



PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM SECRETARIAT

VANUATU NATIONAL ELECTIONS 2016

REPORT OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM ELECTION OBSERVER TEAM

INTRODUCTION

At the invitation of the Government of Republic of the Vanuatu, the Pacific Islands Forum deployed a Forum Election Observer Team to Port Vila Vanuatu, from 14 - 25 January, to observe the Vanuatu snap-elections on 22 January 2016. The Forum Election Observer Team (the Forum Team) comprised Mr Pita Vuki, Electoral Commissioner and Supervisor of Elections of the Kingdom of Tonga (Team Leader); Mrs Taggy Tangimetua, Government Statistician and Chief Electoral Officer of the Cook Islands; and Forum Secretariat staff (the list of members is attached at **Annex 1**).

2. The Forum Team was based in Vanuatu's capital, Port Vila, and met with a wide range of stakeholders including senior Government representatives; the Vanuatu Electoral Office; civil society (including youth, women and disability groups) and faith-based organisations; private sector: election candidates; development partners; media representatives; the University of the South Pacific; and members of the diplomatic corps based in Port Vila. A list of stakeholders consulted is attached at **Annex 2**. On 22 January, Election Day, the Forum Team deployed across the island of Efate and neighbouring Moso Island. The Team observed all aspects of the elections in rural and urban areas – the pre-polling environment, the opening of polls, casting of votes, closing of polling, and the counting of votes.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

3. The Forum Election Observer Team recommends for the consideration of the Government of the Republic of Vanuatu, the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office, as appropriate.

Recommendation 1:

- a) That standardised processes be followed for the opening of polls, voting, close of polls, opening of the count, and the conduct of the count;
- b) That all Returning Officers are given at least one full-day refresher training before the election to ensure consistency of practice in the facilitation of the polling processes (including opening and closing) across all polling stations.

Recommendation 2:

- a) That the Vanuatu Electoral Office be re-established as a Constitutional Office reporting only to the Electoral Commission, so that dual reporting lines for the Principal Electoral Officer be streamlined; and
- b) That the Office is allocated sufficient funding annually from the national budget to independently undertake its legislated functions as well as adequately remunerate and maintain its staff.

Recommendation 3:

- a) That amendments be made to the Constitution so that responsibility for local and municipal elections is transferred to the local governments and municipal councils respectively,

commensurate with sufficient (financial and personnel) resourcing to enable the free, fair and orderly conduct of elections at both levels; **or**

b) That sufficient additional staff be allocated to the Electoral Office to enable it to meet its Constitutional responsibilities to conduct elections for Parliament, the National Council of Chiefs, local government and municipal councils, in a manner that is consistent with Occupational Health and Safety standards and that protects and ensures the welfare and wellbeing of its staff.

Recommendation 4:

a) That the necessary legal reforms be undertaken as soon as possible to enable the implementation of the biometric voter registration system; and

b) That adequate financial and personnel resourcing be allocated to the Vanuatu Electoral Office to ensure the commencement and completion of a Biometric Voter Registration system, as soon as possible, but before the next scheduled national elections in four years.

Recommendation 5:

That the ballot papers be changed to reduce the probability of voters placing more than one ballot in each envelope. An alternative ballot format could be a single sheet of paper containing all the candidate's names, symbols, and party names (where relevant) from which the voter would tick or cross their selection.

Recommendation 6:

a) That all information on the electoral processes – particularly the annual opening of the electoral roll for inspection and registration, and changes to legislation – be shared with all mainstream media providers (whether government or privately owned). Such information should be regularly repeated and [where resourcing permits] re-produced in print and widely disseminated;

b) That the Electoral Office take advantage of the widespread use of social media to disseminate through social media, correct information on electoral processes, particularly the annual opening of the electoral roll for inspection and registration and changes to legislation; and

c) That the Electoral Office take advantage of the wide coverage of mobile phone companies to disseminate, through text messages, correct information on electoral processes, particularly the annual opening of the electoral roll for inspection and registration and changes to legislation.

Recommendation 7:

The Forum Election Observer Team congratulates the Government of Vanuatu for its initiative of implementing reserved seats for women at municipal council level and encourages the Government to work with the relevant national and development partners to undertake the necessary groundwork to implement reserved seating for women at provincial and national government levels.

Recommendation 8:

a) That widespread and regular civic awareness activities are undertaken to educate people and raise awareness on the significance of individual votes in influencing the governance and development of the country; and

b) That the Vanuatu Electoral Office is provided adequate funding from the recurrent budget, to undertake widespread and regular civic awareness programmes.

CONTEXT

4. Vanuatu consists of 83 islands divided into 6 administrative provinces and a total land mass of 12,281 square kilometres. There are two main urban areas, the capital Port Vila on the island of Efate in Sheffa Province, and Luganville, on the island of Espiritu Santo in Sanma Province. Vanuatu has an estimated population of over 260,000 of which over 98% are ni-Vanuatu. Approximately 26% of the population reside in the urban areas.

5. Vanuatu gained independence on 30 July 1980 and has a unicameral Parliament comprising 52 members elected by popular vote to serve four year terms. The Head of Government is the Prime Minister who is either the leader of the majority party or majority coalition or is elected by Parliament from amongst its members. The Head of State is the President, who is elected by an electoral college comprising the Parliament and the leaders of the Provincial governments. The President serves a single five year term. There are 18 multi-member constituencies with representatives voted in through the open party-list simple majority vote. Any Vanuatu citizen who has attained the age of 18 can vote while candidates need to be at least 25 years old (amongst other criteria).

6. The responsibility of municipal, provincial and national elections is given to the Electoral Commission, a constitutional body, and the Vanuatu Electoral Office established under the Constitution of Vanuatu and the Representation of the People Act (the Act) respectively.

7. Vanuatu last held national elections on 30 October 2012 and was due to hold the next general elections before 30 October 2016. However, on 24 November 2015 the President, His Excellency Father Baldwin Jacobsen Lonsdale, dissolved Parliament following the inability of the Government and the Opposition to resolve a protracted period of political instability. Consistent with Constitutional requirements that a snap-election be held between 30 and 60 days of the dissolution of Parliament, the Vanuatu 2016 snap-election was announced to take place on 22 January 2016.

Background to the dissolution of Parliament

8. In October 2015, 14 Members of Parliament (MPs) were convicted of corruption and subsequently sentenced to prison terms of at least 3 years each. The convicted MPs were Government members and included two former Prime Ministers (the sitting Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister for Foreign Affairs), the Minister for Finance, and the Speaker of Parliament. The conviction of half the government MPs resulted in a minority government. As the Government was not able to negotiate a unity government with the Opposition, the ensuing political impasse and increased political instability prompted the President to dissolve Parliament and call for snap-elections.

2016 SNAP-ELECTIONS

The extraordinary challenges in the lead up to the 2016 snap-elections

9. The Forum Team recognises and acknowledges the severe time constraints faced by the Vanuatu Electoral Office, not just in preparing for the snap-election but also in the six months preceding the snap-elections. The Team noted that following the legislated annual clean-up and update of the electoral roll by 30 June, the Electoral Office was faced with organising a by-election for a seat in the Port Vila constituency vacated on 28 July 2015 by the death of the Hon. Edward Natapei. The Port Vila by-election was held on 15 October 2015.

10. The Electoral Office also had to prepare for the Sanma Provincial elections which were held on 17 December 2015. The dissolution of Parliament on 24 November 2015 and the constitutional requirement to hold national elections between 30 and 60 days there-of meant that the Electoral Office was simultaneously preparing for the Sanma provincial elections and the national snap-elections, scheduled for 22 January 2016. The Forum Team was sorry to hear that the Principal Electoral Officer, Father Charles Vatu was taken seriously ill following the Sanma provincial elections.

11. This report contains the Forum Team's observations and assessments of the conduct of the 2016 national elections and the legal and institutional frameworks which guide the conduct of national elections in Vanuatu. The views and experiences of the wide range of stakeholders consulted were also taken into consideration.

Pre-polling

12. The Forum Team observed campaigning undertaken by aspiring candidates in and around Port Vila until Tuesday 19 January, the mandatory 48 hours before Election Day when all campaigning ends.

13. At times loud and festive, the Forum Team found campaigning to be free and peaceful, and in most cases, respectful of other candidates. Candidates were able to campaign unobstructed and the public able to listen. The Forum Team commends candidates and supporters for the manner in which they conducted themselves.

The poll

14. The official opening hours for the election was from 7.30am to 4.30pm on 22 January 2016. The Forum Team observed the opening, conduct and closing of polling across 21 of the 29 polling stations in rural and urban areas on the island of Efate, including the neighbouring Moso Island.

15. The Forum Team commends the Electoral Office, Returning Officers, polling clerks and security personnel for their professionalism and competence in facilitating polling across the stations observed. Within each polling station observed there were at least two sub-polling stations while the minimum number of polling booths seen in a polling station was two. As a result the Forum Team did not witness any queues outside polling stations except for the queues that formed prior to the opening of the polls. Where there were queues, voters assembled in a peaceful and orderly manner.

16. The Forum Team also commends the patience, dedication and compassion shown by all polling officials and voters alike, toward elderly voters, voters with disabilities, pregnant women, and people with young children, all of whom were moved to the front of the queues.

Opening

17. At the polling stations where the opening was observed, the Returning Officers generally held ballot boxes open for voters and observers to confirm it was empty, before locking the boxes. The Act requires ballot boxes to be locked with two dissimilar padlocks, the Forum Team noted this was not the case in some polling stations with some having only one padlock.¹ The Returning Officers also clearly explained the voting process to all present and repeated at regular intervals for the benefit of newly arrived voters.

¹ Section 4(2), Schedule 5, The Representation of the People Act, Chapter 146.

Voting process

18. The Forum Team was in agreement that although there were minor procedural issues witnessed across the various polling stations, these should not affect the validity or legality of votes cast.

19. The Forum Team noted that all polling stations observed had specially allocated areas for political and international observers that allowed a clear view of the process (except for the actual voting). Observers were kept informed of any electoral issues that arose.

20. The Forum Team noted the entire process was very transparent with Returning Officers and polling officials trying their best to ensure voters were able to exercise their right to vote. For example there were several witnessed instances when an additional (*kastom*) name of a voter was included on the voter card but missing from the electoral roll (or vice versa). In such cases the Returning Officer asked several questions of the voter to verify identity, then advised political observers of the process undertaken and sought approval that the voter be allowed to vote. In none of the instances observed were objections made.

21. The minor procedural issues observed by the Forum Team include the delay of 5 minutes at the opening of one station. The Forum Team observed the inconsistent application of indelible ink to voters who had cast their vote. Methods varied from dipping the left thumb in the ink bottle, a small mark on the left thumbnail, imprinting the left thumb on the same ink pad used by officials to stamp polling cards, to the use of a permanent marker pen. Polling officials informed the Forum Team that as they were from the surrounding areas and knew all the voters it prevented double voting. The Act allows the Electoral Commission to make Orders for the placing of indelible mark on the thumbnail of voters.²

22. There were also inconsistencies in the practice of assisted voting across several polling stations. In some stations, the Returning Officer providing assistance requested the presence of the police officer in the voting booth, while in others only the Returning Officer or the police officer entered the booth with the voter. (The Forum Team notes that the legislation does not specify the verification of assisted votes by a third party). In all cases observed the Returning Officers always clearly and loudly informed observers of assisted voting, or proxy voting as was the case.

23. Another minor organisational issue was with the internal set-up of polling stations which affected the order (and orderliness) of processing voters. Generally, when voters were issued ballots their voter cards were taken by the polling official. After casting their ballot the voter would return to the same polling official to retrieve their card (which was first stamped) and have their thumb inked – often at the same time an incoming voter was exchanging their voter card for a ballot pad. This resulted in the disorderly (but calm) milling about of people in the station.

24. One polling station observed did not follow this process. Instead, when the voter was issued with the ballot their voter card was stamped at the same time and returned to them. When the voter exited the voting booth they cast their ballot and a polling official standing beside the box inked their finger after which they exited the polling station. This was a much more efficient and orderly process which enabled the flow of voters in one direction.

Closing

² Section 69, The Representation of the People Act, Chapter 146.

25. The closing of the polls in one of the polling stations observed was delayed by 15 minutes by the Returning Officer to allow voters on their way to the polling station to cast their votes. The Returning Officer first informed the political observers of the extension and the reason (that there were some voters who were making their way to the station). The Forum Election Observer Team noted advice from the Electoral Office that Returning Officers had discretion to extend polling to accommodate late voters.

26. At one of the polling stations where the Team observed the close of polling the Returning Officer did not call out the processes involved in the closing of the polls. The Forum Team has no reason to suspect anything untoward as the entire process was undertaken in full view of all observers. In addition when the Team asked the Returning Officer to describe the processes undertaken for closing, he advised that the polling officials had reconciled the number of ballots issued against the number of names crossed off the electoral list.

The count

27. The Forum Team observed the opening and conduct of the preliminary count in more than 4 polling stations. The Team noted that the conduct of the count differed to varying degrees across the polling stations observed. While it was clear that there was no intention or attempt to obscure the transparency of the process in any of the stations observed, it is the opinion of the Forum Team that some of the methods for conducting the count were far less efficient or easily followed than others.

28. In most polling stations a large envelope was provided for each candidate, with all the envelopes then arranged in single file and clearly displayed on tables. Usually, ballots were picked out of the ballot box and read out before being placed into the relevant envelopes. At the end of this sorting process the contents of each envelope would be individually counted and would constitute the preliminary count figures. At the end of the preliminary count all the envelopes would be sealed and placed in the ballot box and locked. All such ballot boxes from polling stations across the country would then be transported to the Electoral Office in Port Vila where the official count would be undertaken by the three Electoral Commissioners, under the observation of the Electoral Office staff, amongst others.

29. As mentioned above there were differences in the conduct of the count across the stations observed. The Act requires the returning officer to open the ballot box, remove the envelopes and ballot papers and read out the name on each ballot paper.³ This was not uniformly applied. In one station three polling officials picked ballots from the ballot box, holding each up to the room before calling out the name and handing the ballot to any one of four polling officials who ran back and forth to place the ballots in the right envelopes. In another station while three polling officials picked ballots out of the ballot box, only the Returning Officer read out each name and a single polling official was responsible for placing each ballot in the right envelope. In yet another station, a large number of polling officials were moving to and fro picking ballots from the ballot box and placing them in the relevant envelopes. In that situation it was difficult to count the exact number of polling officials involved in the sorting because there was so much movement of people.

29. The actual counting of votes was also done in a highly transparent manner with the Returning Officer emptying the contents of each envelope and clearly counting out each vote that each candidate received. The Forum Team noted that political observers were present during all stages of the voting process (opening of polls, conduct and close of polls, and opening and conduct of count) in all the stations observed.

³ Section 16, Schedule 5, The Representation of the People Act, Chapter 146.

Recommendation 1:

30. The Forum Election Observer Team recommends for the consideration of the Vanuatu Electoral Commission and Electoral Office that:

- a) standardised processes be followed for the opening of polls, voting, close of polls, opening of the count, and the conduct of the count; and
- b) all Returning Officers are given at least one full-day refresher training before the election to ensure consistency of practice in the facilitation of the polling processes (including opening and closing) across all polling stations.

THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AND ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CONDUCTING ELECTIONS IN VANUATU

The Vanuatu Electoral Commission and the Vanuatu Electoral Office

31. The Electoral Commission was established under the Constitution and comprises a Chair and two members appointed by the President on advice of the Judicial Service Commission. The Electoral Office is a public office within the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Principal Electoral Officer is a public servant who reports to the Director-General of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Under the Constitution, the Principal Electoral Officer is also obliged to keep the Electoral Commission fully informed in the exercise of his/her functions and to comply with any directions from the Commission in the exercise of those functions.

32. The Forum Team notes as such that the Principal Electoral Officer has two reporting lines. In addition, as a public servant the Principal Electoral Officer is also subject to the employment terms and conditions of government. The Forum Team acknowledges that this arrangement is not unique to Vanuatu, and emphasises that at no time was there any cause to question the integrity or independence of the management and staff of the Electoral Office. However, the Forum Team is of the opinion that the dual reporting lines of the Principal Electoral Officer – to a constitutionally appointed body as well as a (senior) public servant could potentially give rise to a situation where attempts are made to influence the Principal Electoral Officer in the exercise of his/her functions.

33. The Forum Team believes that a fundamental component of protecting the individual's democratic right to representation (whether in national, provincial or municipal government) is the independent conduct of free and fair elections. The institution responsible for the conduct of elections should therefore be empowered to work free of any external influence, including the *perception* of external influence, and be adequately resourced in both funding and personnel, to ensure its independent operations.

Recommendation 2:

The Forum Election Observer Team proposes for the consideration of Vanuatu Government that:

- a) the Vanuatu Electoral Office be re-established as a Constitutional Office reporting only to the Electoral Commission, so that dual reporting lines for the Principal Electoral Officer be streamlined; and
- b) that the Office is allocated sufficient funding annually from the national budget to independently undertake its legislated functions as well as adequately remunerate and maintain its staff.

The wide responsibilities of the Vanuatu Electoral Office

34. The Forum Team notes that under the Constitution (Article 20, Chapter 4), the Electoral Commission is responsible for the conduct of elections to Parliament, the National Council of Chiefs, local (provincial) government, and the municipal councils. The Team further notes that the electoral calendars for each body of representatives are not necessarily aligned. In theory therefore, the Electoral Office could be faced with organising and conducting an election (including a by-election) every year – either at municipal, provincial or national level – or as happened in 2015/2016, three elections within the space of 6 months.

35. The Forum Team was advised that the Electoral Office had six permanent staff positions, however, the two senior positions – Principal Electoral Officer and Deputy Principal Electoral Officer, were presently filled by acting appointments from other departments within the Ministry of Internal Affairs (under which the Electoral Office sits). This was also the case for the position of Director-General of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, to which the Principal Electoral Officer reports.

36. The Forum Team commends the Electoral Office and the Ministry of Internal Affairs on the conduct of the 2016 snap-elections, which on the basis of the Team's observations, was as free and fair as practically possible within the given timeframe, as well as peaceful and orderly, notwithstanding the many challenges mentioned above.

37. The Forum Team also commends the cooperation by Government ministries in support of the Electoral Office, which cooperation was the standard practice during elections and has led to a wide range of civil servants with extensive experience in the conduct of elections.

Recommendation 3:

38. Noting the wide area of responsibility of the Electoral Office, which has only six permanent staff positions, the Forum Election Observer Team proposes for the consideration of the Government of Vanuatu:

- a) That amendments be made to the Constitution so that responsibility for local and municipal elections is transferred to the local governments and municipal councils respectively, commensurate with sufficient (financial and personnel) resourcing to enable the free, fair and orderly conduct of elections at both levels; **or**
- b) That sufficient additional staff be allocated to the Electoral Office to enable it to meet its Constitutional responsibilities to conduct elections for Parliament, the National Council of Chiefs, local government and municipal councils, in a manner that is consistent with Occupational Health and Safety standards and that protects and ensures the welfare and wellbeing of its staff.

The electoral roll and the registration of voters

Registration of new voters

39. The Forum Election Observer Team was advised that consistent with the Act, the Electoral Office opens the electoral roll at the beginning of every calendar year up to the 15th day of June for the registration of eligible voters (particularly those newly turned 18), and the update of voter information as necessary. However, due to the compacted timeframe of the snap-elections, the Electoral Office was not able to open the rolls for registration in January 2016. Therefore young people who turned 18 between 16th June 2015 and 22 January 2016 were not able to register. The Forum Election Observer Team acknowledges that given the time and resource constraints facing the Electoral Office, the situation while unfortunate, was unavoidable.

40. Concerns were raised with the Forum Election Observer Team and through mainstream media of the possibility of electoral fraud occurring following legislative changes regarding the issue of duplicate cards and applications to vote by proxy, gazetted on 28 December 2015. In the view of the Forum Election Observer Team the changes to the legislation (attached at Annex 3) would not have facilitated the ease of electoral fraud occurring. However, the issue does highlight the lack of adequate communication of important information regarding electoral processes and systems by the Electoral Office.

Inaccuracy of the electoral roll

41. Information provided by the Electoral Office shows that there were 200,159 voters on the electoral roll. This corresponds to 77% of the total population, meaning that 23% of the population is outside the voting age or ineligible. It should be noted that Vanuatu has a young population cohort with 36% under the age of 15 and 17% between the ages of 15 and 24. The electoral roll is evidently inflated, noting also that registration is not compulsory. Stakeholders the Forum Team met with expressed concern about the integrity of the electoral roll alleging a large number of deceased persons and duplicate or false names on the roll. The Electoral Office acknowledged that the electoral roll was inaccurate and in need of cleaning-up – which it had planned to do, had the snap election not been called. The intention was to have a clean and accurate roll before the 2016 national elections, which under normal circumstances would have been held later in the year.

42. The main issue with the electoral roll was that while the law allowed for ease of registration of new voters every year, it was less easy for the Electoral Office to remove names from the roll, including those electors who had died or moved away. The Forum Team was advised that there was no linkage between the electoral roll, the civil status registry (of births) and the health registries, which recorded deaths in government run hospitals and medical centres. (This however is not unique to Vanuatu). The onus to provide updated information for each of the registries was on the individual (or their family members in case of births and deaths). Many people simply did not do this, or were unaware of the need to advise the Electoral Office of the death of family members. Also, deaths in rural areas were not always recorded on official registries. It is difficult therefore at any one time to estimate the actual number of people who should be on the roll.

43. The Forum Team was pleased therefore to note advice from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Electoral Office that plans were underway to introduce Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) before the next general elections in four years. This would necessitate the re-registration of all voters as well as registration of newly eligible voters, resulting therefore in a new, more accurate electoral roll. The Forum Team was advised that the Electoral Office had planned to phase in the BVR system when it opened the electoral roll for inspection and update in 2016, but was hampered by the dissolution of Parliament in November 2015. Having observed the 2014 Solomon Islands general elections, the Forum Team notes the success the BVR had in producing an accurate electoral roll for the Solomon Islands.

Recommendation 4:

44. The Forum Election Observer Team strongly recommends for the consideration of the Government and Parliament of Vanuatu that:

a) the necessary legal reforms be undertaken as soon as possible to enable the implementation of the Biometric Voter Registration system; and

b) adequate financial and personnel resourcing be allocated to the Vanuatu Electoral Office to ensure the commencement and completion of a biometric voter registration system, as soon as possible, but before the next scheduled national elections in four years.

Invalid votes

45. Following the release of the official count the Forum Team noted that the total number of invalid votes was 1141 or 1% of the total votes cast. The official election results are attached marked **Annex 4**. This might seem a small figure except when considered against results in some constituencies where winning margins were less than 10 votes. For example, in the Efate Rural Constituency (4 seats) the difference between the 4th elected candidate and the 5th candidate (unsuccessful) was 9 votes, and there was a total of 160 invalid votes. In Pentecost there were 137 invalid votes and the winning margin for the last successful candidate was 8 votes. If the invalid votes had been counted the results in both constituencies could have been different.

46. The Forum Team observed during the count that invalid votes were almost entirely due to there being two ballots placed in one envelope (meaning it was not clear who the voter had selected). In the view of the Forum Team this was due to the ballot format. Each candidate in a constituency had an 8 x 7 cm colour ballot with their name, picture, symbol, and party (where relevant) printed on it. All contesting candidate's ballots were compiled in a flip-pad and issued to the voter. In the voting booth the voter would flip through the pad to find their chosen candidate's ballot, tear it out and place it in the envelope provided before casting the sealed envelope in the ballot box. It would appear that in tearing out their chosen candidate's ballots, many voters also tore the ballot beneath it – in effect placing two ballots in the envelope and rendering the vote invalid.

Recommendation 5:

47. The Forum Team recommends for the consideration of the Electoral Office that the ballot papers be changed to reduce the probability of voters placing more than one ballot in each envelope. An alternative ballot format could be a single sheet of paper containing all the candidate's names, symbols, and party names (where relevant) from which the voter would tick or cross their selection.

Public awareness

48. The Forum Team noted that many people the Team met with, including candidates for elections, were not aware that the electoral roll was open for registration at the beginning of every year. The Team was advised that this was likely because the Electoral Office only used the government-owned broadcaster, Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC), to publicise updates and news, for short periods of time. In addition, the VBTC did not have complete coverage of the country. Privately owned mainstream media, including a radio station hugely popular with younger listeners and which did have 100% coverage of Vanuatu, usually reproduced electoral updates and news broadcast by the national provider – when made aware of.

49. The Forum Team noted the increased use of social media in the lead up to the snap-elections. While the Team recognised the value of social media in disseminating information, it was noted that contributions to social media were not substantiated and often unofficial or rumour-based, which could lead to the quick and widespread dissemination of incorrect and possibly incendiary information. The Forum Team noted the importance therefore of the Electoral Office ensuring the timely, thorough, and widespread dissemination of all

information relating to electoral processes to ensure that information in the public domain was accurate.

50. In addition to the mainstream and social media medium, the Forum Team noted advice that mobile phone companies had 100% coverage of Vanuatu as well and could be used to disseminate news and updates on registration and other Elections processes. The Forum Team however acknowledges the cost implication of using mobile telephone service providers.

Recommendation 6:

51. The Forum Election Observer Team recommends for the consideration of the Electoral Commission and Electoral Office that:

- a) all information on the electoral processes – particularly the annual opening of the electoral roll for inspection and registration, and changes to legislation – be shared with all mainstream media providers (whether government or privately owned). Such information should be regularly repeated and [where resourcing permits] re-produced in print and widely disseminated;
- b) the Electoral Office take advantage of the widespread use of social media to disseminate through social media, correct information on electoral processes, particularly the annual opening of the electoral roll for inspection and registration and changes to legislation; and
- c) the Electoral Office take advantage of the wide coverage of mobile phone companies to disseminate, through text messages, correct information on electoral processes, particularly the annual opening of the electoral roll for inspection and registration and changes to legislation.

The representation of Women

52. The Forum Team noted that of the 265 candidates contesting the election, 9 were women. The Team was pleased to note that several women had been endorsed by some of the older established parties. Unfortunately, none of the female candidates were successful. The Team noted that women contesting elections generally face more challenges than men – in particular the lack of access to resources and cultural and community perceptions of the role of women.

53. The creation of an enabling environment for women would help maintain a minimum number of women representatives in decision making (with regional precedents already set in the Autonomous Bougainville Government and Samoa). The Team was therefore pleased to learn that the Government of Vanuatu had introduced reserved seats for women in municipal councils, with plans to expand the practice to provincial, then national governments.

Recommendation 6:

54. The Forum Election Observer Team congratulates the Government of Vanuatu for its initiative in implementing reserved seats for women at municipal council level and encourages the Government to work with the relevant national and development partners to undertake the necessary groundwork to implement reserved seating for women at provincial and national government levels.

Civic awareness and responsibilities

55. In the opinion of the Forum Team there is a good level of civic awareness and interest in local politics, particularly following the imprisonment of the 14 government MPs. However, the Team noted the need for more civic education on the specific links between the individual's

vote and the governance of the country. Voters could benefit from asking more of candidates in terms of their policy platforms and development agenda for the country. At present, the Forum Team noted that a large number of people voted along family, party or religious lines.

Recommendation 7:

56. The Forum Election Observer Team recommends for the consideration of the Vanuatu Electoral Office and the Government of Vanuatu that:

- a) widespread and regular civic awareness activities are undertaken to educate people and raise awareness on the significance of individual votes in influencing the governance and development of the country; and
- b) the Vanuatu Electoral Office is provided adequate funding from the recurrent budget, to undertake widespread and regular civic awareness programmes.

CONCLUSION

57. The Forum Team is of the view that:

- the Vanuatu Electoral Commission should be congratulated for successfully conducting the 2016 snap-elections given the tight timelines and challenging circumstances;
- polling officials conducted themselves in a professional and impartial manner;
- voters were able to exercise their civic rights freely, without intimidation, and in secret;
- there were shortcomings, particularly with regard the inaccuracy of the electoral roll, adherence to the Act and the dissemination of information from the Electoral Office, however, the Team does not believe that there was any malice or intent to commit electoral fraud; and
- the democratic process in Vanuatu would benefit from in-depth, regular and sustained civic education and awareness raising.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Pacific Islands Forum Election Observer Team acknowledges with gratitude:

- the Government of the Republic of Vanuatu for the invitation to observe the snap-elections;
- the Acting Principal Elector Officer and staff of the Vanuatu Electoral Commission for facilitating accreditation processes and meeting with the Team;
- the polling and security officials at all stations visited by Team members for facilitating access to the stations and taking time to speak with Team members;
- the Acting Director-General for Foreign Affairs & External Trade and the Acting Director-General for the Ministry of Internal Affairs; for meeting with and sharing their perspectives and experiences with the Team
- all the interlocutors the Team met with including Government representatives, civil society and faith based organisations, political parties and independent candidates, the Melanesian Spearhead Group, the University of the South Pacific, Pacific Institute for Public Policy, development partners, and members of the diplomatic corps;
- other international observer teams for sharing of information and camaraderie; and
- the people of Vanuatu for their warm welcome and generous hospitality.

Pacific Islands Forum Election Observer Team

10 February 2016

FORUM ELECTION OBSERVER TEAM MEMBERS

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1. Mr John Killion Taleo, Chair, Vanuatu Electoral Commission
2. Mr Yvon Basil, Acting Director-General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs & External Affairs
3. Mrs Cherol Ala, Acting Director-General, Minister of Internal Affairs,
4. Mr Joe Johnson Iati, Acting Principal Electoral Officer, Electoral Office
5. Mr Gary Tavo, Staff of Department of Local Authorities, assisted with Electoral Office affairs during snap elections
6. Mr Wilson Toa, Chief Executive Officer, Vanuatu Transparency International,
7. H.E. Ms Georgina Roberts, New Zealand High Commissioner to Vanuatu
8. H.E. Mr Jeremy Bruer, Australian High Commissioner to Vanuatu
9. Mr Joeng Pak, Deputy High Commissioner, New Zealand High Commission
10. Mr Malcolm Paterson, Second Secretary, Australian High Commission
11. Mr Molean Kilepak, Acting Director-General, Melanesian Spearhead Group
12. Mr John Licht, Acting Director of Programs Division, Melanesian Spearhead Group
13. Mrs. Dorostay Kenneth, Director, Department of Women's Affairs
14. Ms Astrid Boulekone, General Manager, Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce and Industry
15. Mrs. Evelyn Toa, President of the Media Association of Vanuatu, Deputy Editor of The Independent Newspaper and freelance journalist
16. Mr. Moses Stevens, President of PINA/Freelance journalist/Host of Talk Back Show at FM 107
17. Mr Derek Brien, Executive Director and Ms Frida Bani-Sam, Communication & Network Liaison Officer, Pacific Institute of Public Policy
18. Mr Vira Taivakalo, President of the Vanuatu National Youth Council
19. Mr Joe Kalo, Principal Administrator of the Vanuatu National Youth Council
20. Ms Rebecca Solomon, Secretary of the Vanuatu National Youth Council
21. Vanuatu Society of Disabled People
22. Mrs Nadia Kanegai, candidate
23. Mr Loius Kalpnel, candidate
24. Professor Emeritus Don Patterson, Ms. Anita Jowitt, Acting Head of Law School, Dr. Howard Van Trease, Honorary Research Fellow, Dr. Tess Newton Cain, DevPolicy
25. Mr Albert Mariner, Mr Walter Rigamoto, Commonwealth Election Observer Mission
26. Pastor Allan Nafuki, Head of Presbyterian Churches Vanuatu
27. Elder Job Talesa, Presbyterian Churches Vanuatu
28. Mr Charles Harrison, Head of Vanuatu Association of NGOs (VANGO)
29. Ms. Alice Kaloran, VANGO
30. Youth Challenge Vanuatu
31. Mrs. Leiasmanu Cullwick, Executive Director, Vanuatu National Council of Women