



## Overview

Since establishing an office in Canberra, International IDEA's engagement in the Pacific Islands has increased to the extent that it is now in a strong position to make significant contributions in support of democracy. Its work has grown from highlighting the value of International IDEA's global resources to providing expertise specific to the region based on research on government stability, inputs to the Solomon Islands Government's electoral reforms discussions, and relations with various electoral and political party bodies in Melanesia.

This Policy Brief is part of International IDEA's work to increase knowledge among politicians and policy-makers on how political institutions, processes and reforms can be designed to promote democracy and sustainable human development.

## About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with a mission to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

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# Leadership turnover and political instability in Pacific Island states

## Introduction

Political instability is often associated with frequent changes of government. Frequent changes of government may act as a barrier to sustainable human development because they are disruptive to the delivery of services and development programmes, and make it more difficult for governments to be accountable. Changes of government occur often in a number of Pacific Island states, in particular Nauru, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. This Policy Brief investigates how long political leaders hold office in these countries, and the frequency and causes of changes of government. The concept of 'terminal events' is used below to map the frequency of changes of government and the political instability that these changes represent in six Pacific Island states: Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The findings draw attention to the frequency of changes of government in the region, as well as the attempts by the governments of some states there to address the resulting political instability through constitutional reform.

## Terminal events and political instability

The concept of a terminal event is used to denote the point at which a political leader loses office. Terminal events may be enumerated not only to illustrate the frequency of their occurrence, but also as an illustration of their likely effect on instability. The most common 'terminal events are: a motion of no confidence; the voluntary resignation of a prime minister or cabinet; interventions by the head of state; the death or incapacity of a senior cabinet member; the departure of one or more political parties from a coalition; conflict between the head of state and the cabinet; and the loss of a general election. It should be noted however that as a frame of analysis, terminal events do not capture all aspects and nuances of political instability (Huber and Martinez-Gallardo 2003: 2). First, they do not account for the continuation of ministers or political parties from the government that has just fallen in the government that replaces it. Second, they do not account for changes in the composition of the executive between terminal events. Third, they do not account for the many aspects of executive instability that do not result

*This Policy Brief is based on the forthcoming article, 'Leadership Turnover in the Pacific Islands: A Preliminary Analysis' in Regan, Anthony J., et al. (eds) State of the Pacific 2013: Politics, Land & Livelihoods (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016)*

in a change in political leadership, but where a state of political instability is self-evident. For example, four no-confidence motions were tabled in parliament in PNG between 1977 and 1982, inevitably disrupting government, but only the fourth forced a change of government.

The terminal events approach argues that executive instability can, to some degree but with significant limitations, be measured by reference to the extent to which a head of the executive holds office for a period less than the constitutionally mandated term. Where this happens frequently, and the actual terms in office are short, this may be an indicator of instability. In addition, the categories of terminal events that result in shorter than mandated terms in office can be identified and analysed to gain a better understanding of what causes or contributes to instability. This Policy Brief identifies and analyses terminal events related to or associated

with political instability that occurred either during a parliamentary term that was prematurely dissolved, or during a full parliamentary term (see table 2). These demonstrate the number and type of terminal events that influenced the turnover of political leaders.

### Terminal events in Pacific Island states

The six Pacific Island states analysed below all gained independence in the period 1968–1980.<sup>1</sup> Between independence and their most recent general election, the total number of political leaders in these states, including political leaders who held office more than once, was 125 (see figure 1), indicating frequent changes in political leadership and accompanying instability.

<sup>1</sup> Kiribati, 1979–2011; Nauru, 1968–2013; PNG, 1975–2012; the Solomon Islands, 1978–2010; Tuvalu, 1978–2013; and Vanuatu, 1980–2013.

Figure 1 Summary of all terminal events, 1968–2013

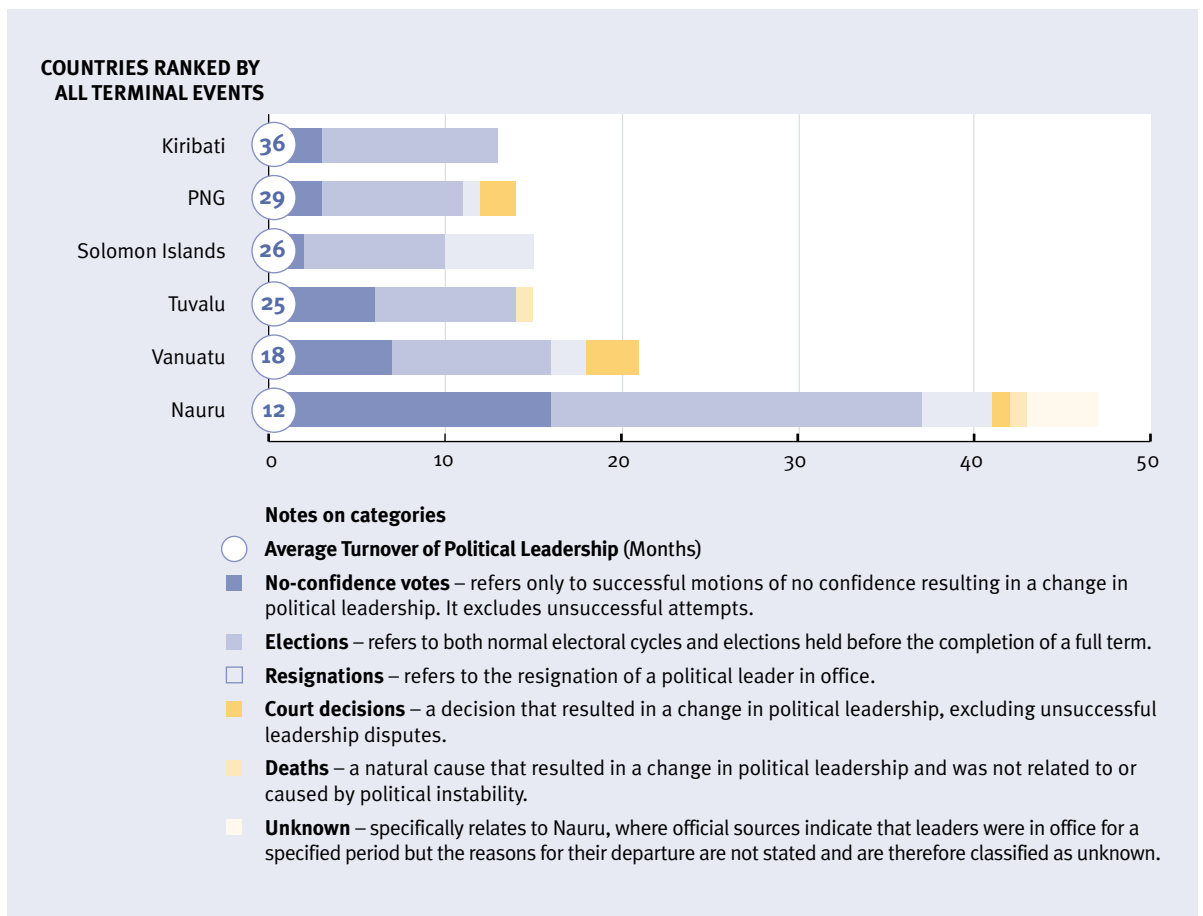


Figure 1 lists 125 terminal events, irrespective of their relation to instability. Table 2 demonstrates that 66 of these terminal events were associated with executive instability, such as early elections, successful no-confidence motions and resignations. Of these, successful no-confidence motions were the most common event (particularly in Nauru). Possible factors explaining the regular use of motions of no confidence include: the prevalence of weak political party systems; the highly tenuous political party arrangements that govern coalition governments; the weakness of other constitutional avenues

for holding governments accountable; and their effectiveness as a tool for immediately dissolving governments. Successful motions of no confidence have significantly affected the tenure of office of political leaders. They have caused the dissolution of parliaments before their full terms in three states in the region, prompting political leaders to undertake reforms aimed at addressing the political instability caused by the frequent use of such motions.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A full electoral term is four years in Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu; three years in Nauru; and five years in PNG.

**Table 1 Terminal events related to executive instability since independence**

Countries	Terminal Events				Number of terminal events resulting in the dissolution of parliament	Number of terminal events without affecting term of Parliament	Total
	Elections as a result of premature dissolution of parliament	Successful no-confidence votes	Resignations	Court decisions			
Nauru	9	16(a)	3(d)	1	16	13	29
Vanuatu	2	7(b)	1	3	4	9	13
Tuvalu	–	6	–	–	–	6	6
Solomon Islands	–	2	4	–	–	6	6
PNG	–	3	1	2	–	6	6
Kiribati	3	3(c)	–	–	6	–	6
	14	37	9	6	26	40	66

**Notes**

Table 2 excludes terminal events such as deaths, resignations, court decisions, and all general elections held at the end of a parliamentary term.

- (a) Includes five successful no-confidence motions tabled during a parliament prematurely dissolved before its full term.
- (b) Includes two successful no-confidence motions tabled during a parliament prematurely dissolved before its full term.
- (c) Refers to three successful no-confidence votes that resulted in three separate automatic dissolutions of parliament before the completion of its full term.
- (d) Includes two resignations that occurred during a parliament that was prematurely dissolved before its full term.

Table 2 shows the duration of political leaders' periods in office. Extremely short executive terms are another indication of unstable governments, although it is important to note that a change of leader does not necessarily prevent the functioning of the rest of government. Nauru has had a new president on average every 12 months, and Vanuatu a new one on average every 18 months. In both these Pacific Island states, the number of political leaders in office for six months or less is also an indicator of executive instability. In Nauru, 18 presidents were in office for

six months or less, while in Vanuatu nine served six months or less. The impact of this political instability is most obvious in Nauru. It was once one of the wealthiest countries in the world, as a result of export revenues derived from phosphate mining. Unstable and weak governance has affected its economy to such an extent that it has been forced to seek regional assistance from the Pacific Islands Forum to help improve its governance, and its economic and financial position. The situation in Nauru has improved somewhat, but many governance challenges remain.

**Table 2 Duration of political leaders and total number of political leaders**

Countries	Year of Independence	Number of political leaders (a)	Number of different individuals in office (b)	Term of Office of Political Leaders				
				Average duration (months) (c)	Shortest duration (days)	Longest duration (months) (d)	Longest duration of single term (months) (e)	Served 6 months or less (f)
Nauru	1968	46	14	12	1	192	36	18
Vanuatu	1980	24	8	18	11	143	50	9
Tuvalu	1978	16	11	25	90	58	49	2
Solomon Islands	1978	16	11	26	17	91	52	2
PNG	1975	15	7	29	330	202	68	1
Kiribati	1979	11	4	36	30	134	48	1

**Notes**

Table 2 excludes terminal events such as deaths, resignations, court decisions, and all general elections held at the end of a parliamentary term.

- (a) All political leaders irrespective of the number of times the same individual was president or prime minister.
- (b) Total number of different individuals who held office as political leaders.
- (c) Number of days each political leader was in office divided by 30 days, i.e., turnover in months.
- (d) The cumulative period served by a political leader irrespective of different parliamentary terms.
- (e) Longest term in office in a single term of parliament.
- (f) Number of political leaders who have been in office for six months or less, including the same individual more than once.

International IDEA's engagement in Democracy and Development contributes to the achievement of the following institutional objectives:

- stronger democratic institutions and processes; and
- more sustainable, effective and legitimate democracy
  - by supporting political actors, political institutions and the capacities of women and men for democratic participation and representation, effective oversight, and democratic accountability, primarily through knowledge production at the global level, and dialogues and support to reform efforts at regional and country levels; and
  - by advocating for a place for democracy in the development agenda, primarily calling on IDEA's knowledge production and dialogues at regional and global levels, and based on experiences generated at country level.



## Reforms aimed at addressing instability

Following pressure from donors and the international community to address executive instability, constitutional reforms were undertaken in a number of Pacific Island states. In PNG, the Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) was introduced in 2001 in order to strengthen political parties and instil discipline among their members. Some of the provisions of the OLIPPAC, however, were ruled unconstitutional in 2010. Following a review, revised legislation is now ready to be debated. To avert the threat of no-confidence votes, legislators in PNG amended the Constitution in 2013 to extend the 'grace period' following a general election, during which a motion of no confidence is not permitted, from 18 months to 30 months. The Supreme Court ruled in September 2015 that changes to the constitution to increase the grace period to 30 months are unconstitutional.

Following the example set by PNG, the Solomon Islands introduced the *Political Parties Integrity Act* of 2014 to strengthen political parties and address political instability. The Act seeks to prevent independent members of parliament from dictating the formation of governments by restricting this role strictly to registered political parties. The Act also seeks to eliminate

the destabilising role of independent members of parliament in determining the balance of power during votes on motions of no confidence. The rules governing coalition agreements among political parties regulate the formation of government, withdrawals from the coalition and the replacement of prime ministers. Political leaders in Vanuatu are also examining ways to address political instability, drawing on the experiences of PNG and the Solomon Islands.

## Conclusions

Democratic government, including in parliamentary democracies, is premised on the regular rotation of leadership roles. However, as the analysis in this Policy Brief shows, frequent changes in government can result in executive instability, which has negative consequences for governance and for sustainable development. Implicit in efforts to improve the tenure of the executive is the notion that stability is desirable for good governance. It is important to note, however, that stability can also mask poor governance, a lack of democratic accountability, poor management of the economy and corruption. Political stability needs to be contextualized against these important concerns; and efforts to increase the tenure of the executive, such as those being introduced across the Pacific Island states, should be accompanied by democratic checks and balances.



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