



State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

Choosing Our Leaders: Western Electoral Systems versus Traditional Leadership Selection in the Pacific Islands — A Personal Perspective

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Commentaries in various internet sites and social media Facebook pages have been increasingly critical of the quality of political leadership across the Pacific islands region. The Facebook page 'Forum Solomon Islands International', the 'Sharp Talk' blog (devoted to Papua New Guinea), and the 'Yumi Tok Stret' website and 'Yumi Tok Sense' Facebook page of Vanuatu are inundated with commentaries about the quality of political leadership and the shenanigans of political leaders. Social media has facilitated a level of discourse never seen before in the Pacific islands region. I have referred to only a few Facebook pages and websites but I am sure that every country has one devoted to critiquing national developments in their countries, not to mention their national leaders. Social media is truly transformative and is giving a voice to many who would otherwise remain silent. If applied effectively, it could be an important agent for change.

These discussions have also highlighted the tension between the principles underlying the selection of leadership in the community and churches, which is consensus-based, and political leadership in the national parliament, which is competitively based. By that I mean people who are appointed to positions of leadership in the communities and churches are selected through a thorough process that involves consultations, close examinations of the personalities and their traditional lineage links, and their past record of community service. Their selection is not something treated lightly.

I think that in most Pacific island societies, traditional chiefly systems or at least some form of community-based leadership structure or arrangement continue to be practised at the village level, particularly in rural areas. These structures or what could also be described as local, community, village-level governance arrangements coexist with the churches whose influence on the day-to-day lives of ordinary people cannot be underestimated. It could be argued that, at the village level, it is the confluence of the church and the various village governance arrangements that often coagulate around selected elders, youth and women leaders that has the most

influence on the day-to-day affairs and welfare of communities. While it is not the case everywhere, in some countries these coordinated arrangements and the nexus between church and community are very strong and, indeed, are stronger as you move further away from urban areas.

In almost all Pacific islands societies, traditional leadership and communal governance arrangements were either hierarchical as in Polynesia and certain parts of Micronesia (Marshall Islands, Yap and Pohnpei), or leadership achieved by accumulation of wealth or power through possession of material goods and services, as in most parts of Melanesia. These were well-established power structures, and arrangements that helped to maintain governance and ensure equitable distribution of wealth and services among the community. These systems had their inherent weaknesses and faults and it could be argued that they operated at a different time and era, but I would counter argue that the vast majority of our societies that are isolated from urban areas are still held together by this relationship that coexists between the community and the churches. It would probably not be unreasonable to argue that even in some urban areas, people who live in the urban periphery and those who squat on land in urban areas may have reason to feel that their lives probably revolve around their church and community. This could be true for some of the urban squatter settlements in Honiara and Port Vila where many minor disputes can still be resolved to a large extent by community and church leaders, although respect for these community leaders is also waning because of the different values with which people have grown up in these communities.

Nonetheless, community, tribe and family affiliations are still the greatest strengths of our Pacific islands societies. Yet the values of our community practices around the way decisions are made and leaders are chosen contrasts greatly with those associated with the democratic political systems introduced by colonial powers and adopted by our own leaders at independence.

The Western electoral system is almost anathema to the low-key, consensus-based, community-building and confidence-constructing form of selecting community and church leaders in the Pacific. Modern elections in some Pacific island countries are socially divisive and corrode the strong family, church and tribal affiliations that hold communities together. The placard-waving, drum-beating, long convoys of trucks with men, women and children shouting at the tops of their voices from the back of pick-up trucks contrasts greatly with the slower, more consultative and constructive processes of choosing our community and church leaders. Modern elections in countries like Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands involve thousands of dollars that candidates dish out to people. It becomes a game and in fact a joke among many electors, who use the opportunity to fundraise for their village sports teams and all sorts of other excuses that they can come up with, to get money from candidates. People lose their sense of self-respect during elections by treating it as a game and treating the candidates in particular as automatic teller machines.

In contrast, the process of selecting community and church leaders involves a great deal of respectability, well-established protocols in some instances, and none of the gamesmanship associated with modern political elections. Political campaigning to attract votes can have comical dimensions, with candidates often asked questions to embarrass them, and candidates played off against each other. It must be said that the way in which political elections have morphed in some Pacific island countries raises much doubt about the credibility of the system: the system that delivers people who must make the most important social, economic and political decisions. It is no surprise there is a growing level of dissatisfaction in social media about the quality of political leadership.

The psychological ramifications of the outcomes of the two processes of selecting community and church leaders on one hand and political leaders on the other cannot be more stark. Community and church leaders often feel a strong compulsion that they owe their service to the people who choose them, while political leaders often feel that people owe them and therefore they can do anything they want, often to recover the money that they spent winning the elections. The consequences of the two systems of governance that most Pacific island societies have are also telling. Communities are generally stable while governments are generally unstable. Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are very good examples of countries that have relatively unstable

governments and where their political system is entirely adopted from Western models. Countries such as Samoa and Kiribati that have successfully fused some of their traditional values with modern government systems have generally had more stable political governments.

Various donors and international organisations have attempted to address the political and electoral problems through various projects that range from strengthening parliamentary processes to introducing electoral reforms through political parties. All these simply entrench the Western values and democratic systems that are almost anathema to the traditional consensus-based value systems that continue to be practised at the community level. Given the Kiribati example, which builds on their egalitarian culture and has a popular electorate system for their representative and president with the right to recall by popular vote, there is probably something that can be learnt about the integration of traditional systems with the modern electoral systems that were introduced, and continue to be supported, by donors.

Author Notes

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