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Solomon Islands

Country:

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Year:

2015

FIW Status:

PF

PR Rating:

3

CL Rating:

3

Aggregate Score:

68

Combined Freedom Score:

3.0

Overview:

In preparation for legislative elections in November 2014, voter registration using biometric technology began in March to create a more secure voter roll. No resources were allocated to register voters overseas, who were unable to participate in the polls. Of those who were registered to vote, nearly 90 percent participated—the highest turnout yet and a significant increase from the 52 percent who participated in 2010. In December, the National Assembly elected Manasseh Sogavare to the prime minister; he had previously held the post on two occasions.

Ratings Change:

The Solomon Islands' political rights rating improved from 4 to 3 as a result of relatively successful elections in October 2014, which featured biometric registration and were accepted as legitimate by both the opposition and voters.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 25 / 40 (+3) **[Key]**

A. Electoral Process: 9 / 12 (+3)

Members of the 50-seat, unicameral National Parliament are elected for four-year terms. A parliamentary majority elects the prime minister. The National Parliament selects a governor general for a five-year term. He represents the British monarch as head of state and appoints the cabinet with advice from the prime minister. In May 2014, Sir Frank Kabui won a second term as governor general.

In legislative elections held in November 2014, a total of 32 independent candidates were elected to the National Parliament—a record-breaking number. The Democratic Alliance Party took 7 seats, the United Democratic Party took 5, the People's Alliance Party won 3, and three smaller parties secured one seat each. Observers reported general peace and orderly conduct at polling stations and found the elections to be generally free and fair.

Previous elections in the Solomon Islands have been plagued with problems including flawed voter rolls, allegations of bribery, fraudulent ballots, theft of ballot boxes, and voter intimidation and violence. The introduction of biometric voter registration for the 2014 national general elections marked a notable step in addressing a number of electoral challenges, and the overall conduct of the elections was both peaceful and successful. Neither voters nor the opposition contested the results.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 10 / 16

There are several political parties, but alliances are driven more by personal ties and clan identities. Frequent changing of party affiliations has a destabilizing effect on government. In May 2014, the National Parliament approved a revised Political Parties Integrity Act, which the government claimed will streamline processes to register, deregister, and merge political parties. Opposition parties complained that their concerns about the constitutionality of some provisions had been ignored.

C. Functioning of Government: 6 / 12

Public offices are widely seen as opportunities for personal enrichment. Many public officials have faced charges of official abuse and corruption and even former prime ministers have been convicted. Lawmakers often give themselves pay raises and other benefits, like lifetime pension, and absenteeism from parliamentary sessions is common. Public pressure in 2013 forced the government to withdraw a bill that had proposed giving former prime ministers and their surviving spouses monthly pension payments, free housing, free health care, a service staff, and other benefits.

In August 2014, the Leadership Code Commission, which investigates allegations of misconduct by lawmakers, dismissed a case against Gordon Darcy Lilo, the prime minister at the time; the commission cited lack of evidence. The case had been launched based on a complaint by a civil society group.

The Constituency Development Funds Act was passed in 2013 to increase transparency and accountability in the use of development funds, which lawmakers can spend at their discretion on roads, services, and other assistance to improve conditions for their constituent

communities. However, critics claim that the law places money in lawmakers' hands without clear measures to monitor how funds are managed and spent, and that little time was given to public consultation before the law's passage. Civil society groups called on international donors in 2014 to demand greater accountability from the government.

Civil Liberties: 43 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 14 / 16

Freedoms of expression and of the press are generally respected, but politicians and elites sometimes use legal and extralegal means to intimidate journalists. There are several print newspapers. The government operates the only radio station. There is no local television station, but foreign broadcasts can be received via satellite. Internet use is growing, but access is limited by high costs and lack of infrastructure. Freedom of religion is generally respected, as is academic freedom. The first university opened in Honiara in 2013.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 9 / 12

The constitution guarantees freedom of assembly, and the government generally recognizes this right in practice. Organizers of demonstrations must obtain permits, which are typically granted. In May 2014, a protest in the capital led to mob violence and looting, and police responded with tear gas and detained 53 people. Protesters had gathered to express discontent with rehabilitation assistance to victims of flooding. Violent public disagreements over perceived inequality in assistance efforts took place in August.

Civil society groups operate without interference. Workers are free to organize, and strikes are permitted. The Workers Union of the Solomon Islands was formed in July 2014. Its charter mandates that women must hold half of the union's executive positions.

F. Rule of Law: 8 / 16

The judiciary suffers from a lack of resources, which limits the provision of legal counsel and hinders the conduct of timely trials. Residents of rural areas have far more limited access to the formal justice system than those in urban centers. The Ombudsman's Office has far-reaching powers to investigate complaints of official abuse and unfair treatment, but it is poorly resourced. The effectiveness of the police is hampered by poor training, abuse of power, and factional and ethnic rivalries.

The military component of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) withdrew in 2013, ending a decade-long mission. RAMSI had maintained peace between the country's two dominant ethnic groups, the Gwale and Malaitans, since 2000. The police component—a 150-member force from Australia, New Zealand, and other Pacific Island countries—will remain through 2017 to train and support local police. The Royal Solomon Islands Police Force was disarmed in 2003 because of involvement in criminal activity and ethnic violence during a period of ethnic tensions in 1998–2003. In 2013, the

government approved a limited rearmament project led by the police component of RAMSI.

In September 2014, Australian national Frank Prendergast began a two-year term as police commissioner.

A Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigated crimes tied to ethnic violence between 1998 and 2003 and produced a final report in 2012. Commission member Terry Brown published a copy of the report online in 2013 after more than a year of delays by the government in reviewing and approving it for official public release.

The government has voiced opposition to decriminalizing same-sex sexual activity on grounds that it is against traditional values.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 12 / 16

A growing Chinese economic presence in the Solomon Islands continues to deepen public resentment; many demand that the government enforce laws that reserve certain jobs for native islanders.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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