

Integrity of the Vanuatu Electoral Roll

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Introduction

This paper discusses the integrity of the electoral roll in Vanuatu, which is central to good governance. I am conscious of the fact that I am speaking to an audience of people experienced in matters of good governance and, in one way or another, in matters of elections. For my part I have only been in this important government work for less than 12 months. My first significant engagement in this respect, of course, was the national elections of May this year.

Apart from chairing the meetings of the Electoral Commission when these are convened, as Chairman of the Electoral Commission I am not actually involved with the day-to-day management of the Electoral Office. This work is assigned to the Principal Electoral Officer and her staff, which consists of three officers who have been doing their work in an acting capacity for the last three years.

Having said that, I want to make the point that what I am going to say today reflects some of my own beliefs about good governance and about what I want to try to achieve during the period of my presidency of the Electoral Commission. I have a little over four years left to try to do this.

Definitions

In order to understand the theme of my presentation it is important to understand the definition of *integrity*. The Oxford Pocket English Dictionary defines Integrity as 'honesty'. It comes from the Latin word *integritas* – wholeness or purity.

Secondly is the definition of the *electoral roll*. The electoral roll is a list of all eligible voters registered to polling stations of their polling districts of the 17 constituencies of Vanuatu each year.

The integrity of the electoral roll is the extent to which the electoral roll is an honest reflection of the number of voters eligible to vote throughout Vanuatu. It is the complete record of all people over the age of 18 years in Vanuatu. The integrity of the electoral roll is central to the electoral system and the survival of democracy, its institutions and principles in Vanuatu.

The Electoral Roll

The Vanuatu electoral roll is an electoral register in which the list of eligible voters is recorded for the purpose of exercising the right to vote for those whose names appear in the electoral roll in an electoral event. Electoral rolls are a fundamental part of any voting system because they contain the list of electors and they are *prima facie* evidence of an elector's right to vote. It is for this reason that in every democratic jurisdiction the electoral roll is an important part of the voting system.

In Vanuatu we maintain a system of establishing an electoral roll like many other countries do, although perhaps not all systems are the same. Our system is provided under the law enacted by the Vanuatu Parliament, commonly referred to as the *Representation of People Act (CAP. 146)*. That law gives the authority to the Principal Electoral Officer to draw up electoral lists every year for the purpose of compiling the electoral roll in all the 17 constituencies that make up Vanuatu.

In practice the Principal Electoral Officer appoints electoral registration officers and assigns them areas or districts for which they are responsible to conduct the registration. They in turn rely on the cooperation and assistance of the members of the communities in carrying out their task satisfactorily so that the final result of their work is as accurate as possible. The process involves updating the roll by including the new 18 year olds, which is the year of eligibility, and enrolling names of any new residents in a given area, and at the same time eliminating the names of those who either have died or are no longer the residents in the area because they have gone to live somewhere else.

This is all done manually and it involves electoral registration officers going from house to house in person, often repeatedly, to ensure that every person eligible to vote has been registered, and registered correctly. It is a costly exercise in terms of time and money, given the geographical nature of this country. The average number of registration officers that can be deployed in this exercise in one year can go up to 500, and with the system as we have it today, this number is likely to increase. Even though registration and voting are not compulsory in Vanuatu, we are required to register every citizen who has attained 18 years of age to give them the opportunity to exercise their voting rights if they so wish in an election event.

The period of registration each year runs from January to June when registration officers must try to complete their task of registering voters. Then there is a period of two months when the information collected is compiled into preliminary lists for each area or each district. Constituencies are divided into polling districts and each polling district is divided further into polling stations. Vanuatu currently has a total of 309 polling stations and each polling station has an electoral roll. Therefore altogether we have a total of 309 electoral rolls.

The law requires that the electoral roll must be made available for public inspection for two weeks from 1–15 June each year. This allows the electors to make any corrections or amendments to the list before it is finalised as the official electoral roll for the given year. The Principal Electoral Officer has between 15 and 30 June to finalise compilation and establishment of the electoral roll from the information collected by the electoral registration officers. The roll can then be used for any elections that may take place following the establishment of the roll on 1 July each year.

Until last year when a separate roll was established for the Port Vila Municipal Council for the election of that council, the one national electoral roll had been used for all the elections, including that of the national Parliament, provincial councils and municipal councils. The Electoral Commission would like to work towards establishing a separate roll for every entity, that is to say, a separate roll for the national parliament and one for each of the eight local authorities, beginning with the Luganville Municipal Council whose election is due in February 2003.

That in a nutshell is the system of the electoral roll that we have in Vanuatu.

Although this system has enabled us to conduct all the elections this country has had for the last 22 years of its independence, the system is far from perfect and the

Electoral Commission is the first to admit this fact. It is open to fraud and abuse. In the May 2002 national elections there were several instances where the number of registered voters in the official roll for a polling station exceeded the estimated number of voting population. In one case someone's name was on the roll three times. There were several duplications of names on the roll with different spellings. Many people listed on the electoral roll were known to be dead. Others were known to have moved to another island. The independent 'Elections Observer Group' estimated in its final report that our official roll is overstated by 20 percent. The primary contributor to electoral fraud is the poor state of the roll.

Electoral Cards

Voters are issued with electoral cards at the registration time. These cards are produced to the polling officers at the polling station as proof that the bearers have been registered to vote in their area. Applications for new electoral cards are a source of electoral fraud.

In the recent election, many people in places like Port Vila and Luganville constituencies admitted being in possession of more than one electoral card and many of them are awaiting prosecution today. This situation can discourage well-meaning citizens from being part of the election process and cause them to lose confidence in the electoral roll. Voting by proxy is frequently abused where people wilfully arrange through bribery or political manipulation for others to vote for them elsewhere under different names while they themselves vote in another place.

Recommendations

This leads me to the third and final part of my presentation. We need an electoral roll that has the confidence of the public at large, especially the voting population. We need a system that guarantees free and fair elections, that results in a legitimate outcome in terms of elected representatives for the electors to the Parliament. How might we arrive at this?

Firstly, an effective voter education programme is essential. This can be accomplished through the education system in schools so that children learn early what their citizenship rights and civil rights are, and learn to respect and value these; through community awareness education programmes; and through youth and adult education programmes using organizations and civil groups such as NGOs, theatre groups and the media. The task of educating the public about their involvement in elections should not be left to politicians during the time of election, for the reason that it is too late and the time is not appropriate for it and the fact that the players at this stage have their own agenda. Political education at election time can become confusing.

Given that for over 90% of population, elections provide the only opportunity for them to actually be involved in government, it is important that they appreciate and value their participation in the election process. Hence the importance of voter education. People must be appreciated and valued as vital elements in considering good governance, and efforts must be made to invest heavily in people.

The quality of the registration officers is an integral part of preparing an electoral roll that has integrity. The electoral roll must be accurate, reliable and up to date.

Personal information about electors in the roll must be accurate. The responsibility for this rests with both those responsible for registration and the voters themselves. Ways must be devised to facilitate voters' access to the roll when it is being established, for the purpose of satisfying themselves that the information in the roll about them is correct. This should be allowed to take place throughout the year up to a limit time before an election. This should give the electors the feeling and degree of ownership and confidence in the roll. It will encourage them to want to participate in the election with respect and confidence.

Electoral rolls are the electors' documents. They should include all eligible voters and should not by law prevent anyone eligible to enrol under the *Constitution* as voters on grounds of race, religion, etc. They therefore need to be easily accessible to the voting public and transparent in both format and presentation. They need to be easily understood and in the language of the people. In the context of Vanuatu, they need to be in the Bislama language – i.e. one standard Bislama language.

The electoral roll should be easy and cheap to establish and its maintenance should be sustainable. Vanuatu must develop a system appropriate to its context, affordable and therefore manageable into the future.

Summary

As the election roll is the national list of all registered eligible voters, its integrity cannot be achieved and maintained without the collective efforts of government, watchdog agencies, the private sector, civil society and the international community. The involvement of the entire community would bring about national integrity that enhances sustainable electoral development, maintenance and respect for the rule of law dealing with democracy elections. This would inevitably improve the quality of life for all citizens of Vanuatu.

The integrity of the electoral roll will in the long term ensure credible voter registration and election systems. By having these credible systems in place, then Vanuatu can stand tall and confirm that there are free and fair elections in this country.

One of my major goals in my term of office as Chairman of the Electoral Commission is to ensure that the Electoral Roll has integrity as the basis for a quality electoral system and good governance in Vanuatu. I want the Vanuatu electoral roll to be the benchmark for electoral rolls in the Pacific