



**SOLOMON ISLANDS NATIONAL ELECTION
5 APRIL 2006
REPORT OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM OBSERVER TEAM**

INTRODUCTION

In November 2005, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Sir Allan Kemakeza invited the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat to send an observer Team to the Solomon Islands' national election, scheduled for 2006. Bearing in mind the Forum's engagement in peace building in Solomon Islands under the terms of the Forum Leaders' *Biketawa Declaration* of 2000, and the recommendation of the 2005 Eminent Persons Group that the Forum monitor the 2006 elections, the Secretary General was pleased to accept the Prime Minister's invitation.

2. The Forum Team consisted of nine members, led by HE Mr Ieremia Tabai MP, from Kiribati. Other Team members were senior officials from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Vanuatu, as well as representatives of the University of the South Pacific, and two Forum Secretariat staff. A full list of the Forum Team members, and the constituencies observed by them, is at [Attachment 1](#). Most of the Team arrived on 31 March 2006, and remained in Solomon Islands until 11 April 2006 or shortly thereafter.

3. The Forum Team joined other international observers from Australia, Japan, New Zealand, USA and the Commonwealth Secretariat in an overall international observer mission of 44 persons, coordinated by the United Nations. Forum Team members were deployed in pairs (most with observers from other groups) to Guadalcanal, Malaita, Central and Choiseul provinces, and on election day visited 51 polling stations in 9 constituencies. Forum Team members observed the count for several constituencies in Central Province, Guadalcanal and Honiara.

4. Prior to deployment, the international observers attended two days of briefing in Honiara arranged by the United Nations Coordination Team. This included presentations from RAMSI, the Royal Solomon Islands Police, the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission and the UN itself. We were also provided with comprehensive background material in the lead-up to the election and at the briefing, including the various election officials' manuals.

5. This report documents the Team's assessments and recommendations arising from our direct observation, discussions with various participants in the electoral process, and examination of relevant documents.

6. The Forum Team recognises that it (and even the larger observation mission) was of limited size and conducted its observation in Solomon Islands for a relatively short time. For this reason, the scope of our report is limited in time and scale to focus particularly on the process of polling and counting. We have not sought to comment upon those issues which we

were unable to directly observe or upon which we had insufficient information to form useful assessments or recommendations.

THE CONTEXT

7. Solomon Islands has a population of around half a million, scattered across nine provinces. The total land area is 28,370 square kilometres spread across 1.34 million square kilometres of sea area. The majority of the population lives in rural areas, and is engaged in subsistence cultivation. There are some 86 distinct language groups.

8. The 2006 election was the first since the end of the 1998-2003 conflict in Solomon Islands. During those years, around 20,000 settlers on Guadalcanal were evicted from their homes, hundreds were killed and much of the country's infrastructure was destroyed. On 5 June 2000, the elected government was overthrown, leading to a severe breakdown in standards of political governance. Elections were held in December 2001, but conflict continued in North Malaita, rural Guadalcanal and, to a lesser degree, in the Western Province. In July 2003, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) arrived, endorsed by Forum Leaders under the terms of the *Biketawa Declaration*. RAMSI succeeded in disarming and arresting the militants and restoring stability and has remained in Solomon Islands since, continuing its work in law and order but also expanding to provide broader assistance with the restoration of key institutions of governance.

THE ELECTORAL FRAMEWORK

The legal framework

9. The legal and administrative framework for national elections in Solomon Islands is provided by the 1978 Constitution, and the *National Parliament Electoral Provisions Act* of 1980, as amended ("the Act"). The Constitution includes general provisions establishing the Electoral Commission and governing determination of constituencies and the conduct of elections. The Constitution provides in Section 48 that citizens of Solomon Islands aged at least 21 years may be elected to Parliament. Citizens aged at least 18 years may register as electors under Section 55 of the Constitution, but no person is entitled to be registered in more than one constituency; or "in any constituency in which he is not ordinarily resident".

10. More detailed provisions governing the election process are found in the Act. In 2005, amendments were made to the Act and to Regulations under it, to put in place three key changes for this election:

- A change in the method of voting used from what is known as a "multiple ballot box" to a "single ballot box" system;
- The constitution of the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission as a permanent body (rather than being disbanded after each election and re-constituted shortly before the next); and
- Changes to the voter registration form to include details of gender and date of birth.

The relevance and impact of these changes is discussed further below.

The election management body

11. The Solomon Islands Electoral Commission (SIEC) is established pursuant to Section 57 of the Constitution. The Commission consists of the Speaker of Parliament as Chair, and two other members appointed by the Governor-General on the advice of the Judicial and Legal Service Commission. The Commission has a small office (with some four staff at the time of our briefing) headed by the Chief Electoral Officer. For this election SIEC was assisted by four international advisers provided through RAMSI.

12. To administer the 2006 election in accordance with the electoral laws, the SIEC appointed nine Election Managers (one for each province and Honiara), and fifty Returning Officers and Assistant Returning Officers (one for each constituency). A Presiding Officer and two Polling Assistants were appointed for each of the 810 polling stations. The Returning Officer was responsible for conducting the count for each constituency. The Team was advised that the majority of Returning Officers and many polling staff were public officials working in the constituencies concerned.

13. The Forum Team regards the constitution of the SIEC as a permanent body as a welcome development which should help facilitate some of the important work recommended in this report, such as voter registration and education. We encourage the Solomon Islands Government to ensure that the SIEC is sufficiently funded and staffed to carry out the work it needs to do between elections. The Team notes that aside from the international advisers, the costs of the 2006 election were entirely funded by the Solomon Islands Government.

The electoral timetable

14. The election date was announced by Governor General Sir Nathaniel Waena on 22 February 2006. Nominations for candidates opened on 23 February and closed on 8 March. Election day was 5 April 2006. The counting of votes was completed on 10 April, with the gazettal of results on 12 April, and the new Parliament scheduled to convene on 18 April.

The electoral system

15. Solomon Islands is divided into 50 constituencies, each of which elects a single member of Parliament. The electoral system used is “first past the post” – that is, the candidate with the most votes in each constituency is declared the winner.

16. While the electoral system itself was not changed for this election, the method of voting was altered. In past elections, Solomon Islands used what was known as the “multiple ballot box” system. Separate ballot boxes were provided for each candidate in a ‘closed’ room. After receiving their ballot papers, voters were required to enter the room and deposit their papers in the box of their favoured candidate.

17. Due to widespread concern about vulnerabilities in this system, the law was amended in 2005 to change the method of voting. In 2006 voters were required to mark the ballot paper for the candidate of their choice inside a “voting screen”, then return to the open area of the polling station and place the ballot in the single ballot box provided.

OBSERVATIONS

18. Some of the key observations of the Forum Team and our counterparts in the international observer mission were made public in a Joint Interim Statement issued on 7 April 2006. That statement is at [Attachment 2](#). The United Nations Election Observation Coordination Team (UNEOCT) will also be preparing a report on the observation of the election, which will be finalised following (and drawing on) completion of the various observer teams' reports. We note that the Commonwealth Secretariat team issued separate statements, and is also preparing its own report.

19. The following observations provide the views of the Forum Team on a number of issues that struck us as key matters arising from the election.

Election management

20. The Team formed the opinion throughout the polling and counting period that the SIEC and the polling and counting staff carried out their roles and functions with a consistently high degree of impartiality and professionalism, and displayed a strong commitment to ensuring a free and fair election.

21. The Team was aware that the Chair of the Electoral Commission was also the head of a political party contesting the election (although not himself a candidate). While we emphasise that no doubt was raised as to the integrity of the individual in question, nor his conduct in overseeing the election, the Forum Team is concerned that such a situation damages the appearance of impartiality of the Commission.

22. We believe it to be important for the long-term strengthening of the electoral management process in the future that election officials (Returning Officers, Presiding Officers and Polling Assistants) be carefully selected to ensure impartiality, that they conduct their duties in a neutral, diligent and conclusive manner and that they obtain remuneration for their work in a timely and predictable fashion.

23. The conduct of polling officials observed during both the voting and the count was generally exemplary. In some polling stations various technical errors and variations on procedure were observed but these were not generally seen as significant, nor in any case did Forum observers regard any actions or omissions by polling staff as an attempt to manipulate the election process. In many cases examples of good practice were observed, suggesting that the training provided to polling officials was comprehensive and, for the large part, effective.

24. Security was provided effectively by the Royal Solomon Islands Police, with some backup support provided by RAMSI's Participating Police Force. The police observed were uniformly professional and discreet, and helped maintain a peaceful and orderly atmosphere on election day and during the count. The Forum Team also recognises the broader contribution made by RAMSI since 2003, in creating a general environment of peace and stability conducive to a successful election process.

Recommendation 1:

That the Chair of the Electoral Commission, and all electoral officials, ensure they do not undertake any action or assume any position which may give the impression of affiliation with a particular candidate or party.

The poll

25. As briefed by the SIEC, and as has been the practice since independence, polling opened at 7.00am and closed at 5.00pm. The Team observed a number of minor irregularities at various polling stations, such as polling not opening on time at 7.00am, the key hole on the ballot box not properly sealed with wax, and a Polling Assistant rather than the Presiding Officer helping out voters who had difficulty in marking the ballot paper. In one polling station posters for two candidates had been left on the wall beside the ballot box; this appeared to be an oversight by polling staff.

26. It was the Team's assessment, however, that these minor irregularities had no adverse effect on the well planned set up of polling stations, the smooth and orderly flow of voters, the assured environment of secrecy and the enthusiasm and confidence shown by the people in the election process.

27. The Team noted that in some respects the technical aspects of the polling process could be improved. For example, the use of wax to seal the ballot box caused difficulty for many polling officials. There were also some complaints that the design and colour scheme of the ballot paper made it difficult for voters to read, especially in constituencies with a large number of candidates. We believe that reviewing the technical aspects of polling would be valuable, while recognising that changing some procedures may require amendments to the law.

Recommendation 2:

That discussion take place within the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission, with outside advice where useful, about possible improvements to the process of polling which may be implemented for future elections.

The count

28. Regrettably, due to the logistical arrangements made for the Team, members were not able to observe the full counting for the constituencies where they were deployed. In regard to those constituencies for which we were able to observe the counting of votes, the Team was impressed by the transparent manner in which it was carried out.

29. Based on our observations in the constituencies, the Team notes the importance of clarity and certainty in the arrangements for transport of ballot boxes from the polling stations to the counting centres.

30. The Team noted that under the provisions of the electoral law and the instructions provided to Returning Officers, a strict interpretation was applied to the requirement for a valid vote – that is, placement by the voter of one mark only on the paper, in the box for the candidate of choice. While we do not dispute the legality of this, it had the effect of causing the rejection of ballots where the voter's intention was clear, for example when they marked the candidate's symbol rather than the box beside it. We are also aware that application of these rules was not entirely consistent between Returning Officers. The Team believes there is a case for amending the law and guidelines on this issue, to ensure the enfranchisement of as many voters as possible.

Recommendation 3:

That consideration be given to a possible amendment to the electoral law, to allow votes to be counted where the voter's intention is clear.

Candidates and political parties

31. There was a total of 453 candidates who contested the 50 constituencies, with one constituency where the candidate was elected unopposed and others ranging from two candidates to twenty candidates.

32. The greater number of these candidates contested as independents while there were eleven political parties who endorsed candidates in the election.

33. The Team noted that there is no formal registration process for political parties in Solomon Islands. While this did create some confusion at the national level about use of symbols and the affiliation of certain candidates, the Team is confident that at the constituency level voters were clear on the identity and correct symbol for their respective candidates.

34. The Team is of the consensus that political party culture should be allowed to evolve naturally in Solomon Islands rather than being forced upon it by regulating them through legislation. Even without a change in the voting laws, a more strongly party-based system may emerge spontaneously over time (as has occurred in Samoa and the Marshall Islands). We are of the view that reforms aimed at strengthening, triggering or forcing the emergence of political parties are unlikely to prove successful in Solomon Islands. Parties should be allowed to develop spontaneously when suitable issues arise that encourage strengthening of political organisation.

The "Single Ballot Box" system and first-past-the-post voting

35. Under the previous multiple ballot box system, there were significant opportunities for electoral fraud. The system eased opportunities for vote-buying, and in many cases the casting of the ballot was far from secret. We were advised by the SIEC that voters were known to obtain ballots from the Presiding Officer, pass through the polling booths without depositing these and instead sell them outside the polling stations to candidates or their supporters. Ballots were then carried into the concealed room by an agent and deposited *en bloc* into one candidate's ballot box.

36. The new single ballot box system avoids this defect of the previous voting process. It ensures that voters cast their own ballots, and prevents these being sold outside the polling booth. Provisions for secrecy of balloting have also been improved. Election observers found substantial enthusiasm for the new single ballot box system among Returning Officers, Presiding Officers and assistants, as well as among candidates contesting the election and voters.

37. Solomon Islands employs a first-past-the-post voting system. In the absence of a well-defined party system, this creates the potential for a considerable degree of vote splitting. 453 candidates contested the 2006 elections, an average of 9 per constituency (up from 6.6 in 2001). Many candidates were elected on the basis of only 20-30% of the vote. In most

constituencies, candidates could rely only on localised support, with the one from the largest village and/or with the broadest support proving successful.

38. Whether or not first-past-the-post is the most suitable electoral system in such circumstances is a matter for Solomon Islanders to decide. In neighbouring Papua New Guinea, which has even larger numbers of candidates contesting elections (average 26 in 2002) and where the majority of MPs elected in 2002 had less than 20% of the vote, a limited preferential voting system has recently been introduced. PNG's new system has so far been used only in a few by-elections and awaits the sterner test of the general election scheduled for 2007. Other models which may merit consideration are Vanuatu's single non-transferable vote system, and Kiribati's "two-round" system.

39. The Team notes that the issue of which electoral systems best suit Pacific island countries is being considered by the University of the South Pacific, and that further regional work on electoral systems and process is provided for in the Forum's Pacific Plan.

The register of voters

40. The national exercise to update the register of voters was completed in early March 2006, and resulted in a register of 342,119 voters. This represented almost 73% percent of the entire population, based on census estimates by the Government. Given that more than half the population of Solomon Islands is estimated to be under the voting age of 18 years, it was widely recognised – including by the SIEC – that there were problems with the register.

41. In a commentary published by the SIEC in the *Solomon Star* newspaper on 20 March 2006, the Commission put forward several reasons for the high number of voters on the register, most notably:

- No "cleaning" of the register has been done outside an election year, due to there being no permanently constituted electoral body to conduct such an exercise and no funding for it. Therefore registration exercises have started immediately prior to elections and due to short time, do not start "from scratch" but simply build upon the existing list.
- The issue of double registration, whereby it is understood many residents of Honiara register both in the capital and in their "home" village, to ensure they can vote in either place on election day. (Note that voters' fingers were marked with ink to prevent any voter from voting twice.)

The Team understands that large movements of people during the recent tensions increased the instances of multiple registration for this election, as they would have registered in their new locations without being removed from the roll in the old ones. We also note that while the Constitution forbids registration in more than one constituency, there is no corresponding offence in the Electoral Act relating to double or multiple registration.

42. The Team notes that the inflated register of voters creates an arbitrary and inaccurate picture of voting in Honiara, where constituencies are very large on paper but voter turnout is significantly lower than elsewhere.

43. In addition, the Team heard a number of complaints from potential voters, polling agents and domestic observers that persons who believed they were validly registered, did not find their names on the lists on election day and were therefore unable to vote. While there were some instances where we observed a whole village missing from the register, for the

most part these omissions appeared *ad hoc* and a result of error rather than manipulation of the roll. Nevertheless, the SIEC has publicly recognised “unconfirmed and as yet unsubstantiated reports” of partisan and selective registration of voters by some registration officers, and has undertaken to investigate these, as well as fully reviewing all electoral officials, after the election.

44. The Team notes the statement in a 5 April press release by Chief Electoral Officer Musu Kevu that the integrity of the register “is a long time problem that we must now arrest by overhauling the entire registration process”. The Team records its strong agreement with this view. The Team notes that changes to the voter registration form put in place in 2005 will contribute in future to a more accurate and manageable register and assist in future efforts to “clean” it, and also that the permanent constitution of the SIEC should help to ensure that this is done prior to the next election.

Recommendation 4:

That the Solomon Islands Election Commission conduct a review of the voter registration process, and take action to improve the integrity of the register of electors, as a matter of priority in advance of the next election. Appropriate support should be provided by the Solomon Islands Government to ensure this occurs, and international partners should be prepared to assist if requested.

Out of constituency voting

45. The international observers were further concerned about the absence of any system for pre-poll or out of area voting. This had the effect of disenfranchising a number of potential voters, including most election officials, police and some domestic observers, who were unable to attend their “home” polling station on election day. The Team is concerned that it is contrary to internationally recognised principles of democracy to have such a large number of public servants unable to exercise their right to vote.

46. We understand that the inability to cast a pre-poll or out of area vote also contributes to the problems with the register of voters by giving rise to double registration, so institution of such a system should naturally be done in conjunction with the efforts to improve the register of voters recommended above.

Recommendation 5:

That consideration be given to implementing some system of out of area, postal or pre-poll voting for Solomon Islands elections, to ensure that the maximum number of eligible citizens is given the opportunity to vote.

Distribution of constituencies

47. Section 54 of the Constitution provides that there shall be between 30 and 50 constituencies, and the constitutional limit of 50 has been reached. The same section establishes a Constituency Boundaries Commission and provides that it may review the boundaries “whenever they consider this to be desirable”, but at least every ten years. The Team understands that neither a census nor a boundary review has been conducted since the tensions concluded. During that time there was a very high degree of relocation of people within Solomon Islands, particularly between Guadalcanal and Malaita.

48. As a result of these factors, the constituencies are now seriously unbalanced in numerical terms, from a low of 2,345 voters for the Malaita Outer Islands Constituency, to over 30,000 for East Honiara. This is partly attributable to Honiara's "double registration" issue but based on actual voter numbers in Honiara, it can be estimated that a large numerical disparity exists notwithstanding that distortion. While the reasons for this are understandable, the current distribution seriously undermines a fundamental principle of representative democracy, that each person's vote should have equal value.

49. The Team believes this issue needs to be considered as a priority before the next election. There are greater or lesser ways of addressing it, from boundary adjustments to changes in the entire system – this is a matter for Solomon Islands. The Team also recognises the need to balance greater equality of constituencies carefully against other factors such as ethnic community interests and the political stability of the country as a whole.

Recommendation 6:

That the Constituency Boundaries Commission be convened in accordance with Section 54 of the Constitution to review the constituency boundaries and seek an appropriate arrangement which provides a more equal franchise.

Civic and voter education

50. The Team notes that a large programme of civic and voter education was conducted across the country in the months leading up to this election. Initial indications from the SIEC suggest that the invalid vote for the 2006 election was objectively low at 1-2% of votes cast, which is a particularly good outcome considering that it was the first election using a new method of voting. The Team believes that the civic and voter education made a strong contribution to this outcome, and encourages the SIEC to coordinate a continuing programme of voter education between elections.

Participation of women in the election

51. Twenty-four female candidates contested the 2006 election – while still a low number, this was almost double the 13 who contested the previous election. The Team recognises the contribution of the National Council of Women and others in encouraging and training women to run for office.

52. No female candidates were elected. This underlines the need for further work to be conducted on an ongoing and long-term basis, to ensure that an increasing number of credible and skilled women are ready to contest future elections, and that the essential role of women in nation building and political life is continuously promoted. In this regard, the Team recognises the project presently being undertaken by the Forum Secretariat and UNIFEM on advancing women's representation in parliaments across the Pacific region.

Domestic election observers and civil society

53. The Forum Team recognises the major contribution which civil society has to make to a healthy democratic process, and welcomes the strong engagement of civil society in the 2006 Solomon Islands election in various ways.

54. In particular, this election saw the first deployment of domestic election observers. With assistance from the Commonwealth Secretariat, some 80 domestic observers were deployed in four provinces. Where Forum Team members saw domestic observers at work, we observed them to be dedicated and thorough in their work. Their role was complementary to that of the international observers: domestic observers bring particular skills such as language and local knowledge to their observation, they demonstrate local people's stewardship of their democratic process, and their complementary reporting fills out the overall picture of the election process for the Solomon Islands authorities and the public. The Forum Team would encourage the further development and continuation of domestic observer activities in future elections, and would also like to see increasing interaction between international and domestic observers (such as organised information-sharing after the poll and count).

55. The Forum Team also recognises and commends other civil society action to raise voter awareness and ensure the integrity of the process, including the "clean election pledge" promoted by the Winds of Change group.

CONCLUSION

56. The Team is of the opinion that:

- the election process was conducted in line with generally accepted democratic principles and practice;
- the process allowed voters to exercise their choice freely and in secret;
- there were technical problems and shortcomings which may be able to be improved in future Solomon Islands elections, but these were not significant enough to undermine the fairness and integrity of the overall process; and
- the result can be accepted as reflecting the will of the people of Solomon Islands, as expressed by them in a democratic process.

57. We praise the dedication of the electoral officials and polling and counting staff, and all others engaged in the electoral process in various ways.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1:

That the Chair of the Electoral Commission, and all electoral officials, ensure they do not undertake any action or assume any position which may give the impression of affiliation with a particular candidate or party.

Recommendation 2:

That discussion take place within the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission, with outside advice where useful, about possible improvements to the process of polling which may be implemented for future elections.

Recommendation 3:

That consideration be given to a possible amendment to the electoral law, to allow votes to be counted where the voter's intention is clear.

Recommendation 4:

That the Solomon Islands Election Commission conduct a review of the voter registration process, and take action to improve the integrity of the register of electors, as a matter of priority in advance of the next election. Appropriate support should be provided by the Solomon Islands Government to ensure this occurs, and international partners should be prepared to assist if requested.

Recommendation 5:

That consideration be given to implementing some system of out of area, postal or pre-poll voting for Solomon Islands elections, to ensure that the maximum number of eligible citizens is given the opportunity to vote.

Recommendation 6:

That the Constituency Boundaries Commission be convened in accordance with Section 54 of the Constitution to review the constituency boundaries and seek an appropriate arrangement which provides a more equal franchise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without wishing to overlook the contributions of any individuals to our Team's work, we are very grateful to:

- The (outgoing) Solomon Islands Government, for the invitation to observe the election and the open and welcoming facilitation of the international observer teams;
- The Solomon Islands Electoral Commission – Chair Sir Peter Kenilorea, Chief Electoral Officer Mr Musu Kevu and all their staff and advisers -- for their work to accredit the observers, provide background materials, comprehensively brief us, and ensure that all “doors were open” for us to observe the poll;
- The Returning Officers, Presiding Officers, Polling Assistants and police in the polling stations and counting centres we visited, for their warm welcome and their open and cooperative dealings with us, which made our job of observation both straightforward and pleasant;
- The United Nations Election Observer Coordination Team – Team Leader Steve Wagenseil and all his international and local staff – for undertaking the mammoth job of briefing, deploying, organising and generally looking after all the international observers, for completing the job successfully, and for displaying great professionalism and good humour throughout;
- The other international observer teams, for their sharing of information and camaraderie, especially those who deployed with Forum Team members;
- The Commonwealth Secretariat, for allowing us to use their office facilities, which helped enormously in enabling this report to be completed;
- The Office of the Speaker of the Solomon Islands Parliament for sharing information with Forum Team members; and
- The people of Solomon Islands, for their friendliness and generous hospitality everywhere we went, which made participation in the Forum's observer mission a pleasure and a privilege for us.

Pacific Islands Forum Election Observer Team
Honiara, 11 April 2006

FORUM OBSERVER TEAM MEMBERS

Name / Position	Constituencies Observed
HE Mr Ieremia Tabai MP Member of Parliament Kiribati	North West Guadalcanal
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Ms Jeannette Bolenga Fellow University of the South Pacific	North Malaita Fataleka Mbaelelea
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**SOLOMON ISLANDS ELECTION 2006
INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVERS
Pacific Islands Forum, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, USA**

**INTERIM STATEMENT
7 April 2006**

International election observers welcome the conduct of the Solomon Islands election in a peaceful, orderly and lawful way and in a spirit of goodwill. We praise the people of Solomon Islands for the successful conduct of the day.

Forty-four international observers, representing the Pacific Islands Forum, the Commonwealth, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the United States of America, have been privileged to observe election day and the commencement of the count.

International observers covered over 160 polling stations in 27 constituencies in Central, Choiseul, Guadalcanal, Isabel, Makira, Malaita and Western provinces and in Honiara.

The international observers' interim assessment is that the polling process was transparent and well-conducted, and voters were able to exercise a free and secret vote. We were impressed by the commitment shown by polling staff to ensure that the poll was carried out in accordance with Solomon Islands law.

While we observed some minor technical problems and difficulties in particular polling stations, our assessment is that these were not significant enough to compromise the integrity of the overall process.

Our observation of the counting to date also indicates that this is being conducted in a careful and transparent manner.

Observers noted considerable support from Solomon Islanders for the new "single ballot box" system. We believe the system increased the secrecy of the vote and transparency of the process. We wish to commend the outgoing Parliament for the adoption of the new system.

We welcome the efforts of the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission in conducting a major program of civic education and voter awareness in recent months. The civic education program made a real difference to increasing voters' understanding of and confidence in the election process. We recommend that such programs continue.

International observers noted concerns about the accuracy of and access to the register of voters, including absence of voters' names from the register. We note the comments by the Chief Electoral Officer, Mr Musu Kevu, that these problems must be addressed.

International observers were also concerned that a number of potential voters were denied the chance to vote due to the absence of any system for "out of area" voting. We encourage consideration of introducing some such system in Solomon Islands in the future.

International election observers recognise the valuable contribution made to this election by Solomon Islands' first domestic election observer program. We note with appreciation the Commonwealth Secretariat's facilitation and training of the domestic observers. We also acknowledge the efforts of civil society groups to promote a clean election.

A peaceful environment prevailed across the constituencies observed on polling day. We recognise the effective role played by the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP) in providing security for the election.

International observers also commend the contribution of RAMSI in ensuring the confidence and stability essential to a successful election process, including its support to the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission and civic education programs.

We wish to thank the United Nations team for the excellent coordination, logistical arrangements and briefing provided to international observers, which contributed significantly to the success of our mission here.

Many of the international observers will remain in Solomon Islands to observe the full counting of the votes. Some groups will then be preparing final reports on the process to share with the Solomon Islands Government and the public.

Finally, we wish to record our appreciation to the people of Solomon Islands for the hospitality which international observers encountered everywhere we went.

HE Mr Jeremia Tabai MP
for the Pacific Islands Forum

Ms Ruth Pearce
for Australia

Mr Brian Donnelly MP
for New Zealand

Ambassador Kanji Hanagata
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Ms Leslie Livingood
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