Voter Integrity, Trust and the Promise of Digital Technologies: Biometric Voter Registration in Solomon Islands

Stephanie Ketterer Hobbis and Geoffrey Hobbis

1) University of British Columbia
2) Aix-Marseille University, CNRS, EHESS - CREDO

Abstract: Drawing on the anthropology of technology, this article examines the introduction of a digital biometric voter registration for Solomon Islands 2014 national election. Four perspectives on biometric voting are brought into dialogue: (1) the technological particularities, strengths and shortcomings of BVR, (2) a global and international embrace of the technology for its perceived ‘universal’ tendency to secure identities, (3) efforts by the Solomon Islands state to showcase its political stability by means of BVR and (4) the ways village-based voters come to understand, interpret and re-imagine BVR as political technology. We show how, within the ethnographic context of North Malaita, debates surrounding BVR reveal a continued distrust and uncertainty in North Malaitans’ relationship with the Solomon Islands state and its representatives. Within the context of this uncertainty BVR is re-imagined as technology that aids voter integrity within rather than beyond patronage networks.

Keywords: biometrics, biometric voter registration, elections, digital democracy, Solomon Islands

1 Both listed authors contributed in equal parts to the production of this manuscript.
Comment by Solomon Islander on the Facebook Group ‘Forum Solomon Islands – International’ (22 March 2014) in response to the newly introduced biometric voter registration system and allegations that candidates have hired young men to buy voters’ biometric voter ID cards on to ensure voters’ support the day of the national election (19 November 2014).

Introduction

This paper examines the introduction of a biometric voting registration (BVR) system for the 2014 national election (and subsequent provincial elections) in Solomon Islands, a small islands developing state in the south western Pacific. Specifically, we address the role of BVR in the electoral process and the technological promises and pitfalls of digitisation in state-building and development. We look at biometrics in Solomon Islands from four perspectives: the technology itself, the global, the state, and predominantly village-based voters—over 80% of Solomon Islanders remain resident in rural areas. We investigate the structural contexts and the problems that the BVR system was meant to address, and we put this in relation to the choices individual Solomon Islanders exercised in how they made sense of the BVR. We consider how material affordances or ‘constraints’ are met by human agency.

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or the choices actors make in the processes by which meaning scaffolds around technological usage (see Latour 2003; Lemonnier 1992; Latour and Lemonnier 1994), and thus how these choices may undermine the theoretical potentials or promises of digital ‘good governance’, or ‘anti-corruption’ technologies such as BVR.

We draw on the anthropology of technology to separate universal dynamics or ‘technological tendencies’ (Leroi-Gourhan 2013, 2015) from the particular socio-cultural, political, economic and also environmental context in which they are employed, integrated and (re-)imagined (see Coupaye 2009). By so doing we account for what Pierre Lemonnier calls the ‘blending power of things’, a recognition that it is not only important to consider how and of what objects are made, but also ‘[their] myth of origin, physical usage and so on’ (2014, 538). This approach allows us to move beyond technologically deterministic understandings that assume the (effective) deployment of a given technology (BVR) will lead to a particular outcome (improved voter integrity and possibly a more stable electoral and political system).

The ethnographic particularity at the core of the anthropology of technology, thickly described, presents a case wherein top-down, technologically deterministic global and state-policies are re-envisioned and re-configured by local voters’ acts of agency.

In accounting for technological particularities alongside global, state and voters’ imaginings of BVR in Solomon Islands, we tease out the frictions that are created between the technological narratives, experiences and usages linked to the implementation of the technological system. We show how diverging meanings surrounding the value of anonymous voting shape how BVR is employed in ways that re-reveal existing uncertainties in Solomon Islands electoral politics rather than ‘fixing them,’ as promised by deterministic narratives. Instead of conveying a sense of stability or security in the political system, we show how voters’ discussions of BVR and how the system is (hoped to be) integrated into the political system, reflect a broader distrust in the Solomon Islands state, its politicians and administrators.

Our argument is based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in Solomon Islands spanning the period of the initial biometric registration process to the elections on November 19, 2014 and government formation (February 2014 to February 2015). Of this period, we spent approximately four months in the capital city of Honiara and eight months in Gwou'ulu Village, Lau Lagoon, Malaita Province (Lau/Mbaelelela Constituency). Throughout this time
we talked with Solomon Islanders about their experiences with the new system, from electoral clerks tasked with implementing the system to town- and village-based voters. In addition, our analysis is informed by relevant news coverage (Solomon Islands-based and international), official statements, reports and press releases, as well as Facebook discussions on the topic. Particularly relevant Facebook groups include Forum Solomon Islands International (FSII) which is also a registered charity and Solomon Islands’ most significant civil society organization (see Finau et al. 2014), the Lau/Mbaelelea Forum and National Malaitans.

A Malaitan perspective on BVR is advantageous in many ways. It offers insights into the shifting legitimacies of the state system from its, perhaps, most fierce critics in Solomon Islands—the extended history of Malaitan resentment towards imposition of ‘Western’ state structures, centralisation and loss of political and economic autonomy is well documented (see Akin 2013). At the same time, a Malaitan perspective also allows for a glimpse into the centre of power. With independence from Britain in 1978 Malaita has dominated much of the national political landscape as well as the labour market in the capital city, Honiara. This domination has been an ongoing source of political insecurities and conflicts (see Allen 2013; Moore 2007). For these reasons the perspective presented in this article is then also not necessarily representative of Solomon Islands at large. Instead we hope that this article inspires observers of BVR in other Solomon Islands contexts to share their complementary, or contradictory, experiences to create a more complex, comprehensive, and locally-informed understanding of the potentials and pitfalls of BVR as political technology in Melanesia (Papua New Guinea is introducing BVR for the 2017 election, Vanuatu for the 2020 election).

A Brief Introduction to Solomon Islands (Electoral) Politics

The references to ‘corrupt practices’ in the epigraph to this article are indicative of some of the critiques that have been voiced against the Solomon Islands state, its politicians, and the electoral system. The Solomon Islands has weak political parties and is politically fragmented with comparatively high numbers of independent candidates contesting for any given seat in a Westminster-style first-past-the-post electoral system (see Steeves 2011). Incumbent turnover rates are significant and winning candidates often only receive a small fraction of the total votes. For example, in Lau/Mbaelelea Constituency, where we did most of our
research, the winning candidate in 2014, Augustine Auga, merely received 26.3% (or 2,513) of all votes. In 1984 Ben Foukona won with a meagre 10.7% of the vote (Wood 2015).

Voters tend to vote ‘locally’ and with a primary concern for ‘local issues’, for instance, based on a candidate’s track record of helping their respective community, families or individuals. Cox (2009) and Wood (2013) explain this tendency, among others, based on the failure of the Solomon Islands state to demonstrate a capacity to implement large projects successfully (in 2015 the World Bank (2016) judged Solomon Islands to be among the bottom 16 percent of all countries globally for government effectiveness and regulatory quality). Therefore, Wood suggests that Solomon Islanders are trapped in a ‘vicious cycle of local voting’ (2013, 1) that nurtures a form of patron-client relationship between voters and candidates (and eventually MPs). This vicious cycle also prevents the emergence of consolidated parties and voting preferences that centre on policies rather than individual perks, thus undermining the stability of the state system.

In this context, international development partners have been pushing for reforms to the electoral system to undercut local voting and patronage networks, for example, through the EU-funded, UNDP-implemented ‘Strengthening the Electoral Cycle in the Solomon Islands Project’. The BVR is part of these efforts. It is intended to ‘clean up’ the electoral roll and to prevent multiple-voting. During previous elections candidates were accused of paying voters to register at multiple constituencies, at times under multiple names. They were also accused of facilitating multiple-registration and multiple-voting by hiring trucks and boats on Election Day to move large groups of voters from one polling station to another (among others see Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2006).

**The Technology**

How then was BVR expected, in view of its technological tendencies, to improve the electoral process in the Solomon Islands? Digital biometric technologies involve

the collection with a sensing device of digital representations of physiological features unique to an individual, like a fingerprint…. This digital representation of

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3 ‘Local’ is used here to refer to voters’ language-based home communities. For example, many of the Lau we met in Honiara, including those who more permanently resident in town, returned to their ancestral villages in the Lau Lagoon to cast their votes.
Biometric data is then usually transformed via some algorithm to produce a so-called [sic] “template”. These templates are stored in a centralised database that is accessed when on following occasions the finger… is presented to the system. After a similar algorithmic transformation of this second biometric image, a comparison can be executed. If a matching template is found, the person presenting themselves is “recognised” and counts as “known” to the system (van der Ploeg 2007, 46).

Because of the unique information that individual bodies contain biometrics are then said to allow for accurate identification of any given person.

It is this ‘certainty’ that has fuelled the rapid, global expansion of the biometric industry. With a market size of US$ 9.58 billion in 2015, the biometrics market is predicted to increase to US$ 31 billion by 2023 (Global Market Insights 2016). In the context of electoral reform alone, 34 low-to-middle income countries—not including Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu—have opted to utilise the system in one form or another (Gelb and Clark 2013).

This success story began with the rise of fingerprinting and its perceived potentials both for internal security and for controlling colonised populations (Maguire 2009). Biometric monitoring started out as and continues to provide what Maguire describes as ‘a vision of security in contexts in which… the malleability of individual identity [is] rendered problematic’ (2009, 13). Thus, it is no surprise that the securitisation of identity took off after 9/11. For example, Krasmann and Kühne (2014) note that while the German Bundestag had rejected biometric technologies for identification (and securitisation) purposes as unproven and unreliable technologies in pre-9/11 debates, government rhetoric shifted quickly in the post-9/11 ‘insecure identities’ environment. Since then several biometric systems have been introduced. Resistance to and critiques of identification-for-securitisation technologies exist and persist, but we truly appear to be en route to ‘embracing a fully-fledged biometric information order’ (Breckenridge 2005, 269), especially since biometric technologies are less and less used in exceptional cases and more and more integrated into the mundane (Ajana 2012).

Digital biometric technologies allow for two types of identification: ‘one-to-one’ or 1:1 matching (verification/authentication) and ‘one-to-many’ or 1:N matching
(identification/recognition) (Ajana 2010; Gelb and Clark 2013). The former allows for authentication, to verify that a person is who they claim to be. The latter is intended to ensure that a person is unique in a given database, in other words that they did not register more than once. This is commonly used for voting or social security payments. According to Gelb and Clark (2013), 1:N matching is technologically the most difficult as the likelihood of false positives increases with the population size included, especially if the points of comparison (the number of biometrics included for a given person in the database such as fingers and iris) are small. If, however, enough high-quality biometric data are collected even in large populations a person’s uniqueness can be determined with a statistically small margin of error.

In Solomon Islands BVR was initially introduced for the purpose of both types of identification, to make sure that a given voter was who they claimed to be and to ensure that no one was able to vote more than once. To implement the system the Solomon Islands Government hired the Canadian company Electoral Services International Inc. (ESI) to register and store prospective voter's thumbs and face. Based on Gelb and Clark’s (2013) criteria this is a comparatively small number of biometric reference points though technologically adequate for both types of information in a country with as small a population as Solomon Islands (approximately 605,000).

There are, however, two context-specific technological concerns surrounding the use of fingerprints and facial recognition. Both types of biometrics are deemed least intrusive. People are used to have their pictures taken, and fingerprints have long been used for criminal investigations (Unar, Seng and Abbasi 2014). However, fingerprint technology and facial recognition remain unable to reliably account for ‘bodily deviance’ (Magnet 2011, 30). Problematic are, for example wounds. With a majority of Solomon Islanders working in slash-and-burn agriculture, or non-industrial fishing, cuts are frequent and, with limited access to biomedical care, so is scarring. Another challenge area is the non-linear structure of the human face as well as modification of faces from natural aging through the application of cosmetics, plastic surgery, or particularly relevant in the Solomon Islands case, tattoos (see Unar, Seng and Abbis 2014). Another core problem area is sensitivity to illumination conditions, which is also problematic in the Solomon Islands case where pictures were often taken outdoors in changing daylight.
This cursory overview questions frequently held assumptions about the undeniable objectivity of biometric markers or digitised bio data (see Krasmann and Kühne 2014). Even though the biometrics—facial and fingerprints—that are included in Solomon Islands’ system reflect current industry standards, it is crucial to recognise that, beyond ethical considerations or the applicability of a given system to a given situation, technological realities constitute an important part of the equation. This is especially so in a (development) context wherein, as argued by Donovan (2015), biometric legitimacy is to a significant degree derived from a presumed technological objectivity, and wherein promises of technological progress may overshadow broader political and economic concerns.

Also, in the Solomon Islands case technological capacity stopped playing a role halfway through the election. Beyond printouts of the registration lists, BVR was not used on the day of the national/provincial elections. Biometrics were not collected on polling day. The election clerks had a list of names of registered voters with serial numbers generated at the time of the voter registration. Voters merely had to find themselves on the list. Even the biometric ID cards issued to everyone who registered were not systematically checked at all polling stations.4

Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the digital BVR system may be, it is only the user experience that tells the full story of its implementation, use, and eventual effect on the electoral process. An examination of the user experience reveals the complex entanglements of global, state-level and village imaginings of the potentials of BVR, and how they are socially constructed, unequal and at times contradictory, if not a source of friction.

The Global and International Perspective

The introduction of BVR in Solomon Islands is exemplary of global efforts to shrink the ‘identity gap’—unequal access to official identification—which is seen as one of the primary obstacles to development. For example, Setel and colleagues (2007) argue that the identity gap has significantly hindered progress in bringing adequate health care to developing countries. They suggest that a lack of civil registries too often results in limited or no

4 We were unable to locate any polling station in the Lau Lagoon that required voters to show the new voting ID cards to be eligible to vote. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for noting that in another (undisclosed) constituency and province IDs were required to cast votes.
statistical information on births, deaths and causes of death and therefore is a waste of donor money. The Solomon Islands case fits into this rhetoric and conviction, in particular since ‘insecure identities’ have been identified as a core obstacle to the democratic process (and peace) in Solomon Islands.

International audiences closely observed the 2014 national election as an indicator for Solomon Islands long-term political stability. Described as ‘historic’ (ABC News 18 Nov. 2014), the 2014 election was the first after the 2013 departure of the military component of the Australia-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). RAMSI had been deployed to Solomon Islands after five years of civil conflict, the so-called ‘Tensions’, and the subsequent (partial) collapse of the state and capitalist economic system in 2003. Tasked with setting the stage for ‘effective’ government and governance based on the example of the Western, democratic, liberal state, RAMSI’s successes were measured, but also tarnished, during national elections. For example, RAMSI faced critique when Honiara’s Chinatown was partially burnt down after the 2006 election (see Allen 2008). From the perspective of RAMSI state-builders and Australian policy-makers, a peaceful election in 2014 was indispensable to move forward with the intended full withdrawal of RAMSI (the remaining advisors to government ministries and police officers) in 2017.\(^5\)

Internationally, the decision of the Solomon Islands Government to embrace BVR was, thus, well-received and its execution has, so far, only faced little critique. Especially after the by and large peaceful 2014 national elections, the system has been praised as important tool for advancing the democratic process. The Commonwealth Observer Group notes that ‘the Biometric Voter Registration process has raised confidence in the integrity of the electoral roll. A credible voters’ register is a key foundation for conducting elections with integrity’ (cited in FSII, Facebook Group, 22 November 2014). Australian High Commissioner to Solomon Islands Andrew Byrne remarks that he is ‘particularly pleased to see the positive impact of the Biometric Voter Registration process. The new roll provided greater confidence and reduced opportunities for voter fraud’ (cited in Solomon Star 29 Nov. 2014). Dr. Karl Claxton, member of the observer team from the Australian National University, recognises the overall positive impact of the biometric system even though he found otherwise little change in politics: ‘The new voter Biometric system has essentially resulted in the end of

\(^5\) See Allen and Dinnen (2015) for a more complex discussion of RAMSI transition narratives and aspirations.
double, triple and sometimes quadruple voting. While it was very expensive it's given people real confidence, results and the process’ (sic; cited in *Sunday Star* 30 Nov. 2014).

This is not to say that concerns were not voiced as well. For example, the Commonwealth Observer Group also noted that ‘there were reports that not all eligible citizens were able to register during the registration period’ (cited in FSII, Facebook Group, 22 November 2014). Terence Wood points out that there have been recorded attempts of candidates ‘to register ineligible supporters from other locations in their constituency’ (2014a, 1; see also Commonwealth Observer Group 2014). Still, the international consensus indicates generally favourable attitudes towards BVR. ‘The new roll still has flaws… but it is improved’ (Wood 2014a, 1).

**The State Perspective**

The state perspective is situated at the intersection between the global and the emplaced local. At least from the perspective of the global, the state is particularly significant because it is tasked with negotiating any potential points of friction that may arise from local encounters with the global (and vice versa). While constituting ‘just one institutional ensemble among others within a social formation’, the state is also ‘peculiarly charged with overall responsibility for maintaining the cohesion of the social formation of which it is a part’ (Jessop 2001, 167).

BVR responded to international concerns about the electoral process and it nicely fit within wider processes initiated by external state-builders such as the digitisation of the auditing system, customs, and human resource management. Simultaneously, BVR was offered as answer to Solomon Islanders’ complaints about multiple-voting. BVR promised to deal with Solomon Islanders’ and international critiques of the political system; and it promised to do so while distracting from internally more contentious electoral issues such as out-of-constituency voting, candidate spending during electoral campaigns, the weakness of Solomon Islands party system, and post-election ‘grass-hopping’—the practice of frequently changing political alliances, usually by switching from the government to the opposition, or the other way around (see Wood 2014b; Steeves 2011).
Seemingly reflecting this sentiment, the Solomon Islands Government (SIG) chose a politically ‘neutral’ company to implement the system. ESI fit the portfolio required by international donors—well-established with previous experience in the Pacific (Fiji)—without drawing immediate criticism for perceived linkages to existing patron-client politics—as previously noted, ESI is a Canadian\(^6\) company. SIG purchased the full package including the necessary hardware, software, supplies and support personnel to train local clerks for the implementation of the process. As advertised by ESI, ‘the system incorporates a field-based registration unit, central data consolidation and processing, renewable energy supply where needed, thorough training, and complete support’ (2014, 3).

Necessary electoral laws were amended and the system was set to roll out in January 2014 after awareness campaigns in the fall of 2013, and in time for the national election initially scheduled for July 2014. Then the government could not get the necessary funding together to start and complete the registration process (Solomon Star 20 Jan. 2014) and registration had to be moved to March/April 2014. The new date was kept. However, for multiple reasons the registration had to be extended. Flash floods across Guadalcanal (and especially Honiara) during the first week of April 2014 demanded a partial halt to registration as a national state of emergency was declared. Demand was also simply too large at out-of-constituency registration booths in Honiara. Electoral clerks simply could not reach some areas in time. In East Kwaio, disgruntled voters were said to have prevented electoral clerks from starting the BVR process during the first week of registration. Potential voters were uncertain as to what BVR entailed and more broadly discontent with the Solomon Islands Government (Solomon Star 10 Apr. 2014).

In the end the responsibility for BVR implementation fell on the shoulders of electoral clerks who travelled across the provinces for awareness, registration and eventually polling itself. Young women and men filled the ranks, many with experience registering voters in the previous paper-based system. Training was largely done in the lecture hall at the National Museum in Honiara. On the last day of training the clerks were given their assignments and timetables. Those clerks assigned to Temotu Province were given three hours to head to the wharf. Because of the close proximity between Honiara and Auki, the provincial capital of Malaita, the clerks assigned for North Malaita were given a week.

\(^6\) For the past ten years Canada has had a small economic and political presence in the Pacific Islands States in comparison to that of other ‘developed’ countries that border the Pacific.
We joined the clerks on one of the chartered ships for the trip to Malaita. The wharf was electric with confusion. Some clerks quit. Some refused to work with their assigned partner. Supervisors felt forced to compromise, allowing some to choose their own partners and hurriedly hiring new people to fill the suddenly empty clerk positions. One supervisor remarked that the systems put in place to stop corruption were now useless. A problem during previous registration periods had been clerks colluding. Preassigned pairs were supposed to prevent this but the sudden re-shuffle created pairs who were known to be supporting the same candidates.

A list was used to determine if passengers were supposed to be on the ship (electoral clerks only) as it was carrying confidential government documents and equipment. Our contact, who had invited us along, was on the list but his name had already been ticked off. No one knew how to confirm whether he or the other person were who they claimed to be. Our contact and his doppelganger were both allowed to stay, as were we and several adults who were not
government employees, along with their children. The very men and women who were
expected to help Solomon Islands ‘secure’ the identities of its voters (and citizens) through
BVR, were themselves ‘unknown’ or ‘insecure identities’ (see Velez 2012).

Six hours later Auki was packed with the ranks of clerks preparing to spread out over the
province; they waited for more instructions and for the arrival of their per diem funds. Some
could no longer afford to stay in Auki at their own expense and travelled on ahead, the
equipment being left behind. Some more quit. Despite this uncertainty and chaos many clerks
were proud of the work they were going to do. They considered it to be an important
contribution to the betterment of their country and a concrete way to reduce the corruption,
inefficiency and unreliability that they felt to be inherent in Solomon Islands electoral system.

Such commitment was necessary. The electoral clerks had been told, to the horror of many,
that they would be held accountable for any piece of equipment that got damaged or any
information wrongly recorded. Some equipment would undoubtedly be stolen (also by
electoral clerks), but other equipment might just not be able to keep up with the conditions in
which they would have to be operated, particularly in saltwater and bush environments during
the final weeks of the rainy season. Humidity, sand and dirt are serious problems, as are ants,
which often colonise electronic equipment.

There was also the pragmatic difficulty of transporting the equipment—a ‘portable laptop
computer, thumb print scanner, digital camera, backdrop for photo taken, portable colour
printer, laminates for voter ID cards, voter registration forms, pens, VR steps (poster), storage
boxes (plastics), external battery kit (standbys) [and] cartridge inks’ (Solomon Islands
Electoral Commission 2014, 1). The equipment required to operate the digital system was in
many cases prohibitively unwieldy, and no extra personnel were available. The pair of clerks
assigned to each registration area had to deliver the onerous load of technology to pre-
arranged, advertised sites. This was especially difficult in the bush areas, which were often
only accessible by footpaths. Clerks had to carry the equipment for days over a loose surface
of red dirt and mud that tenuously clings to a shallow rock face.

The paper-based system that had been used for previous elections involved a pair of clerks
going from house to house throughout a ward in a constituency, filling out a standard form
with a pen. Clerks were responsible for the forms, being able to send boxes of completed
forms to a supervisor and only needing to carry what was necessary to areas with dangerous
terrain. Due to its technological requirements, the new biometric system required more
permanence, specifically registration booths instead of house-to-house registration. The
clerks and much of the prospective voting population were required to meet halfway in the
rural contexts of Solomon Islands. In the end the last mile of providing this new service was
the responsibility of the user. This can be impossible depending on personal circumstances,
from self-provisioning responsibilities to unmarried and married women being required to
obtain permission from husbands before travelling outside their own villages (see Hobbis
2016a). Besides, we were told, registration times changed frequently because of late arrivals
and tight schedules. Clerks were often only present for a few hours at any registration station.

Also, reports surfaced about prospective candidates and their supporters purchasing freshly
issued voter registration cards from the electorate (Solomon Star 19 March 2014). Voters
received a small remuneration on registration day and were promised a larger one on Election
Day when the cards would be returned to them. The Electoral Commission responded with
reminders about the punishments associated with electoral fraud. Those selling their ID cards
would be brought to justice after official complaints had been received. Yet, no such official
complaints ever reached the Electoral Commission (Radio Australia 12 May 2014). Even
those who were caught registering twice—6,000 double registrations were officially recorded
(Island Sun 22 July 2014)—could vote.7 There have also been no reports of rogue clerks
being prosecuted.

This said, by the time the election was called for November 19, 2014, (it had to be postponed
because the voter lists could not be produced and confirmed in time) the biometric voter
registration system had ‘cleaned up’ the electoral roll. In 2010 there were 448,189 voters
registered. Reflecting the estimated number of Solomon Islanders of voting age the number
had been reduced to 287,656 in 2014 (Commonwealth Observer Group 2014, 8). Yet, this
numerical success remains overshadowed by the problems with implementing the system that
many Solomon Islanders observed and critiqued. Some explained that they observed the
registration of ineligible voters in some constituencies and, according to the Solomon Star (28
Nov. 2014), there was a significant increase in registered voters at some polling stations after

7 If someone registered more than twice, a voting ban for the 2014 election was issued. We were unable to
verify whether this ban was implemented on Election Day.
modifications to the provisional lists. As suggested by an observer on FSII, the electoral system with BVR is still susceptible to manipulation and modification in the following ways:

1. System open to abuse....there is risk that officials can allow voters to vote twice. For example, Presiding Officer can pre-sign the Ballot Paper and then hand it to Voter to put it into the ballot box. Expected to happen in rural community polling stations.

2. The absence of a computer system to do on-time checking of names of voters against the total number of votes gives the opportunity for double voting and over-voting, ie. having more ballot papers than total registered number of voters.

3. The presence of Polling Agents is expected to interfere with voters choices. Further, their presence is a threat to the whole administration and processes in each polling station.

4. The system was still manual, officers merely ticking names against Voters cards and ID numbers. Manual systems are prone to error.

(FSII, Facebook Group, 22 Nov. 2014)

Compromises had to be made in every aspect of the system and the Solomon Islands state, while praised by international observers, has had to face local critique for BVR. This critique comes afore in village-based voters’ discussions.

The ‘Village’ Perspective

The ‘village’ perspective is based on our fieldwork in Gwou’ulu Village on the north-western edge of the Lau Lagoon in Malaita Province. While village-centric analyses have been strongly critiqued for their tendency to present ‘bounded, homogenous and static units’ (Mitchell 2010, 7), we agree with Antonio Sorge and Jonathan Padwe that ethnographic research in and on villages offers important, if not unique perspectives, into global-national-local connections and ‘[circulations] of people, goods, images and ideas not moored to a single place’ (2015, 242). Gwou’ulu Village is not isolated from urban areas. Villagers travel between Gwou’ulu, Honiara and Auki (the provincial capital), often for temporary labour migration or to access educational and health facilities, and they are integrated in social networks that fall alongside an urban-rural continuum rather than a divide. Hence
connections and overlaps, for example, with the middle-class opinion expressed in the epigraph, are not uncommon or even necessarily surprising.

Yet, these overlaps are not comprehensive. There are differences in how the elections, particularly the campaign, are experienced in village environments that are geographically and through inadequate transportation infrastructures distant from urban centres. Gwou’ulu had little access to the urban circulation of (political) information including news sources such as the Solomon Star or discussion forums on Facebook. Newspapers rarely made it to Gwou’ulu and radio signals including that of the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC) only reached few houses. Facebook was nearly impossible to access in the village. Mobile phone credit was saved for emergencies, rather than being used for ‘political chit-chat’ with urban contacts (see G. Hobbis 2017). It is within this context that Gwou’ulu electoral experiences were, at least in parts, disconnected from broader national narratives and debates, and that the purpose and value of BVR was interpreted and re-imagined.

The polling station at Gwou’ulu serves over 300 potential voters. Due to its comparatively large size Gwou'ulu would be a prize if it voted unanimously for any given candidate (commonly referred to as ‘block vote’\(^8\)). However, even as a competed political space (the last block vote happened in 2006) a significant advantage can be gained by getting the support of a large proportion of the village. As previously alluded to, 2,000 votes (or even less) may win you the seat for Lau/Mbaelelea Constituency. Accordingly, all eleven candidates competing in the constituency visited Gwou'ulu during the campaign period—whereas in many other villages barely half of the candidates made it.

Prominent men in the village, elders, chiefs and business men became campaign managers (CMs) for individual candidates. While not formally part of the electoral process, CMs are pivotal for the organisation and conduct of campaigns and elections ‘on the ground.’ Beyond an often singular campaign event—the candidate’s speech and a subsequent question and answer session—voters have few options to inquire about candidates’ platform and electoral promises. To learn more about candidates’ messages voters turn to CMs who organise regular meetings with committed and potential supporters of ‘their’ candidate. CMs have a ‘direct line’ to candidates and his campaign staff (other CMs) through campaign-funded mobile

\(^8\) A second type of block voting refers to one faction of the village blocking the votes of another faction (an attempt to neutralise the votes of one faction by voting for a similarly strong candidate).
phone-based networks, and during regular meetings with the candidate travelling through the constituency.

CMs talk up their candidate. They channel the perks that candidates offer to supporters or issue threats to potentially deserting ones, for instance by explaining that ‘we will take away the solar unit that was given to you because you voted for the particular candidate during the last election.’ However, the relationship between candidates, CMs and voters is not unidirectional. Villagers communicate concerns and requests to CMs who negotiate on villagers’ (and their own) behalf with their candidate. For example, one candidate promised his Gwou’ulu supporters (not everyone in the village) fibreglass canoes should he win. This promise was only made after some villagers informed the candidate’s CM that they would not continue to support this candidate without such promise.

CMs are thus indispensable for the electoral process—many we talked to agreed that a candidate without a CM in Gwou’ulu would have no chance for large-scale support—and they take their roles accordingly serious. For CMs to be effective they have to keep track of both the promises made and to whom, in case the candidate wins. To this end, CMs commonly write down supporters’ names on a list and, in 2014, they also tried to collect villagers’ biometric voter ID cards. The candidate and voters expect CMs to create reliable lists of supporters. Voters are not merely passive recipients of campaign messages and promises; rather they negotiate for particular perks throughout the campaign. The number of supporters on these lists is also used on the campaign trail to convince undecided voters about the strength of a particular candidate. The list also proves that CMs ‘did their job’.

An accurate understanding of voter support is thought of as particularly significant to ensure a fair distribution of government funds to a particular individual, family, village, community or broader ‘development’ vicinity. In this context accuracy is defined as concrete knowledge of those who voted for their new Member of Parliament (MP). A concern for anonymity, a secret ballot, was only secondary to several of our respondents, though not all (especially women who were often sidelined in negotiations with CMs and candidates explained how they use the secret ballot to vote for a candidate of their choosing rather than their husband’s, even if it meant that they would not get the promised perks).  

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9 Wives were often added to lists as soon as their husbands agreed to support a particular candidate.
Because of the secret ballot (and the deviation of some voters), it is in the end not possible for the integrity of these lists to be confirmed. However, there is a degree of confidence in their validity. After all, all parties involved in the list-making, candidates, CMs and voters, have something to gain from the integrity of the list. This is especially true if the candidate wins and if the list corresponds, roughly, with the number of voters for the given candidate at the polling station. Collecting the biometric voter ID card contributed to a sense of integrity of these lists due to the uniqueness of the cards. While names can be written on multiple lists (though rumours about doing so travel fast), there is only one ID card per voter (at least ideally) that can be given to a CM as ‘security.’

This concern for voter integrity in CMs lists, strengthened through the biometric voter ID card, is also reflected in villagers’ broader support for BVR and its promise to stop multiple voting. By and large, villagers agreed that voting more than once, as many knew had been done in previous elections (or which they had even done themselves), was undesirable. Multiple voting was said to not only skew results but also undermine the validity and effort put into the negotiations between voters and candidates, mediated by CMs, during the campaign. Many of our local respondents wanted the ‘right’ candidate to win, the one who had demonstrated a capacity to mobilize a (true) majority of voters and then, hopefully, to fulfil promises to relatively large section of the population rather than only to a few. For example, even if not all villagers have access to new water tanks a candidate provided to his supporters, the new tanks would reduce demands on the communal water source; demand would be more reduced if more villagers had supported the respective candidate. Multiple voting was felt to unfairly limit the number of beneficiaries, thus negatively affect the well-being of the constituency at large while serving the ‘selfish’ interests of few individuals.

The following case study further illustrates how villagers believe that BVR is making it easier for candidates to identify and thus reward those who are actually supporting them. Candidates often charter boats to bring supporters to their constituency from Honiara for the vote (out of constituency voting is not (yet) possible). Before BVR this had caused significant discontent. Boats were overloaded and thus, at times, even turned around by port authorities

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10 The practice of chartering boats for supporters is not limited to Malaitan candidates. For example, when Gordon Darcy Lilo, Solomon Islands Prime Minister from 2011 to 2014 and candidate for Gizo-Kolombangara Constituency, was not re-elected in 2014, he attributed his loss to the late arrival of a passenger boat transporting his supporters to the constituency from Honiara (Radio Australia 23 Nov. 2014).
or the police, depriving passengers of the possibility to cast their vote. Commonly, chartered boats leave Honiara on Election Day or the evening beforehand. There would no second chance, if they had to turn around. Villagers attributed overloaded boats to dishonest voters. People actually known to be voters for candidate B would claim to vote for candidate A in order to get a free ride. Sometimes, so we were told, people not registered in the given constituency would also use the opportunity for a free boat ride. BVR was said to make this type of cheating more difficult. We learned that one candidate required people to show a registration card in order to board, which meant that at least those who had given—at times sold—it to another candidate would not be able to use this service. Another candidate was said to have collected registration cards in advance. Only people whose cards he was holding would be allowed onto his boat. A third candidate asked for the registration number noted on each of the cards. There was some confusion about how this would work out; however, at least some villagers contend that this number could be directly linked to a particular polling paper, thus allowing candidates to check whether voters were indeed supporting the candidate whose boat they had been using.

In this regard, villagers desired BVR and were certain that it worked. Villagers who had considered registering at more than once—often because they were not born in Gwou’ulu and were uncertain if they should not vote in their home villages instead—were told by other villagers, in a chorus with the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission, that the ‘computer will catch you’. Some were caught. They were still allowed to vote—at the location they registered first—but, to their embarrassment, their names and pictures were displayed publically in the village, for them to be publically scrutinised.

In other words, the BVR system was described to us as positive because it was felt to increase the honesty of voters, or at least it seemed to make it more difficult for supporters to lie about where their support lay. This was taken very seriously. A villager told us that they had ‘given’ their ID card to a candidate shortly after registration but then they changed their mind about who to vote for. When they received the card back on polling day they were told that they could return it to the candidate for another perk at the end of the day. The voter decided not to do so. It would be simply too dishonest and in the end, they also worried that the new technology might perhaps disclose their dishonesty after all.
This is not to say that the new registration system was accepted with no concerns. On the contrary, from a village perspective it had two notable disadvantages in the information that it recorded (rather than the cards that it produced). The first came with workings of the system itself. By and large, our respondents agreed that computers are successful in identifying cheaters irrespective of their political networks (and they thought this was a positive attribute). However, some of our respondents, in particular those who were familiar with (urban) Internet Cafes and other digital technologies, were wary of the proclaimed objectivity and safety of the information saved and processed during BVR (and possibly during voting). They were aware that humans, such as electoral clerks, could possibly manipulate the information recorded. Knowledge of computers and their manipulation was not only seen as source of power but also as being sourced by power. Incumbent MPs who agreed to the system were recognised as the most likely to have access to those implementing it—the clerks and IT professionals who were, after all, also voters.

In Gwou'ulu one rumour was particularly prevalent: the current MP for Lau/Mbaelelela was said to have distributed thirteen USB sticks that contained a virus to election clerks. These USB sticks would be inserted into the computers on the day of the vote. It would infect the computers thus requiring the use of the old paper-based system, which villagers were convinced could be more easily used to cheat. Our respondents were uncertain about how viruses work or how they are created, however, they were familiar with their destructive potential. During our fieldwork computer viruses were widespread in villagers’ mobile phones, which rarely had anti-virus software installed, and if they did, it was out of date due to limited Internet access (see G. Hobbis 2017, 168-169). Villagers concern about viruses is, thus, not unsubstantiated while the rumour about the use of viruses by the current MP reflects villagers’ broader concerns about their (current) political leaders including leaders’ (nationally and internationally-proclaimed) commitment to a ‘clean election.’ When this rumour was circulating (up to polling day itself) villagers were sure that their biometrics would be taken again before casting their vote. Because it was not, this particular virus-based fear remains unsubstantiated. However, it contributed to a broader sense of uncertainty and distrust in the new system—also because in the end the old paper-based system that villagers had little trust in was used.\footnote{While we were unable to obtain an official statement about this decision, an IT Professional working with the system insisted that biometrics were never intended to be checked on Election Day due to the associated costs and infrastructural challenges posed by doing so.}
A second rumor and fear—as Emde suggests ‘rumour [creates] fear, fear [creates] rumour’ (2005, 398)—revolved around concerns that the new biometric system exposed everyone to malevolent sorcery who provided ‘truthful’ information during the registration. Not only in Lau but elsewhere in Melanesia fear of sorcery and witchcraft is omnipresent and a dynamic force in everyday life (see Forsyth and Eves 2015). In the words of Lawrence Foana’ota, the former director of Solomon Islands National Museum, ‘people believe in sorcery and witchcraft as the main cause of accidents, deaths, diseases and failures either in business undertakings or in work’ (2015, 83). This belief reaches beyond the realms of ancestor worship. It has become deeply intertwined with different iterations of Melanesian Christianity and it is ‘being articulated and transformed through its participation in historical processes of social change’ (Rio 2010, 182). BVR is exemplary in this regard.

In Kokana Village, Central Makira, it was rumoured that the scanning machines for BVR were a tool of Satan, or ‘666 technology’ that was being used to create a registry for the apocalypse (Solomon Star 21 March 2014). In Gwou’ulu some were worried that malevolent sorcerers could make use of the BVR to inflict harm on those who had registered. Specifically, BVR was rumoured to increase users’ vulnerability to contagious magic and its underlying belief ‘that whatever [is done] to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact’ (Frazer 1959, 11). For example, beyond BVR, Gwou’ulu villagers commonly did not share a betel nut with someone that they did not trust if they had already taken a bite out of the nut. The chewer’s body, their saliva and the betel nut were recognised as intrinsically connected, and the betel nut could be used as a conduit for by a malevolent sorcerer to hurt the chewer. The same is true for BVR, which villagers recognised as recording core information—unique identifies—about individual bodies. As such, in a way similar to saliva on betel nuts, BVR was rumoured to allow for malevolent sorcerers to directly target, and if desired kill, any given person on the registration list.

A second closely related concern revolved around the government’s request to provide ‘true names’ to electoral clerks. This was problematic. We were told that a common protection against malevolent sorcerers was to keep one’s true name secret, using a nickname instead. A sorcerer who knew their victim’s true name could, for example, write it down on a path that

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12 This resonates with other millennialist narratives found in Makira (see Scott 2011).
the targeted victim frequently takes. If the victim does not see the writing and does not turn back immediately, they would be attacked and possibly killed by an evil spirit. The names submitted to the biometric clerks were given in recognition that providing true names was potentially dangerous. At least some adjusted the spelling with this in mind. Age and place of birth were also obscured at times. This was not difficult to do. No other form of identification had to be presented for registration and no one was required to provide testimony to a given person's provided details (a common practice to respond to the lack of official identification). Simultaneously, this practice did not undermine villagers’ usages of BVR, in particular not the use of biometric voter ID cards to ‘monitor’ voter integrity. The cards remained ‘unique’; the photograph offered a reliable-enough identifier.

In Gwou’ulu, ‘on the ground’ among voters, BVR was re-imagined. Many of our respondents valued it for its capacity to increase voter integrity as it was locally perceived, within the system of local voting and patronage networks that Wood (2013) and Cox (2009) describe. This is reflected in our respondents’ discussion of the system and how voter ID cards (rather than the biometrics themselves) were integrated into the ‘informal’ electoral system to increase the reliability of CMs’ lists of voters and to, hopefully, allow those who truly supported the winning candidate, to access the privileges associated with doing so. At the same time, the uncertainties surrounding BVR re-reveal some of the broader, locally-perceived shortcomings of and distrust in the Solomon Islands state and its representatives.

Stephanie Hobbis (2016b) has argued elsewhere that while Gwou’ulu villagers desire a more effective state in its ability to mediate their growing dependency on the global political-economic system, in everyday life the contemporary state is predominantly viewed as a disruptive rather than legitimate governing force. Gwou’ulu villagers are disillusioned with the state and, as a result of this disillusionment, engagements with the state and its agents, for example, during elections, often re-emphasise the legimitacies, interests, values and concerns of the village community (and Gwou’ulu’s urban connections) irrespective of the broader interests of the state and imagined nation. This is visible in the choices Gwou’ulu villagers made surrounding the integration of BVR into the electoral system. It is visible in some villagers’ decision not to provide the (untrustworthy) state with their true names, in others’

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13 Even though this choice was contentious among Solomon Islanders themselves as, for instance, reflected in FSII Facebook discussions, it appears contextually adequate as most Solomon Islanders do not have access to any official documentation such as birth certificates.
fear that their biometric information could be abused to inflict harm on them, and in debates about MPs access to the technologies and the possibilities for manipulation. Many of the voters we talked to, thus, do not share the confidence that some international observers felt that BVR had brought to the electoral system. On the contrary, among some voters it has nurtured further distrust in the state and its actors.

Conclusion

On a most basic level BVR in Solomon Islands appears to have been successful in achieving its primary promise, to reduce the number of multiple registrations and, thus, to create a ‘cleaner’ electoral roll. However, as Wood (2014a) notes, this cannot unquestionably be traced back to BVR. It may simply have had to do with the fact that there was a need to compile a new roll, for example, to remove the names of recently deceased voters. Based on our village data it also appears credible that double registrations were not necessarily the outcome of corrupt practices or intentions. During conversations with the villagers who had been caught registering for more than one constituency, we learned that they had not yet wanted to make a final decision about where they would vote, whether in their ‘birth’ or ‘marital’ constituencies or in the constituencies in which they were employed.

Biometric voter registration did raise general confidence in the integrity of the electoral roll. BVR’s core idea—one vote per voter—was embraced as a just political practice and as one that required improvement in the context of Solomon Islands. International funders and observers, electoral clerks who implemented the system, civil society (social media) groups and villagers agreed that BVR was a step into the right direction. However, BVR did not, as envisioned and hoped by international observers, counteract patronage networks. Instead candidates, CMs and voters used biometric voter ID cards to possibly increase the reliability of the patronage system.

Our Lau respondents, as well as the many commentators on Solomon Islands-centric Facebook pages, were also able to identify possible fraudulent behaviours that were not addressed by the new electoral roll. Distrust appears to continue in the administrative capacities of the state and the integrity of their staff. Human personnel remained ultimately responsible for executing both the registration and the voting processes, and the Solomon Islanders and especially Malaitans we talked to (including electoral clerks themselves) and
whose discussions we observed on social and news media, were reluctant to believe that individuals’ allegiances to electoral integrity (as internationally conceived) overshadows their allegiance to the candidates they support. There appears to be persistent belief that if manipulation of the election results is possible, it will be identified and used to this end by political elites, however small the advantage that could be gained.

As long as this is the case, the claimed advantages, or (falsely deterministic) technological promises of biometric voter registration remain unfulfilled. BVR did not sufficiently curtail fears and uncertainties among our local respondents about the electoral process and the state that it represents; it was unable to move beyond the pitfalls of its often incomplete implementation to reliably demonstrate its capacities as enabling a ‘corruption-free’ election (see also Barkan 2013). Instead, the rumours that circulated about computer viruses and increased vulnerability to malevolent sorcery through BVR re-reveal the persistence of uncertainties and of a lack of confidence in the interests and commitments of the Solomon Islands state and its representatives.

The way BVR has been presented internationally, however, does not reflect these uncertainties; instead, international observers speak of a new confidence in the electoral process. Barely any of the accusations or rumours—from voter ID buying to electoral clerks stealing equipment to the use of black magic to influence results—were ‘officially’ investigated (by an international or national state institution) or acknowledged as substantiated. This may be but another reason for at least Gwou’ulu villagers’ distrust in the state’s ability—why should anyone make an official report if public administrators are thought to be biased in the first place? It also highlights the importance of looking beyond the analytical categories of legitimacy that are commonly applied by international electoral observers, and that are evidenced in global perceptions of the successes (and shortcomings) of BVR in Solomon Islands. For example, the Commonwealth Observer Group (2014) identifies distrust in the management capacities of the state and acknowledges some local concerns with corrupt practices. Its recommendations, however, have a predominantly international focus—a need for reform to correspond to international standards. In this the global perspective and the international dialogue with the Solomon Islands state is limited in its ability to understand and account for the experiences, needs, values and abilities of Solomon Islanders.
Notably, (international) state and non-state actors also did not inform Solomon Islanders of how having their biometric information recorded in a digital database could be used against them. Yet our respondents’ own histories, experiences with the state and culturally-situated understanding of biometrics informed how individuals made sense of BVR. It fuelled a scepticism that in turn resulted in strategies that might work to safeguard them, to a degree, against possible future abuses. Serendipity, then, played a significant role in this first major attempt at a top-down introduction of digital technologies into the lives of Solomon Islanders. Only marginal gains for increasing state surveillance were made, at least in North Malaita, while an already deeply entrenched distrust of the contemporary state on the part of local actors was extended into the realm of digital governance.

Distrust in the state and its representatives informed the way BVR was approached and understood on the ground, concretely nurturing reports and fears of its potential abuse. Bijker (1995) showed how societies in Europe constructed the workability of bicycles based on their own historical understanding of gender and particular designs thrived or died based on these circumstances. The adoption of digital technologies is no different in the Solomon Islands case. The top-down and overtly political nature of BVR has been framed inside of a context that is marked by an uncertain relationship with the state. It is this context that defines how and why this technology does or does not work and that demonstrates how complex, diverging meanings surrounding digital technologies are generated, their universal tendencies but also their situatedness in users’ desires, fears, values and broader experiences.

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