small minority of voters in Solomon Islands did vote with China on their minds – and who can blame them, China’s presence in their country isn’t benign – but the evidence really doesn’t fit with the hypothesis that the poor performance of the OUR party was driven by voters’ dislike of China.

If it wasn’t China, what was it then? The likely answer is much more prosaic: material circumstances. Solomon Islands’ GDP per capita has **contracted**

considerably in recent years. (I'm grateful to Jon Fraenkel for pointing this out.) And historically, there has been a relationship between economic performance and incumbents' electoral fortunes (see [Figure 2](#)). What's more, Constituency Development Funds (CDFs) – the largely government-funded pots of money MPs can spend as they please – appear to have [fallen in real per capita terms](#), whereas previously they had been increasing rapidly. (I say “appear to”, as getting good data on CDFs is hard.) As a result, voters' lives have been getting harder, while the ability of MPs to help their supporters has become less.

Voters in Solomon Islands are pragmatic. They have to be: they live challenging lives with little convenience or material comfort. And so, with lives getting harder, and with MPs less able to help them directly, they chose to punish incumbents. The effect was probably stronger for OUR party MPs because their party, and its leader in particular, was the face of the government.

This wasn't universal – some OUR MPs still won – because [local personalities and connections](#) are crucial to competition in individual electorates. If you've got clan, community or church leaders on your side, sometimes it doesn't matter which party you're from. However, economic circumstances almost certainly explain why incumbents and OUR party politicians did so poorly overall in 2024.

It's not as exciting as imagining Solomon Islands' voters as foot soldiers chasing China out of the Pacific. But that's the reality of the country's politics.

The other reality is that elections never directly determine who will be prime minister. That's decided in the murky days or weeks of negotiation post-election. In my second post-election blog, I'll look at the possibilities.

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

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

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