



Department of Pacific Affairs

Women's Candidacy and the Power of Incumbency in the 2019 Solomon Islands Election

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The 2019 Solomon Islands election marked the first time in the country's history that two women were elected to parliament in a general election. Lanelle Tanangada, who had been elected in the 2018 by-election for the Gizo/Kolombangara seat formerly held by her husband, fended off another strong challenge from former prime minister Gordon Darcy Lilo to keep the seat. Freda Tuki Soriacomua, who won the Temotu Vatud seat in 2014 but was removed from office in 2018 following a court challenge, regained her seat in 2019. While this is a milestone, the under-representation of women in Solomon Islands politics is a continued tradition. As of October 2019, women make up just 4% of members of the national parliament, and around 2% of provincial assembly members. This In Brief examines trends and patterns from the 2019 Solomon Islands election and their effect on women's representation.

Women's candidacy and competitiveness in 2019

In 2019, 26 women contested the election, with at least one woman standing in 22 of the 50 constituencies. While this was the same number of female candidates as in 2014, the total number of candidates declined, so the proportion of women to men was slightly higher in 2019 (7.8% versus 5.8%). Almost half (46%) of female candidates in 2019 won less than 2% of the vote, and 38% placed last or second-to-last. This is roughly similar to the 2014 election results for women (see Baker 2018).¹

Yet some women proved to be highly competitive. In 2014, Soriacomua won Temotu Vatud with around a quarter of the vote, which was the highest proportion of the vote won by a female candidate; the highest-performing non-successful female candidate won just under 20% of the vote. In 2019, five candidates polled over 20%: the two winners (who each won about half the votes cast in their constituencies) and three women who placed second in their constituencies. This is not a perfect measure, as the number of candidates in each constituency varies across the country and fluctuates between elections, but the change is still notable. Soriacomua, for

instance, faced over twice as many opponents as in 2014 but still managed to almost double her vote share.

Six of the female candidates who ran in 2019 had also contested in 2014. Of those, two increased their vote share significantly – Soriacomua and Cathy Launa Nori, who won 13% of the vote in Maringe/Kokota in 2014 and 33% in 2019. The share of the vote won by the other four re-contesting candidates declined (three of these four were contesting in different constituencies to 2014).

Female candidates were more likely to be officially party-endorsed than their male counterparts: 65% of women ran under a party banner compared to 50% of men. Six parties endorsed female candidates, with the Democratic Alliance and People First parties endorsing the most women (five apiece). While the two winning female candidates were party-endorsed – both standing for the Solomon Islands Kadere Party – overall there was not a strong link between electoral competitiveness and party endorsement for female candidates. The average vote share for an independent female candidate was 8.9%, while for a party-endorsed female candidate it was 9.2%.

The power of incumbency

A notable new trend in Solomon Islands elections is the power of incumbency. Historically, turnover in general elections has sat at around 50%, with two notable exceptions to this trend prior to this year: the 1993 election, the first following the introduction of the Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF); and the 2014 election, after RCDF allocations had increased considerably. In both these elections, turnover was significantly reduced as more incumbents retained their seats. The amount of RCDF allocated to members of parliament in the 2014–19 term remained high, and in 2019 incumbency turnover remained low.

The turnover rates of 2014 (26%) and 2019 (28%) suggest incumbents are becoming harder to unseat. This is attributed by many to the use of RCDF (see Wood 23/4/2019). Interestingly, the incumbency effect appears relatively gender-neutral. While overall it disadvantages women, given so few women are

incumbents, evidence from the 2019 election suggests that the women who are already in political positions seem to benefit from the trend as much as men. Both Tanangada and Soriacomua proved to be popular incumbent members of parliament and both increased their vote shares – Tanangada slightly, and Soriacomua significantly – from their previous wins.

Future trends?

Overall, there was no overarching trend towards greater competitiveness for female candidates. The 2019 election did show, however, that there are various individual women who are highly competitive. Evidence from the 2019 election suggests that it is individual characteristics rather than party endorsement or other factors that determine electoral competitiveness.

Recent research on the changing political context in Solomon Islands has suggested that the job of a member of parliament has changed with the increased influence of RCDF (see Barbara 2019). It has been suggested that this shift – from a focus on legislation and law-making to a focus on service delivery and managing development projects at the constituency level – has meant the role is no longer as desirable to aspiring female candidates (UNDP 2019). Certainly this has not proven to be the case in terms of the number of female candidates, which while relatively low has remained consistent. Furthermore, the two success stories of the 2019 election highlight that women can thrive in the new political context.

Author notes

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Endnotes

1. For Solomon Islands election results, see Wood 2019.

References

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