This year is a landmark year for elections in Solomon Islands and Fiji. In August, Solomon Islands will go to the polls for the first time since the withdrawal of the military component of Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, and the elections will for the first time be based on voter registration undertaken using a biometric roll. Elections to be held in Fiji in September are likely to be far more contentious. These elections will be the first since the military coup of 2006, and will involve significant numbers of the younger generation voting for the first time and ongoing uncertainty and confusion around the promised electoral Act.

However, both Solomon Islands and Fiji have undergone significant changes in their information and communication technology (ICT) environments since their last elections. For example, at its last elections, in 2010, Solomon Islands had a mobile phone penetration rate of 21 per cent. This proportion has more than doubled in just two years: in 2012, mobile phone penetration was 53 per cent. The mobile phone network now covers 60 per cent of the country (BAI 2012:12–13; World Bank 2012). Internet penetration has increased far more slowly: in 2010 internet penetration stood at 5 per cent and increased to only 7 per cent by 2012 — mobile broadband was introduced in 2011. Fiji's last elections were in 2006. At that point, mobile phone penetration was 34 per cent and internet penetration 9 per cent. Mobile phone penetration has nearly tripled, to 98 per cent, and internet rates have increased nearly fourfold, to 33 per cent. Mobile network coverage — including 3G — has been rolled out to 95 per cent of the population (ITU 2013).

These changes significantly affect the media environment in Solomon Islands and Fiji. This *In Brief* is the first in a series analysing recent academic literature on the conduct of elections in the context of new developments in ICT and applying this literature to Melanesian elections. This piece focuses on recent work by Max Grömping (2013) on the concept of crowdsourced election observation: ICT-facilitated citizen-generated election monitoring.

Crowdsourcing Electoral Integrity in Melanesia: Emerging Issues

Electoral integrity is an ongoing concern in Melanesian elections. Issues of electoral fraud and malpractice, bribery, and election-related violence have historically marred elections in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji to varying degrees. Elections in Solomon Islands and Fiji this year are unlikely to be completely free from such concerns and Fiji's elections will be subject to huge amounts of tension and scrutiny.

It is more than likely, given these concerns and the current penetration of mobile phones in each country, that Fijians and Solomon Islanders will use their phones to record electoral activity and share it with friends, or to access information about electoral conduct from others. As outlined in Grömping (2013), such activity is known as crowdsourcing, meaning the use of mobile phones and other ICTs by citizens independent of government to monitor elections. Crowdsourcing is more broadly defined as: 'the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call' (Howe 2008:99). In the context of elections it refers to any sort of communication recording the conduct of the election — text messages, email and so on — submitted to a central repository or shared widely by citizens.

Crowdsourced election monitoring, then, is a system in which 'any individual can register an observation about an election and that observation is pooled with other individuals' observations to create a public depiction of the reality of the election that is offered back to the public and to election officials in real-time on election day' (Fung 2011:194–5).

Crowdsourcing can take two forms. It can be 'bounded', meaning that the ICT-enabled monitoring is conducted by trained observers, usually members of established civil society organisations, with a common goal and a common reporting mechanism and framework. This process arguably increases electoral transparency and citizen engagement. In contrast, 'unbounded' crowdsourcing simply means the same communications transmitted by untrained,

generally anonymous, individuals. The information can be shared with others or with traditional media outlets, or transmitted to a website using technology so that the results are collected in the same place. The important feature is that the processes of collection and the people involved remain disorganised and decentralised.

Electoral officials in both Fiji and Solomon Islands are certainly using new technologies to collate their results, and online political discussion is vibrant in both countries. However, there are no 'bounded' practices of crowdsourcing currently underway in Melanesia and none in preparation in either Solomon Islands or Fiji: there are no citizen observers being trained to report data back in an organised, centralised fashion using their mobile phones. 'Unbounded' crowdsourcing seems more probable.

This process is likely to play into broader issues of electoral contestability in Melanesian politics. Grömping (2013) argues that commitment to electoral integrity is an emerging norm in international society, as is crowdsourcing of electoral integrity. This means that states (and citizens) adopt the practice of crowdsourced election monitoring as part of the adoption of larger norms about the role of states and citizens in democracies — that is, on the basis of agreement about how democratic elections 'should' be run.

This discourse is certainly present in democracy activism in Fiji, but varying degrees of clientist politics across Melanesia may mean that such norms are practised in a particularly localised fashion. This means that the meaning of electoral integrity may not be shared by all participants. Integrity may mean election outcomes that work in favour of particular candidates rather than the election as a whole. Depending on the role of certain interest groups in the incident, citizens may not agree either on what fraud is, or on the measurement of all incidences of fraud as equal.

Such nuances affect any crowdsourced election monitoring in Melanesia, particularly given that any such activity is likely to be decentralised and almost entirely spontaneous. This emerging form of electoral monitoring is as yet unstudied and may, of course, bring the benefits of added scrutiny and voter engagement. However, it is easy to imagine that the presence of decentralised, personalised ICT-facilitated records of electoral fraud or violence could add extra noise to tense electoral environments.

Such reports can introduce uneven and unregulated election observation in ways that may reframe the conduct of the election in public discourse.

'Unbounded' crowdsourcing, then, is likely to be one of the outcomes of the changed telecommunications environment in both Fiji and Solomon Islands. This process may enhance the level of detail involved in election reporting in Melanesia — an undoubted good. However, it may also change the relationship between citizens and election observation. It may facilitate a new type of engagement which introduces not only clarity but also chaos, as individuals are able to collect and share alleged incidences of electoral fraud quickly and without centralised control.

Author Notes

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