2012 Vanuatu Election - Election Observer’s Report

Norm Kelly, Associate, Centre for Democratic Institutions

Background
The Vanuatu national election was held on 30 October 2012 (polling was held a day later on the island of Santo, due to flooding). Transparency International provided domestic observer teams across the country. The Vanuatu Government had not invited international teams to observe the election, but after concerns were raised that this may reflect poorly on the conduct of the election, the Government allowed diplomatic missions to observe. Dr Kelly was attached to the Australian High Commission team, and was in-country from Sunday 28th October, to Thursday 1st November.

52 MPs are elected from Vanuatu’s 17 constituencies, with each constituency electing from one to seven MPs under Vanuatu’s Single Non-Transferable Vote electoral system. 346 candidates contested the election, including 17 women. 32 political parties contested the election, and there were 65 Independent candidates. UMP stood the most candidates (30), followed by the Vanu’aku party (28) and the People’s Progressive Party (27).

Dr Kelly observed polling in the Port Vila constituency (a 6-member constituency), visiting four polling stations during the day - Anamburu, Town Hall, Dumbea Hall,
and Chiefs Nakamel. This was followed by observing the initial count at the Chiefs Nakamel station.

**Issues**

Two significant issues were observed during polling, relating to the electoral roll, and the use of proxy voting.

**Accuracy of the Roll** - Several people were turned away, despite having their Electoral ID cards, because they were not listed on the Electoral Roll. The reasons for these problems included:

- Incorrect data entry when transferring information from the field notes of enrolment officials to the database (see Photo 1); and
- The information of newly-enrolled voters (who receive their ID card when enrolled in the field) not being entered into the database at all.

Many of these intending voters appeared to be genuine Vanuatu citizens, with current ID cards. The lack of provisional (or declaration) voting on the day meant that they were unable to exercise their right to vote. If provisional voting was available, these intending voters could sign a declaration, and include this with their vote in a separate envelope. The person’s eligibility could then be checked in the days after the election, and the vote added to the count where verified.

Stations observed in Port Vila were relatively close to the Electoral Office in the capital, and intending voters were being told to visit the office to resolve the problem. By lunchtime, a large crowd (estimated about 50 to 100 people) had gathered outside the Office, and only a few were being admitted into the Office by the VMF at a time. As a result, some citizens were able to have their ID card amended, and return to the polling station to vote (see Photo 1), but this would have been a small minority of those turned away at the Port Vila stations, and it would have been impossible for people in other constituencies (apart from neighbouring Efate Rural) to have their problems resolved.

### Photo 1  ID card and Database Entry

This voter’s ID card originally showed her enrolment as Sheet 155 Line 2. This has been incorrectly entered into the database. The voter attended the Electoral Office, where her enrolment was found on the database, and her ID card amended accordingly. She was provided with a printout of the data entry to show polling officials when she returned to the polling station to vote.
Use of proxy voting - Proxy voting allows an enrolled voter to vote for at least two other enrolled people. Schedule 4 of the *Representation of the People Act* details the procedure and forms to be used for proxy voting. The voter granting a proxy states the reasons why, and who is nominated to act as the proxy. This form is verified by the Electoral Office and provided to the Returning Office at the relevant polling station. The proxy voter then attends the polling station with the person’s ID card and other part of the form. The two parts of the form are then paired by the Returning Officer (see Photo 2).

Photo 2  Matching-up Proxy Voting Forms

Photo 3  An unofficial proxy voting authorisation
Despite not using the official form as stipulated by the Act, and not including the names of the persons giving and receiving the proxy, this note was sufficient to allow a person to lodge a proxy vote. The main concern here is that the note has an official Electoral Office stamp, despite being non-conforming.
The use of proxy voting denies a secret vote to those exercising a proxy, and increases the opportunity for vote-buying. On polling day, processing proxy votes proved to be troublesome and time-consuming for polling officials. Several intending voters were advised to visit the Electoral Office to sort out the paperwork for exercising a proxy, but of course this opportunity was not available for voters on other islands. In addition, some voters were not using the prescribed forms to cast proxy votes (see Photo 3).

Other Issues
Traffic flow at polling stations - while generally this was good, the system of voters returning to the polling officials’ desk to collect their ID card after voting produced some confusion - in terms of where to go, and sorting out ID cards (an official could be holding 5-10 cards while voters are voting).

Access for the disabled - voters had to stand in booths to cast their vote. There generally appeared to be a lack of provision for disabled voters.

Diagram 1 Dumbea Hall polling station layout
This diagram highlights the excessive travel that one voter has to make.
1. Goes to registration table to be marked off roll and receive ballot pad and envelope.
2. Goes to individual booth to vote.
3. Deposits ballot envelope in ballot box.
4. Discards unused ballot pad in rubbish bin near exit.
5. Returns to registration table to have thumb inked and collect ID card.
6. Exits the polling station.
Diagram 2  Anamburu polling station layout
At Anamburu, travel is more streamlined, but becomes complicated when four lines of voters are being processed (diagram shows travel for only one of the four lines).
1. Goes to registration table to be marked off roll and receive ballot pad and envelope.
2. Goes to individual booth to vote.
3. Discards unused ballot pad in rubbish bin.
4. Deposits ballot envelope in ballot box.
5. Returns to registration table to have thumb inked and collect ID card.
6. Exits the polling station.

At the count - officials conduct a preliminary count immediately after voting finishes. This count is unofficial, and after the returning Officer announces each vote (showing the paper to scrutineers), ballots are placed back in their envelopes and returned to the ballot box. Ballot boxes are then transported to the Electoral Office for the official count. It would be beneficial for the Electoral Office to provide tally sheets to the polling officials, to avoid having to hand-write candidates’ names. Also, a tally board would be a benefit for this count.

Performance of Women Candidates
Seventeen women contested the election, including three women with parliamentary experience - incumbent Eta Rory (Malekula), and former MPs Hilda Lini (Port Vila) and Leinavaua Tasso (Epi). It appears that no women will be elected, with the best-performed being Tasso, who is likely to come third in the two-member Epi constituency. Vanuatu is now one of four Pacific states without women in parliament (the others being Palau (lower house), Nauru, and the Federated States of Micronesia).
I contacted the 13 women who attended candidate training support by CDI (and convened by Vanuatu’s Department of Women’s Affairs and AusAID’s Pacific Leadership Program) in August 2012 and followed up with phone discussions with the following women:

Maryanne Bani (Independent, Port Vila) - Complained of not having enough financial backing as an Independent, but would have preferred a longer campaign period.

Jenny Ligo (Independent, Port Vila) - Jenny is with the Vanu'aku Party, but was told to run as an Independent, and then join Vanu'aku if she was elected.

Letty Kaltonga (Labour, Port Vila) - a first-time candidate, Letty’s campaign poster was one of the more prominent around town. She has 20 years’ experience working at the Daily Post, and shows some potential for the future.

Recommendations

1. **Accuracy of the Roll** - the roll and voter ID system needs to be modernised. ID cards should be printed directly from the database, to avoid mistakes in the transfer of data.

2. **Public Access to the Roll** - citizens should have the opportunity to check the roll before election day, and have the opportunity to have the roll corrected where there are inaccuracies. This would reduce problems on polling day, and also help to clean the roll of deceased and ineligible enrolments.
3. **Provisional Voting** - the government should give consideration to the introduction of provisional voting, to address inaccuracies in the roll. Citizens with an ID card who turn up to vote should have the opportunity to lodge a provisional (declaration) vote, which could then be added to the count once the person’s eligibility is confirmed.

4. **Recording the Names of People not on the Roll** - polling officials should be recording the details of people turned away for not being on the roll, so that electoral officials can follow up after the election to add them to the roll.

5. **Disabled and elderly access** - provide at least two booths at each polling station with a chair and desk to make it easier for the elderly and infirm to cast their vote.