Political Parties, Parliamentary Governance and Party Strengthening in Melanesia: Issues and Challenges

Dr Michael G. Morgan, Louise Baker & Luke Hambly
Centre for Democratic Institutions
The Australian National University

Introduction

In this paper, the authors chart avenues for political party strengthening in the Melanesia states of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. More specifically, they explore the advisability of adopting stronger national regulatory frameworks for parliamentary parties, strengthening and democratizing internal governance arrangements and/or broadening the appeal of political parties beyond specific groups of voters. The paper synthesises international best practice regarding engaging with political parties and the results of a recent major research program undertaken by the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) on political parties in the Pacific Islands.¹

The paper seeks to contextualise political parties in Melanesia, exploring the bases of their fluid party structures, and outlining the effects that fissiparous political parties have on political governance. It also provides a synopsis of international approaches to political party strengthening and political party engineering and makes some preliminary suggestions about how these elements might be synthesised to form the basis of engineering, capacity building and strengthening strategies for Melanesian parties.

**Theories of Political Party Operation**

Political parties are integral to the operation of democratic political systems and play fundamental roles in promoting good governance. In Western political systems, strong, representative and responsive political parties serve to legitimize the authority of governments, provide a means for peaceful political succession within a competitive party system and act as conduits of upward pressure from party members and affiliated organizations representing special interests.2

In Western countries, the traditional dominance of political parties has been eroded by the growth of mass media and civil society. Yet parties remain the primary vehicles for political action and are major influences on the development of public policy. Indeed, political parties provide the most sustainable means by which “diverse identities, interests, preferences and passions” can be fashioned into laws, appropriations, policies and coalitions.3 Put simply, parties can serve as the major vehicles for the aggregation of societal interests and their translation into policy.

---

Melanesian Political Parties in Context

An issue of increasing prominence in Melanesia is the apparent weakness of the region’s political parties.4 As Mainwaring and Scully observed of developing democracies generally, party organizations in Melanesia are ‘weak, electoral volatility is high, party roots in society are weak and individual personalities dominate parties and campaigns’.5 Programmatic and ideological cleavages - the traditional bases for political party development - have not shaped political competition nearly as much as ethnic, regional, religious and linguistic factors. There are examples of long-standing parties in Melanesia, with the nationalist Vanua’aku Pati in Vanuatu and the Pangu Pati in PNG being prime examples. The remainder tend to be short-lived, lacking a mass base, organisational structure, coherent ideology and firm party discipline.6 As John Ballard noted in the 1980s, PNG’s parties have mainly existed within the legislature, and have only been active outside of it during election time.7 Parties often act like parliamentary associations, with members joining a party once they have been elected to parliament. Rather than parties driving the pre-selection of candidates, parties are forced to choose popular local candidates for their survival.8 As Steeves points out, Solomon Islands political parties tend to be ‘electoral and strategic tool[s] to

---

be discarded at convenience.’9 Parties do not espouse clear ideological positions grounded in a consistent set of political principles, however most have a very general party position with a pro-development message.10 In addition, once formed parties tend to ‘exist principally for coalition formation.’11 For example, in PNG the early success of the Pangu Party gave way to fragmentation once the driving issue of PNG’s independence was resolved in 1975. According to Ron May, there was very little by way of policy differentiation between the various PNG political parties.12 Similarly, the polarisation between nationalist and centralist Anglophone and federalist, primarily Francophone parties in Vanuatu began to erode in the late 1980s, as leadership challenges within the Vanua’aku Pati provoked major factional splits.

Today, Melanesian political parties are often characterised as being arbitrary and ephemeral, or institutionally weak.13 Candidates often trade on personal qualities and their connection to particular constituents, rather than party-based platforms. Simultaneously, party members often show little in the way of group fidelity.14 Indeed, parties organise around personalities rather than political cleavages and are therefore prone to fragmentation because of the

10 Ibid, 118.
highly personalised nature of Melanesian politics.\textsuperscript{15} According to Henry Okole, Bernard Narokobi and Quinton Clements, PNG political parties:

have consistently failed to be permanent and genuine linkages between the government and the people. Like the state machinery that is easily accessed by political actors to serve their ends, most political parties in the country are the extra arms of their creators.\textsuperscript{16}

A major consequence of this is that there is little obligation or allegiance felt by the Member of Parliament to the political party he or she nominally stood for during the campaign period. Moreover, with the exception of PNG, there are no constitutional or other legislative restrictions to prevent members switching party allegiances within parliament at any time. As Joses Tuhanuku points out, this situation makes party discipline of MPs in the Solomon Islands ‘virtually impossible’.\textsuperscript{17}

Ironically, grassroots electors often appear to be disinterested in organized machinist or centralized parties, which are often unresponsive to local demands and needs. In Vanuatu, for example, electoral results indicate a shift away from the major parties to minor parties and independents, which in turn implies the subordination of national concerns (e.g. good governance) to intensely local ones (local development, responsive local representation, access to development funds).\textsuperscript{18} This is exemplified by increasing support for locally credible independent candidates whose major platforms are local development above all else.\textsuperscript{19} In numerical terms, the dominance of the major parties in Vanuatu has eroded markedly. Whereas at independence in 1980 Vanuatu parliament was polarised between the majority Vanua’aku Pati,


\textsuperscript{19} Morgan, "Political Fragmentation.”
which commanded 60% of seats, and the Union of Moderate Parties, which held the remainder, independents or minor parties now hold 50% or 26 seats in Vanuatu’s 52-seat parliament.

The political economies of Melanesia are predicated on reciprocity between MPs and their constituents, and generally speaking members act as if they are only truly accountable to the direct electors. Moreover, in much of Melanesia, the number of people need to win seats has characteristically been very low. In Vanuatu, the multi-member Single Non-Transferable Vote constituencies tend to return members with minority vote shares, with some candidates winning their seats with miniscule proportions of the vote. For example, in 1998, one of the six MPs elected from the Port Vila Constituency, polled just 352 votes out of the nine thousand or so votes cast.20

Slim electoral margins combined with the high turnover of incumbents at election time (some 50% are not returned each election21) means many MPs are attuned keenly to the need to reward their direct electors.22 This practice motors the pursuit of personal wealth as an imperative for political survival in PNG, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, and has been used to explain ‘rent-seeking’ behaviour. However, the high turnover of MPs also suggests that fulfilling election promises is no easy task, not least because of the demands placed upon MPs by the intense factional politics surrounding election to parliament and the formation of governments.

The Effects of Fragmented Parties on Government and Opposition in Melanesia

The foremost effect of Melanesia’s fluid party structures is regime instability. In the contemporary context, all Melanesian governments must be formed by

---

coalitions, often including several small parties. These coalitions tend not to survive the parliamentary term. Since independence in 1978, governments in the Solomon Islands have lasted only a little over half the four-year term of office. In a period of protracted instability in Vanuatu between 1995 and 1997, the government changed three times via votes of no confidence and there were eight major coalition changes. Consequently throughout Melanesia policymaking has often placed a distant second to alliance building and political survival.

Governments in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are characteristically formed by unwieldy or flimsy coalitions, without ideological coherence and unified primarily by the pragmatic considerations of attaining access to state resources. With the possible exception of Fiji, coalition governments have proved precarious, being beleaguered by competition over ministerial posts. Parliamentary factions congregate around one or more powerful individuals, who are linked to their junior party members and other parliamentarians by complex arrangements of reciprocity and patronage. Coalition member parties often show little respect for coalition fidelity, preferring rather to progress upwardly within governments, with the intention of claiming the post of Prime Minister – the position which dominates control of state resources and therefore represents the most powerful position from which to organise coalitions - or one of the other preferred portfolios. In turn, a particular responsibility of Melanesian prime ministers has become the mediation of contending claims, through inducements (money, ministerial portfolios, the appointment of political adherents and wantoks to party and bureaucratic positions) and sanctions (censure, expulsion).

Simultaneously, allegiances to political parties have weakened further as national politicians have adopted pragmatic and opportunistic attitudes to

attaining positions within government coalitions, therefore lessening the importance of ideological differences between members. MPs also give particular attention to attaining influence over utilities and placing allies and party-members on governing boards of state-owned enterprises. These positions represent important strategic points from which to distribute resources and thereby strengthen political alliances.

The responsibilities of parliaments and parliamentarians outlined by classical liberal theorists, which form the core of institutional expectations of parliaments, have become subordinated to these factional contests. Classical liberal philosophy suggests four basic expectations of parliaments and parliamentarians: that they constitute the executive; make laws; oversee the executive arm of government; and, represent community concerns. 25 The manoeuvring required by Melanesia’s fragmented party structures has mostly excluded policymaking and lawmaking from the public and transparent realms of parliamentary debate, to in camera cabinet, party room and ‘resort’ discussions, which leave the public, many partisans and even members of the government unaware of the implications and means of political machination. The intensity of these negotiations oftentimes diverts the attention of MPs from parliamentary procedures. The importance of the social cleavages or policy platforms that differentiate parliamentary political parties is lessened by the need for pragmatism, with the imperatives of patronage and pay-offs being emphasised. Simultaneously, clearly defined roles such as Government and Opposition can appear secondary when most members seek not to oversee executive behaviour but rather to join the Executive themselves.

The financial and political costs of this manoeuvring are characteristically high. In the past, executive governments in Melanesia have been driven to

---

25 However, no clear consensus emerges from political philosophy about the exact proportions in which these elements should be in evidence. For example, Walter Bagehot assigned principal significance to the British parliament’s responsibility to electing the cabinet (constituting an executive), with the secondary function being to communicate ‘ideas, grievances and wishes’ between governors and governed (representation/communication). There is great variation in the operation of the world’s Westminster systems. Gerhard Loewenberg, "The Influence of Parliamentary Behaviour on Regime Stability: Some Conceptual Clarifications," Comparative Politics 03, no. 02 (1971): 177-79.
extreme ends to raise the funds necessary to maintain their hold on power. For example, after the 2004 elections in Vanuatu, Serge Vohor, at the head of an increasingly brittle coalition and an internally fractious party (the Union of Moderate Parties), opened diplomatic relations with Taiwan, despite Vanuatu’s One China Policy, to access the funds needed to pay-off dissident coalition and party members. In this instance, the vicissitudes of factional politics and the desire to stay in office regardless of the implications were perceptibly driving policy. Furthermore, regime instability tends to undermine policy-effectiveness, parliamentary procedures and basic functions such as oversight and lawmaking. In Vanuatu, endemic parliamentary instability brought policymaking and oversight virtually to a halt in the mid-to-late 1990s. In Solomon Islands, the inscrutability and instability of the national parliament precipitated the breakdown of social order, notably contributing to the bloody ethnic conflict that erupted in 1999, although clearly other factors were at play.

Ways forward for Melanesia

Despite the systemic weaknesses noted above, the mobilization of disparate political parties into coalition governments is still the primary means by which governments are formed in Melanesia, irrespective of how transient they prove to be. Where they serve to aggregate societal interests, parties help to sustain functional democratic institutions by strengthening accountability to the electorate and responsiveness to their concerns, and therefore remain an indispensable institutional framework for democracy. Due to the importance of political parties, many governments in developing societies have looked to party reform as a way to promote better governance and democratic consolidation. This trend has been influenced by comparative research on

---


parties across a range of contemporary democracies. For example, Reilly points out that ‘broad based parties with strong ties to the electorate are associated with higher overall levels of development than other party systems’. Reformers have also considered the idea of Haggard and Webb that party system fragmentation can present particular barriers to achieving substantive economic reform. ‘Political engineers’ have focused primarily on institutional reform, favouring two party system designs or stable coalitions organized on a left-right basis, due to the promise of democratic durability. Despite this promise via designs based on minimal parties with broad social and ideological bases, most developing nations have not evolved dualistic party systems. Reform attempts in developing democracies following this theory have not seen party systems develop as expected.

The major problem with political party strengthening is that, taken together, the results of the myriad party strengthening programs that have been undertaken in Africa, South America and Asia have had minimal or ambiguous returns. In some instances, party engineering strategies have simply been unable to counter the intensity of ethnic tensions. In Uganda, for example, the multiparty system collapsed under pressures of tribalism and ethnic mobilization. Subsequently, more effort has been put into restricting the ability of ethnic groups to form parties in the first place; in Uganda, the system now denies parties a role in electoral politics.

Political engineers have advocated a number of alternative ways for crafting party systems to encourage their development. In particular, they have focused on the design of electoral systems as a means of rewarding inter-ethnic moderation and encouraging cross-ethnic or cross-regional vote seeking. Strengthening parties from the ‘top-down’ via measures aimed at

---

28 Reilly, "Political Engineering of Parties and Party Systems".
building greater party discipline and organizational capacity is another mechanism for influencing political behaviour and developing stable party systems. Yet, such attempts at institutional reform are often ‘quick fix’ solutions to more complex problems. Indeed, political engineers have paid surprisingly little attention to the ways in which parties in developing democracies emerge and are sustained.

Nonetheless, one of the simplest measures available to the Melanesian states is to regulate party formation and operation statutorily.

PNG’s Organic law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPC) was a major constitutional reform introduced in 2000 and enacted in 2001. The OLIPPC reforms have two key objectives: first, to stabilise and encourage the development of political parties through new rules that regulate the formation, composition and funding of parties; second, to stabilise the executive through provisions that limit how MPs can vote on a motion of no-confidence against the executive, as well as establishing rules for the formation of government, defections from political parties and offences for breaking the law, and imposing restrictions on independent MPs.32

Although the law was reorganised with minor amendments in 2003, the essential purpose remains unchanged. Yet OLIPPC has not been able to discourage new parties from being formed or splitting in parliament. Indeed, there may be a tendency in PNG to place too much emphasis on changes to political institutions when what lies at the heart of the problem are behavioural issues or issues of political culture. The 'engineering' of weak parties into stronger alliances and the shifting of coalitions of independents into parties will take time. As Reilly points out, it may not eventuate at all.33 Nonetheless, some simple effects are noticeable. For instance, the number of parliamentary parties fell from 21 after the 2002 elections to 15 in the

aftermath of the 2004 elections, largely on account of the strict application of registration rules and procedures.\textsuperscript{34}

Presently, it is crucial that reformists in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands be afforded comparative experiences on which to draw in the conceptualization of their own political party reform measures. Already some proposed reforms have fallen foul of poor planning, have been beholden to overt political agendas or have been unconstitutional. In 2004, for example, Vanuatu’s parliament debated and passed constitutional amendments empowering the Prime Minister to terminate disloyal MPs and establishing a grace-period at the beginning and end of a government’s life in which no "motions of no confidence" would be allowed. Quickly labelled the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, 50 of the 52 members of parliament voted for the proposals, the president assented to them and they were gazetted by the state law office (attorney general’s department). The Vanuatu Court of Appeal however, deemed the Bill unconstitutional: not only was the parliament without the power to pass the act but also due process was abrogated. Not surprisingly, the Court of Appeal of Vanuatu threw out the Fourth Amendment.\textsuperscript{35}

Consequently, the reform agenda in Vanuatu now reflects the example set in Papua New Guinea more closely, with discussions currently being held around the idea of regulating parties, making party registration mandatory, establishing minimum party numbers, and demanding financial returns be submitted by all registered parties. Minor parties have voiced reservations about any strategies designed to bolster the power of the major parties on the grounds that they will merely serve to entrench parties that are losing touch with grassroots voters.

Certainly, recognition must be made of the differences in the experiences of Western parties in the coalescence of political ideals into organised parties, and the strategies that democracy promotion foundation such as CDI are

\textsuperscript{35} Bob Makin, "Fourth Amendment without Effect, Unconstitutional. No Referendum Standing by for 'after the Silver Jubilee'," \textit{The Independent}, 25 June 2005.
trying to achieve. In developed democracies, such as Britain and Sweden, the modern state was built from the bottom up. In these states, consolidation emerged by establishing the rule of law, followed by institutions of civil society, and then horizontal accountability to parliaments.\(^{36}\) Rose and Shin argue that by contrast, developing democracies have ‘started democratization backwards’, introducing free elections before establishing basic institutions such as the rule of law and civil society.\(^{37}\) Strengthening political parties primarily from the ‘top-down’ is attempting to change a system that has been influenced by pressures from the ‘bottom-up’.

Political party strengthening initiatives must reflect this reality to develop more stable and aggregative political party systems that encourage stronger links between citizens and the government, and thereby greater capacity for policy creation and implementation. What are often missing from the debates about political party engineering in PNG are the critical discussions about party functioning which take into account these pressures and which conceptualise strategies for targeting local people’s expectations of representation and reciprocity from their MPs - issues that underpin contemporary party functioning in Melanesia. Irrespective of OLIPPC’s implementation and the queries that are raised about its constitutionality, advisability and effectiveness, few comprehensive programs have been attempted to educate Papua New Guineans about the laws implications, import and constitutional. Fundamental to the eventual success of OLIPPC will be the level to which the PNG government is able to undertake the civic education, advocacy and lobbying needed to bolster awareness about the implications of the regulatory framework provided by this legislation.

The Centre for Democratic Institutions has embarked on a practitioner-oriented approach to strengthening political parties in key countries in the region through improving the knowledge and skills of members and officials of political parties and extending networks in the region between Australian


\(^{37}\) Ibid: 333.
political party officials, parliamentarians and parliamentary staff and their counter-parts from priority countries. The intention is not to import Australian political party practices into the region wholesale but rather to provide political parties with training, access to capacity building activities and comparative experiences on which to draw in the determining of the direction for their own parties. Among the intended outcomes of this strategy are the strengthening of internal democracy in the selection of legislative candidates and party leaders and the strengthening of party organization generally. This will be achieved through a responsive, non-partisan process that gradually engages Melanesian political parties at an international, regional and national level in meaningful dialogue about their role and methods. Through this strategy the relative merits of prioritizing representation for women and other under-represented groups within internal governance structures within political parties and the Executive may be analysed. Indeed, the abovementioned party strengthening activities provide the necessary preconditions for these future, necessary discussions about the appropriate levels of representation in Melanesia political parties.

**Conclusions**

No consensus emerges from the international literature on party strengthening about how best to extend the appeal of parties beyond their direct set of electors and how best to transcend the links of patronage, ethnicity and region which characterize party functioning in Melanesia. Given the existing political governance arrangements in Melanesia, parties are nonetheless central to democratic state functioning. What remain contested are the appropriate avenues for effecting the stabilization of Melanesian political parties, for limiting floor crossings and for encouraging the aggregation of interests. Neither direct party engineering nor electoral reforms designed to aggregate party interests are particularly cheap or simple options. Moreover, electoral reforms tend to throw up unexpected results.\textsuperscript{38}

However, progressing effective political governance through dialogue and cautious legislative reforms, backed up by effective interpersonal networks and prudently applied technical assistance programs may offer the chance of success to the existing reform packages, and provide exemplars for regional countries to synthesize, evaluate and, where appropriate, adopt.

References


