

Solomon Islands

Country:

Solomon Islands

Year:

2016

Freedom Status:

Partly Free

Political Rights:

3

Civil Liberties:

3

Aggregate Score:

68

Freedom Rating:

3.0

Overview:

Following elections in November 2014, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare named nearly 40 political appointees to his new government in January 2015, up from 14 in the previous administration. Opposition critics said the appointments would impose a heavy burden—roughly \$12 million annually—on taxpayers amid a struggling economy. Subsequent decisions by the Parliamentary Entitlements Commission to grant tax-free salaries and other improved benefits to lawmakers further fueled public frustration with the government.

By October, Sogavare was struggling to stay in power as a number of ministers and lawmakers withdrew from his coalition. Police went on high alert to prevent any political unrest, but a no-confidence motion against the government was withdrawn at the end of the month after Sogavare secured the support of several independent members of Parliament.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 25 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 9 / 12

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

The parliamentary elections in 2014 were considered a significant improvement over previous years' balloting, with largely peaceful and orderly conduct at the polling stations, though allegations of vote buying persisted. Independent candidates dominated the voting, taking a record 32 seats. The Democratic Alliance Party won 7, followed by the United Democratic Party with 5, the People's Alliance Party with 3, and three smaller parties with 1 each. Parliament elected Sogavare, who had served as prime minister on two previous occasions, to lead the new government.

A new voter roll prepared with biometric technology had a positive impact on the 2014 elections. Nearly 90 percent of registered voters participated, up from 52 percent in the 2010 elections, and the results were accepted by candidates and voters. Flawed voter rolls, bribery allegations, fraudulent ballots, ballot box theft, voter intimidation, and violence had marred previous polls.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 10 / 16

There are several political parties, but alliances are driven more by personal ties and clan identities than formal policy platforms or ideology. Frequent changing of party affiliations has a destabilizing effect on government. In May 2014, Parliament approved a revised Political Parties Integrity Act with the aim of encouraging a stronger party system through more formalized registration mechanisms, though proposals that would have restricted party switching were dropped. The courts rejected complaints from the opposition that some elements of the new law were unconstitutional. The defections from Sogavare's coalition in late 2015 indicated that the law had not achieved its goals, spurring calls for further reform.

C. Functioning of Government: 6 / 12

Corruption and abuse of office are serious problems, and many public officials have faced charges over the years. In January 2015, the chief justice openly urged the new government to fight corruption and stop the appointment of "cronies" to key positions. An auditor general's report released that month found that at least \$8.6 million in government funds from fiscal years 2012 and 2013 were unaccounted for. In March and April, the Leadership Code Commission, which investigates allegations of misconduct by lawmakers, charged a former finance minister and a former mining minister with official misconduct involving conflicts of interest.

The new government said it would form a new policy-monitoring unit to improve government performance, but anticorruption groups noted that the unit would be staffed by expensive political appointees. Critics have also pointed to a lack of oversight regarding implementation of the Constituency Development Funds Act of 2013, which permits lawmakers to spend special funds at their discretion to improve conditions in their districts.

Public pressure in 2013 forced the government to withdraw a bill that would have given former prime ministers and their surviving spouses monthly pensions, free housing, free health care, a service staff, and other benefits. However, in April 2015 the Parliamentary Entitlements Commission granted lifetime pension payments to all lawmakers and higher rates to those who would have already received them, as well as tax-free status on lawmakers' salaries and terminal grants when they leave office. The new benefits drew strong public criticism given the size of the national debt, high unemployment, and other spending needs.

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 a national radio station, and subnational and private radio stations are also available. Subscription television services offer some local content, but the country has been unable to sustain a local free-to-air television station; plans for the national radio broadcaster to create a television service were under discussion in 2015. Internet penetration has grown, reaching about 10 percent in 2015, but access is limited by high costs and lack of infrastructure, particularly in rural areas.

Freedom of religion is generally respected, as is academic freedom. There are few significant constraints on open and free private discussion.

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. Civil society groups operate without interference.

Workers are free to organize, and strikes are permitted with certain restrictions. Laws against antiunion discrimination by employers are reportedly ineffective. The country's main labor union, the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers, was disbanded by court order in late 2013 after lengthy litigation over an illegal strike by plantation workers. However, labor activists registered a new entity, the Workers Union of Solomon Islands, in 2014.

F. Rule of Law: 8 / 16

Lack of resources limits provision of legal counsel and hinders conduct of timely trials. The same problem plagues the Ombudsman's Office in its investigation of official abuse and corruption.

The police force has historically lacked training, suffered from factional and ethnic rivalries, and drawn accusations of brutality. The police were disarmed in 2003 because of involvement in criminal activity as well as violence between the two dominant ethnic groups in 1998–2003. The military component of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which was organized to restore peace, withdrew from the country in 2013. A police mission from Australia, New Zealand, and other Pacific Island countries will remain through 2017 to train and support the local police in an advisory role. Government payments to former militants, ostensibly as part of a rehabilitation program, remained a matter of public controversy at the end of 2015.

In addition to lingering tensions among local ethnic groups, a growing Chinese presence in the country's economy has led to public resentment in recent years.

Same-sex sexual activity can be punished with up to 14 years in prison. While cases are reportedly rare, the government has resisted international pressure to decriminalize such activity.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 12 / 16

There are few significant impediments to freedom of movement, and property rights are generally respected.

Discrimination limits economic and political opportunities for women. Many lawmakers have voiced support for increasing women's participation in the National Parliament, including through reserved seats for women; just one woman won a seat in the 2014 elections. Rape and other forms of violence against women and girls are serious problems. A women's shelter reported in November 2015 that it was overwhelmed by demand for its services. In 2014, legislators passed the Family Protection Act, which criminalized various forms of domestic abuse and provided victim-protection mechanisms, but it had yet to be promulgated at the end of 2015.

Local and foreign women and children are vulnerable to sex trafficking and domestic servitude, including through forced marriages or "adoptions" to pay off debts. Migrant workers sometimes face forced labor in the mining, logging, and fishing industries. The country is not a party to the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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