cogitatio

Politics and Governance (ISSN: 2183–2463)
2023, Volume 11, Issue 1, Pages 130–140
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i1.6065

Article

Gender and Opposition Leadership in the Pacific Islands

Kerryn Baker [1,*] and Jack Corbett [2]

[1] Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, Australia
[2] Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Southampton, UK

* Corresponding author (kerryn.baker@anu.edu.au)

Submitted: 31 July 2022 | Accepted: 9 December 2022 | Published: 22 February 2023

Abstract
Parliaments in the Pacific Islands are among the most male-dominated in the world. Yet despite the odds, there is a cohort of women who have been elected and won senior roles. This article adds to an emerging literature that examines the gendered pathways to political influence in the region by focusing on the hitherto overlooked role of the opposition leader. It uses a biographical approach to consider the pathways in and through this role by four women opposition leaders: Fiame Naomi Mata'afa (Samoa), Hilda Heine (Marshall Islands), Dame Carol Kidu (Papua New Guinea), and Ro Teimumu Kepa (Fiji). We parse out factors that explain the success of these leaders while also identifying barriers that have prevented their emergence in other Pacific states. We identify two main ways in which women politicians have used the position of leader of the opposition: first, the conventional understanding of the role as a path to power; and second, the less well-understood role of defending and protecting democratic norms and institutions. The latter can be interpreted as a version of the "glass cliff" phenomenon where women leaders assume key positions in times of crisis. Our findings thus highlight that while in the Pacific the role of leader of the opposition can be a path to power, the relatively few women leaders who have taken on this role have used it in diverse and varied ways.

Keywords
gender; glass cliff; leader of the opposition; Pacific Islands; political parties

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Women Opposition Leaders: Pathways, Patterns, and Performance" edited by Sarah C. Dingler (University of Innsbruck), Ludger Helms (University of Innsbruck), and Henriette Müller (New York University Abu Dhabi).

1. Introduction

Political opposition is fundamental to our understanding of liberal democracy. But as the introduction to this thematic issue shows (Dingler et al., 2023), conceptualising "opposition" leadership for the purposes of comparative research has proven a long-standing challenge. The Pacific region is no exception. Most states operate Westminster systems and many have first-past-the-post electoral systems (Fraenkel, 2016; Larmour, 2005). Yet party systems are often fragmented and weakly institutionalised (see Bishop et al., 2020; Rich et al., 2008). When the opposition is considered, it is usually defined by its absence: in terms of ideological or programmatic debate; party-based campaigning; and key resources and organisational capacity. Instead, the key focus is on the pre-eminence of executive dominance, with opposition benches occupied by those members of parliament (MPs) unable to gain ministerial roles who are waiting for the chance to launch a motion of no confidence and obtain them (see May, 2017; Morgan, 2005).

The same focus on absence is true for women politicians, leading to a dearth of analysis of women opposition leaders (see Helms, 2022). Women are very much under-represented in Pacific politics as both legislators and leaders. While women's political leadership is an increasingly large area of scholarship, both globally (see Jalalzai, 2013; O'Brien, 2015) and in the Pacific Islands region (see Cox et al., 2020; Spark & Corbett, 2020), how and why women assume the role of opposition leader is

far less studied. Rather, the focus is on the obstacles to participation and influence, which in the Pacific include financial, cultural, and institutional barriers (see Baker, 2018; Fraenkel, 2006; Huffer, 2006; Zetlin, 2014).

Despite this difficult context, there is nevertheless a cohort of women who have held the position of opposition leader in Pacific legislatures. To consider how women MPs have interpreted the role of opposition leader we compare the experience of four who have held the post: Fiame Naomi Mata'afa (Samoa), Hilda Heine (Marshall Islands), Dame Carol Kidu (Papua New Guinea), and Ro Teimumu Kepa (Fiji). We adopt a biographical approach to explore their pathways in and through the position. We find two different trajectories: first, a short tenure that ultimately proves a stepping stone to the role of head of government; and second, a (potentially) longer occupancy in which women leaders frame their opposition leadership in terms of defending democratic norms and institutions rather than trying to establish a credible alternative government. The latter trajectory can be interpreted as a version of the "glass cliff" phenomenon (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), where women leaders assume key positions in times of crisis. In the Pacific, this form of "glass cliff" opposition leadership has not become a path to power; instead, women's leadership in these periods has become symbolic of democratic resistance and resilience. Our findings thus support the common view that in the Pacific the role of the leader of the opposition is only rarely a path to power while at the same time adding much-needed nuance to its specific use by women leaders.

To substantiate these claims, the article is structured as follows. We begin with a brief overview of the literature on opposition leadership and how the role has been constituted in the Pacific region. Then, we outline the methods and approach of this article. Following that, we examine the experiences of four women leaders of the opposition in Pacific Islands countries. We consider their experiences through the lens of two distinct narratives: (a) opposition leaders as heading credible alternate governments and (b) opposition leaders as defenders of democratic norms and institutions. We conclude by considering what the experiences of women opposition leaders in the Pacific can tell us about democracy and politics in the region more broadly.

2. Opposition Leadership, Gender, and Pacific Politics

As Dingler et al. (2023) demonstrate in their introduction to this issue, there are three main strands of literature that can help us explain the form and function of opposition leadership. The explanatory power of each strand varies in relation to the Pacific region. Taken together, though, we can see that despite its significant social and political diversity, there are notable general trends in the region: Institutions are weak, creating space for highly personalised and intensely male-dominated systems to emerge.

The first explanation is institutional. Most Pacific states adopted versions of the Westminster system—including executive-legislative fusion and first-past-the-post electoral systems—at independence (Fraenkel, 2016; Larmour, 2005). Yet Westminster systems have functioned very differently than expected in the region, with politics often defined by the weakness of programmatic political parties or institutionalised party systems, and the corresponding personalisation of political leadership (see Corbett, 2015a; Kabuni et al., 2022; Steeves, 1996). Indeed, these trends recur despite the diversity of political institutions and cultures across the region. The point is that while parties matter in most of the Pacific—politicians regularly move between them and form new ones—they do not play a critical role in mobilising voters for elections. By and large, Pacific voters elect relatives, community members, or persons whom they have a prior association with, rather than parties. The result is that where parties do exist, and regardless of the mix (single, two-party, or multi-party systems), their main role is that they enable politicians to form a government and maintain executive authority (Corbett, 2015b; Rich et al., 2008). This form of highly personalised politics has two distinct effects (Corbett, 2015a). On the one hand, it creates unstable governments, with the switch of a few MPs triggering frequent motions of no confidence. On the other, some leaders are able to dominate all aspects of political and social life to the extent that they have unparalleled influence. Indeed, some countries fluctuate between these extremes, with Nauru emblematic of how a sustained period of dominance by independence leader Hammer deRoburt was followed by a succession of short-lived political alliances that rose and fell with alarming regularity (Connell, 2006). In short, institutional explanations of opposition leadership have limited explanatory power as even though Pacific states often follow the Westminster tradition of nominating an "official opposition," the person who inhabits the role does not usually fulfil the same functions as in other states.

The second explanation is drawn from leadership studies and focuses on agency rather than structure. This literature should be better placed to explain why institutionalist explanations struggle to account for the patterns and trends apparent in the Pacific. Where party politics is weakly institutionalised, as in the Pacific, personal networks take on outsized importance over and above formal political structures (see Corbett, 2015a; Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018). These include familial, church, and clan ties. In much of the Pacific, chiefly authority is also interlinked with political authority. Studies of political leadership in the region, however, rarely consider the role of the opposition, let alone subject it to sustained theorisation. Rather, the tendency is to note its absence. When the opposition is discussed, it is usually by reference to potential alternative prime ministerial candidates (but not necessarily alternative parties or policy platforms). The position has also been interpreted as an

important symbol for reformers who champion a particular way of practising democratic governance. As we shall see, in Papua New Guinea, Dame Carol Kidu assumed the position in 2012 as the sole member of the opposition amidst a constitutional crisis. In Fiji, Ro Teimumu Kepa held the role in the context of the Frank Bainimarama-led government suspending many other liberal rights and freedoms. The point in each case is that the position of leader of the opposition can also be occupied by figures who seek to champion a more programmatic—and, arguably, democratic—form of politics as an alternative to the highly personalised systems that are the more common pattern. As the above examples illustrate, a number of leaders who have fulfilled this role have been women. Indeed, until the relatively recent elevation of Hilda Heine (in 2016) and Fiame Naomi Mata'afa (in 2021) to lead their countries, opposition leader and deputy prime minister were the most senior positions women politicians in the Pacific had obtained.

The third explanation can be found in the literature on gender and politics. Women in Pacific politics are usually defined by their absence, both from parliament but also senior public roles. The region is infamous for having the lowest levels of women MPs in the world. Unsurprisingly, this has led to a significant body of work on the barriers to women's political participation (see Baker, 2018; Fraenkel, 2006; Huffer, 2006; Zetlin, 2014). Key factors include the pervasive influence of money politics on campaigning, which means campaign costs are prohibitive for many women and lead to their being considered high-risk candidates. Cultural factors are also important, both in relation to traditional norms and customs, but also the pervasive influence of Christianity across the region. Electoral systems, particularly first-past-the-post voting systems, are also identified as a significant barrier. As elsewhere, prospective women leaders may also run "from" rather than "for" office due to the perception that politics is corrupt and highly masculinised (Spark & Corbett, 2018).

The general frame through which Pacific politics is examined tells us that weak institutions have given rise to highly personalised, male-dominated systems. In such systems, opposition leadership is rarely considered in its own right, whether through an institutional, leadership, or gender lens. If it is considered at all, it is as a pit stop to executive leadership: a temporary position in which to consolidate support for a tilt at the prime ministership (or presidency), in a dynamic political context. We would therefore expect women politicians to treat the role of leader of the opposition in a similar way to their male colleagues—as a way of increasing their profile and reputation as a potential leader of government. What is interesting is that they appear just as likely to gain the role when the democratic system itself appears under threat.

This latter observation conforms to theories that emphasise how women are disproportionately represented in leadership positions that are considered precarious and often assume such positions in times of crisis, a phenomenon known as the "glass cliff" (see Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Ryan et al., 2010). The "glass cliff" constitutes an additional barrier for women leaders, as women in such positions face a more difficult path to success (and in this case, to government). Yet in such circumstances, the presence of women opposition leaders has important symbolic value. In periods of democratic crisis or transition, the issue of women's representation is significant both in that the absence of women is viewed as a democratic deficit, but also in that the increased presence of women is often framed as a means of strengthening democracy (Waylen, 2015). When women become opposition leaders they inhabit these framings. Using four case studies from the Pacific region—which, like other non-western regions, is under-studied in literature on women's political leadership and the "glass cliff" phenomenon—we highlight how women have taken on the role of opposition leader in periods of democratic strain and upheaval. The lesson is that for a select few women, the role has proven to be a rapid springboard to the prime ministership. For others, the position has been more symbolic, with women opposition leaders perceived as defenders of democratic values.

3. Methods and Approach

In this article, we use a biographical approach to consider the pathways in and through the role of the opposition leader for four women, all the first to assume opposition leader roles in their respective countries. This approach is the most feasible given the small number of cases there are to consider (Dingler et al., 2023). It has also been used quite extensively to study women MPs in the region (see Cox et al., 2020; Spark & Corbett, 2020). We draw primarily on public sources—published interviews, profiles, biographies, and speeches—to undertake this analysis. We draw extensively on the numerous interviews and profiles from local and international media outlets on the four opposition leaders, as well as parliamentary transcripts and the existing academic literature. We have also conducted at least one research interview with each of the profiled opposition leaders for prior projects (see Baker, 2019; Corbett, 2015a). Due to guarantees we gave when collecting some of that material—including a commitment to not attribute quotes—we rely on it for background only. Carol Kidu has written an autobiography (Kidu, 2002) and Ro Teimumu Kepa is the subject of a biography (Rasigatale, 2003), although both were written before their time as opposition leaders.

Our definition of "opposition" is broad, following Helms (2022), and is consistent with the often fractured and malleable party systems present in the Pacific region. Carol Kidu and Ro Teimumu Kepa were officially recognised as leaders of the opposition within parliament, while Hilda Heine and Fiame Naomi Mata'afa were publicly recognised as opposition leaders due to their positions as the head of the opposition parliamentary bloc

and the main opposition party respectively. As we will outline, the contexts in which women opposition leaders have risen to power are incredibly diverse. As a result, we primarily focus on drawing out patterns or similarities across the group as differences are much better explained by context specificities. Although a comprehensive assessment of both women's and men's experiences as opposition leaders is beyond the scope of this article, we acknowledge that the key pattern we seek to emphasise—how women opposition leaders have often been cast as defenders of democracy—is not unique to them as male politicians have also taken on this role (for example, Mick Beddoes, in Fiji, as opposition leader in 2002–2004, and 2006). But we also argue that its recurrence is not entirely coincidental and thus reveals an important way in which contemporary understandings of both gender and democratic leadership intertwine in the Pacific context.

The four leaders are each drawn from countries that adopted elements of the British Westminster parliamentary system, with varying levels of hybridisation. Fiji has consistently been the clearest example of "opposition with a capital 'O' " (Potter, 1966). Fiji's party system is more strongly institutionalised than in the other case studies, due in large part to the ethnic cleavage that has defined post-independence politics in the state (see Durutalo, 2008). Its political history, however, has been disrupted by a succession of coups and abrogations of its (four) constitutions (see Frankel & Firth, 2007; Lal, 1992; Lal & Pretes, 2001). Periods of military rule have limited democratic rights and freedoms, including that of the political opposition. Ro Teimumu Kepa is to date the only woman elected leader of the opposition in Fiji, serving in the role from 2014 to 2018. Ro Teimumu was first elected to Parliament in 2001, and was deputy prime minister from 2001 to 2006, when the government she was part of was overthrown in a military coup. When Fiji returned to democracy in 2014, she was elected leader of the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) and became leader of the opposition following the election. She was replaced as SODELPA leader by Sitiveni Rabuka in 2016, and he became the opposition leader following the 2018 election.

In Papua New Guinea, the party system is fragmented and parties are for the most part loose formations of politicians without clear ideological foundations (see Okole, 2005). As governments are generally formed through large and unwieldy coalitions of small party groups and independents, so too are opposition blocs. The lure of access to ministerial portfolios and government funds, in addition to grace periods that prevent votes of no confidence for half of each parliamentary term, means the opposition is often further limited by defections (Kabuni et al., 2022). Dame Carol Kidu was the leader of the opposition in Papua New Guinea from February to July 2012. Prior to this, Kidu had been a parliamentarian since 1997. She had served as a Cabinet member with the community development portfolio from 2002 until a constitutional crisis in 2011 led to her becoming opposition leader. Kidu retired from politics in July 2012.

Marshall Islands adopted a hybrid constitution that mixed elements of US presidentialism with Westminster parliamentarianism. The leader of the government is elected by members of the Nitijela (parliament) and also acts as the head of state. This executive-legislative fusion creates space for a Westminster-style opposition leader role. But, like Papua New Guinea, the absence of strong parties or an institutionalised party system makes coalition membership relatively fluid. Of note is the interplay between democratic politics and the Marshallese chiefly system, with several Presidents also high-ranking chiefs (see Carucci, 1997). Hilda Heine was first elected to the Nitijela in 2011 and became minister for education. Heine was the leader of the opposition from 4 January to 26 January 2016, after which she became president when her predecessor Casten Nemra lost a no confidence motion. The Heine government lost office in January 2020 following a general election.

In Samoa, the authors of the constitution sought to balance representative democracy with traditional forms of governance. Initially, adversarial elements of a Westminster political system, including elections and political parties, were seen as contrary to customary traditions of consensus in decision-making (Lawson, 1996). The first Samoan political party, the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP), was not established until 1979, seventeen years after independence (see So'o, 2008). It grew to control electoral politics for four decades, regularly winning a two-thirds majority in parliament and using its legislative dominance to weaken opposition movements (see Iati, 2013). Following the 2016 election, in which HRPP-endorsed or affiliated candidates won a combined 94 per cent of parliamentary seats, the country had no recognised opposition. Fiame Naomi Mata'afa was the leader of the opposition party Fa'atuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (FAST) in Samoa from March 2021 to April 2021. Fiame first entered parliament in 1985 and became a Cabinet minister in 1991. In 2016, she became Samoa's first woman deputy prime minister. In 2020 she resigned from the Cabinet after a dispute within the HRPP government over proposed changes to the judicial system. After being elected leader of the opposition FAST party, she led them into the April 2021 election, which produced a deadlocked parliament. Following a prolonged constitutional crisis, Fiame was confirmed as prime minister of Samoa and leader of a FAST government in July 2021.

As these brief vignettes illustrate, the women who have become leaders of the opposition have done so in very specific contexts. But there are two important patterns. The first, as we would expect, is that the leader of the opposition role is a stepping stone to becoming head of government. It should therefore be no surprise that the only two women heads of government in the Pacific have occupied it. What is interesting is that in

both cases they have done so for only a few short weeks, underscoring arguments that point to the irrelevance of opposition leadership in the region. There are certainly no cases to date in which women politicians have held the role for a significant period and then transitioned to the head of government. The other two cases, however, highlight another key pattern: women opposition leaders as guardians of democracy. This pattern speaks to the importance of the role and the symbiotic relationship between a particular understanding of democracy—liberal and modernist—and gender representation.

4. Opposition Leadership as a Pathway to Government

For Fiame Naomi Mata'afa and Hilda Heine, opposition leadership served as a pathway—or perhaps more accurately, given their short tenures in the opposition role, as a springboard—to government. In these cases, opposition leadership provided an opportunity to consolidate support as a credible alternate government: Fiame from voters as part of a general election campaign; Heine from within the legislature following an election. This is similar to how men opposition leaders in the region have utilised the role. Yet the periods of political upheaval in which both Fiame and Heine took on the roles distinguish their tenures.

Fiame, as both a high-ranking *matai* (chief) and one of the longest-serving MPs and Cabinet ministers in the Samoan Parliament, was uniquely placed to contest the prime ministership against Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi. As of 2021, Tuilaepa had been prime minister for 23 years. Fiame had worked closely with Tuilaepa as an HRPP MP, becoming deputy prime minister in 2016, but had split with the party in 2020 after refusing to support a series of bills that opponents argued eroded human rights protections (see Meleisea & Schoeffel, 2022).

Following her resignation from the Cabinet, Fiame was invited to take up the leadership of the new opposition party FAST. Despite considerable backlash to the law changes, the HRPP and Tuilaepa remained popular in Samoa. But over their long tenure, during which they often faced very limited opposition, the HRPP had developed a practice of running multiple candidates in electorates. FAST capitalised on this, running a national-level campaign and endorsing fewer candidates than the HRPP. In practice, this meant that while HRPP won a significantly higher proportion of the vote share in the April 2021 election, their candidates split the vote in multiple electorates, and ultimately FAST and HRPP won the same number of seats—25 each, with one independent MP also elected. Three months of political upheaval followed as a constitutional crisis developed, centred around competing interpretations of Samoa's gender quota legislation, which HRPP attempted to use as a trigger for a second election (see Baker, 2021). After a series of court cases, the Court of Appeal issued a ruling in July that paved the way for FAST to officially take office, with Fiame confirmed as Samoa's first woman prime minister.

In the aftermath of the 2021 Samoan election, it was noted that Fiame's "chiefly and political lineage gives her significant domestic appeal," which was pivotal to FAST presenting itself as a credible alternative government (Suaalii-Sauni & O'Brien, 2021, para. 14). She is the daughter of a *tama'aiga* (paramount chief) and the first prime minister of Samoa, and her mother is from another high-ranking chiefly family. At a young age (and after a prolonged court battle), she was bestowed the *matai* title of Fiame. A *matai* title is a prerequisite for eligibility to stand for parliament in Samoa, but Fiame's title is particularly prestigious: "Among many Samoans, particularly older ones, her high-ranking title matters more than her [political leadership] status" (Spark & Corbett, 2020, p. 472).

Fiame's extensive political experience also contributed to bolstering FAST's credibility as a potential party of government. While a change of government after four decades was hugely significant, Fiame's history as a senior HRPP figure suggested drastic policy change was unlikely. Fiame's success, in other words, is in large part due to her ability "to ensure continuity while embodying change" (Spark, Corbett, & Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2021, p. 529).

Hilda Heine is in many ways an archetypal Pacific women politician: highly educated, being the first Marshallese person to earn a doctoral degree in 2004; politically well-connected, as a member of a prominent Marshallese family; and with a strong background in public and community service (see Baker, 2016). Heine was first elected to national politics in 2011 and became minister of education. Elections in late 2015 swept a cohort of long-serving ministers out of politics and brought in a significant number of younger politicians (see LaBriola, 2017). A historic three women were elected to the 33-seat Nitijela. This included Heine, who was re-elected along with two close male relatives.

Government formation in the Marshall Islands tends to be a fractious process. After jostling for position between three factions, newcomer Casten Nemra was elected president on 4 January. Heine was offered a ministerial post but declined and instead joined the opposition, which began agitating for a vote of no confidence (Cox et al., 2020). This lobbying drew heavily on Heine's personal relationships within the Nitijela, including with her relatives. On 26 January, a successful vote of no confidence was held, making the Nemra government the shortest-lived in Marshallese history. Heine was elected by the Nitijela to replace him the following day.

Heine's tenure as opposition leader was extraordinarily brief—just 14 days. It was a period of consolidating political and personal connections to form the government, and in this way, it was similar to how male politicians have approached the role. Heine's opposition leadership, however, also presented a disruption to traditional *iroij* (chiefly) dominance of politics in the Marshall Islands (Kupferman, 2016; see also Carucci, 1997). Most previous presidents had been *iroij*, and it

was *iroij* members of the Nitijela that had orchestrated Nemra's election.

While their respective tenures as opposition leaders were very short, both Fiame and Heine were experienced and well-known political actors. They were able to draw on their profiles and reputations to establish themselves as the heads of credible alternate governments. Their periods of opposition leadership were thus similar to the way many male leaders in the Pacific approach the role, although distinguished by the historic significance of being the first women to become heads of government.

The positioning of opposition as a "government-in-waiting" is recognisable and common across established and emerging democracies. Yet both the cases of Fiame and Heine represent unique political circumstances in their respective contexts. When Fiame assumed the opposition leadership, there had not been a change of government in 35 years. The power of other parties to carry out the key functions of an opposition—"criticising the government, scrutinising and checking governmental actions and policies, and representing a credible 'alternative government'" (Helms, 2008, p. 9)—had been eroded by the HRPP's dominance of politics and their utilisation of that dominance to restrict access to funding in particular (Iati, 2013). Fiame's pathway from opposition leader to prime ministership, therefore, was far from assured. But the authority she derived from her past political experience and her paramount chiefly lineage meant she was uniquely placed to lead a credible alternate government.

In the Marshall Islands, votes of no confidence are not uncommon, with the motion that removed Nemra the eighth since 1998; a ninth, against Heine, would occur in 2018. Yet successful votes of no confidence are a relative rarity, with the 2016 vote being the second to succeed in that time period. Its timing, coming just two weeks following the election of Nemra as president, was also unprecedented. Due to these circumstances, Heine's political profile and connections within the legislature were especially important in moving from opposition leadership to the presidency.

In winning the presidency, Heine became the first woman head of government of an independent Pacific Island state; Fiame, later, became the second. While their approach to the opposition leadership was similar to many men, in the role both Heine and Fiame posed an explicit challenge to the male dominance of political leadership in their respective countries. Fiame's status as a politician was augmented by her high-ranking title and paramount chiefly lineage, situating her as an outlier in terms of gender but firmly within customary governance traditions. Heine had strong support from male relatives and was able to form a coalition to counter chiefly influence in the selection of the executive. The overarching point, however, is that while the ways these two leaders transitioned to power via the role of leader of the opposition was undoubtedly gendered, it also conforms to patterns and norms about the practice of democracy in the region, and so gender alone cannot explain their respective successes (see Spark, Cox, & Corbett, 2021).

5. Opposition Leadership as Guardianship of Democracy

We turn now to another important interpretation of women opposition leaders in the Pacific: as guardians of democracy. As outlined, party politics in the region tends to be weakly institutionalised, with fluid alliances and unstable governing coalitions ubiquitous features of political life. Even where party systems are more well-established, as in Fiji, democracy has been fragile and subject to successive coups. In these contexts, it is perhaps unsurprising that a key archetype of women opposition leaders in the Pacific, as exemplified by Carol Kidu and Ro Teimumu Kepa, is as a defender of democratic norms and institutions.

Dame Carol Kidu was born in Australia and moved to Papua New Guinea when she married Buri Kidu at the age of 19. He went on to become Papua New Guinea's first Indigenous chief justice. She first entered politics in 1997 and served three terms in the Papua New Guinea parliament before retiring in 2012. Kidu has frequently attributed her first election win to "sympathy votes": "There is no doubt in my mind that the deciding factor for my win in 1997 was the fact that I was the widow of Sir Buri Kidu" (Kidu & Setae, 2002, p. 51; see also Kidu, 2002). This is not an uncommon pathway into politics for women in the Pacific (Baker & Palmieri, 2021).

In 2011, Kidu was the long-serving minister for community development within the government led by Sir Michael Somare. In March of that year, Somare flew to Singapore for medical treatment. When he had not returned by August, a bloc of MPs moved to declare his role vacant, and Peter O'Neill was elected prime minister. Somare then returned to Papua New Guinea and contested the motion to vacate in court. While the Supreme Court ruled in his favour, the Speaker continued to support O'Neill. This created a situation where two factions were each claiming to be the legitimate government. The constitutional crisis was not resolved until general elections were held in July 2012.

As the constitutional crisis continued, the Somare faction refused to sit on the opposition benches. Kidu, however, separated herself from her colleagues and was recognised by the Speaker as the formal (one-woman) opposition in February 2012. In assuming the role, she told journalists that her aim was to "look at how we can strengthen the opposition" in Papua New Guinea, noting that the role of the opposition leader had no staff or resources attached to it (as cited in Blackwell & AAP PNG Correspondent, 2012, para. 5). Kidu also highlighted in parliament the difficulties of not having a supporting party or faction behind her: "Being the single member of opposition is an impossible task, so I invite others to join me" (as cited in Blackwell, 2012, para. 5).

Kidu's role as opposition leader, while recognised as historic in that she was the first woman in Papua New Guinea's history to hold this role (Spark et al., 2019), was largely symbolic. When she was appointed as leader of the opposition, Kidu had already made known her retirement plans at the 2012 election. As the sole member of the opposition, Kidu could not present a credible alternative government. She instead stressed that her motivation for assuming the role of opposition leader was to highlight the importance of the opposition for Papua New Guinean democracy.

Ro Teimumu Kepa is an *iTaukei* (Indigenous Fijian) woman from a prominent chiefly family. She is the widow of Sailosi Kepa, a former chief magistrate of Fiji who also served as attorney general and minister for justice in the interim administration following the 1987 coup. Her sister was married to Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, Fiji's first prime minister. In 1999 Ro Teimumu was appointed to the Senate, and following the 2000 coup, she served as minister for women, culture, and social welfare in the interim government. She was elected to parliament in 2001, and in 2004, after the death of her sister, was bestowed the title of *Roko Tui Dreketi*, one of three paramount chiefly titles in Fiji. Ro Teimumu served as deputy prime minister until the 2006 military coup, which she strongly and publicly opposed. When Fiji returned to democracy, Ro Teimumu was elected leader of the SODELPA party for the 2014 Fijian election.

A biography of Ro Teimumu describes how, during her first election campaign in 2001, her team were taken aback by the cultural protocols of respect paid to her as a member of a chiefly family:

> House calls like this by a member of the Great House was just unheard of and to be forced to look in the eyes of the *raluve* [princess] was just beyond belief. A custom strictly observed by the people of the *vanua* [land] of Rewa was to keep their eyes on the ground or look sideways when speaking with a member of the Great House so their eyes would not meet. (Rasigatale, 2003, p. 103)

Baro Saumaki (2007, p. 223) wrote of Ro Teimumu's 2006 election campaign: "In Fiji, chiefly power remains firmly embedded in Indigenous social and political tradition…[and] chiefs are able to use their traditional position to gain political mileage."

As a paramount chief, SODELPA's election of Ro Teimumu as party leader in the lead-up to the first post-coup elections in 2014 was consistent with their positioning as a party: one that stood for "the restoration of chiefly authority and the role of traditionalism" (Lawson, 2016, p. 41). As a Cabinet minister in the government that was overthrown in the 2006 coup, Ro Teimumu also represented a further opportunity for SODELPA to position itself as anti-coup. Ro Teimumu's popularity—she personally won more than a third of SODELPA votes in the 2014 election—stemmed from this combination of chiefly status and public anti-coup, pro-democracy stance (Nanau, 2015). Indeed, Steven Ratuva (2015) observed that SODELPA's election strategy was centred around Ro Teimumu as leader while Brij Lal (2014, pp. 466–467) noted:

> Kepa brought dignity and calm to the leadership, but lacked the political sharpness and debating skills required to combat temperamentally volatile and intellectually obtuse opponents in an intense political campaign, when the media for the most part were cheerleaders for the regime's party. If there were muted murmurs of dissent about her leadership qualities, these were never publicly aired.

When FijiFirst won a comprehensive victory, SODELPA became the main opposition party and Ro Teimumu was confirmed as leader of the opposition.

Ro Teimumu had already positioned herself as a defender of democracy and this continued as opposition leader. In her first speech she noted the return to democracy had given a voice to the political opposition:

> We were made invisible; we were a non-entity; we were not even second-class citizens and we had very little rights. Today, almost eight years later, through the elections which we view as a victory against all odds, we have been given a voice—all 18 of us in opposition….For most of our people, I am sure, Madam Speaker, their hope is that Monday, 6th October, 2014 signals the end of dictatorships, oppression and suppression, and the beginning of an accountable and transparent governance in Fiji, for the first time in almost eight years. This is certainly what my colleagues and I on this side of the House hope for, and I have no doubt that those who voted for us also look forward to this and as members of the opposition, we are ready to play our part to deliver this to our people. (Parliament of Fiji, 2014, p. 20)

After two years in her parliamentary role, however, Ro Teimumu's position was undercut when she was replaced as party leader by Sitiveni Rabuka, the architect of Fiji's first coup in 1987. Ro Teimumu stayed on as parliamentary opposition leader until the 2018 election, after which she was replaced by Rabuka, although she remained in parliament. Rabuka was seen by the party as better able to counter Bainimarama's popularity at the ballot box (Fraenkel, 2019). Yet Rabuka's involvement in past coups meant SODELPA deliberately stepped away from its anti-coup, pro-democracy stance under Ro Teimumu.

Both Kidu and Ro Teimumu assumed the role at a time when the role and function of the opposition was under stress. Kidu became Papua New Guinea's opposition leader following a divisive and protracted constitutional crisis. Ro Teimumu took on the role as the Fijian parliament was reconvened eight years after

a military coup; in the preceding elections, the coup leader was elected Prime Minister. In these circumstances, the role of the opposition leader took on an important symbolic role as a defender of democracy. As long-serving and high-profile political figures (and, in the case of Ro Teimumu, of chiefly lineage), both Kidu and Ro Teimumu were well-placed to take on this role and to use their leadership capital to champion a more democratic style of politics.

Having a woman in the role was symbolically significant too, given that the increased presence of women in politics is often seen as part of the solution to a "crisis of democracy" (Waylen, 2015). Yet, in both cases, with a return to politics-as-usual, women opposition leaders were sidelined. Kidu, while well-respected as a long-serving politician and Cabinet minister, was not treated as a credible alternate prime minister in the manner of her predecessors (and successors) in the role. After two years, Ro Teimumu was replaced by Rabuka, another former coup leader. Both examples thus represent versions of the "glass cliff" phenomenon where women leaders are installed for largely symbolic reasons during crises and are then usually removed when politics as usual resumes.

6. Conclusion

Taken together, the experiences of the four women profiled above tell a story of the fragile nature of the opposition in Pacific politics, with the position of opposition leader frequently sidelined, undermined, or absent altogether. It should be noted that this is not dissimilar to women's experiences in politics more broadly; as elsewhere in the world, women politicians are disproportionately the targets of violence, harassment, and intimidation (see NDI, 2020). This is especially the case when women are in prominent positions and if they seek to challenge dominant social norms. What is more particular to the Pacific, is that the role of the opposition leader is often symbolic, serving as a safeguard for democratic norms and practices. This is surprising because institutionalist explanations would predict that Westminster-inspired systems with executive-legislative fusion coupled, in some cases, with first-past-the-post electoral systems would entrench two-party systems and the role of the official opposition. But by and large theories of Pacific leadership that emphasise the personalisation of politics, combined with gendered analysis that illuminates the way women politicians navigate political systems that are hostile to their presence, appear to have more explanatory purchase. The lesson is that Westminster institutions exist within distinctive political frameworks that shape and are shaped by local gender and leadership norms. The limits of institutionalist explanations reinforce the need to look beyond the "official" position if we want to better understand the dynamics of opposition politics in democratic regimes (e.g., Dingler et al., 2023).

The approach advocated for in this issue is particularly important for explaining why women often take on political leadership positions in periods of instability or crisis (Jalalzai, 2013). This is true in all four of these case studies: Fiame took on the opposition leadership in the aftermath of a seismic split within the ruling HRPP, which ultimately lead to its eviction from the government after nearly four decades; Heine, in a tumultuous period of Marshallese politics which ended in a vote of no confidence in a two-week-old government; Kidu, in the midst of a complex constitutional crisis; and Ro Teimumu, during the return to democracy after a military coup. Crises can provide windows of opportunity for change, and it is notable that the only two women heads of government in independent Pacific states to date utilised brief periods as opposition leaders as a springboard to the executive. This is similar to the trajectory (real or intended) of many male opposition leaders in Pacific states. Yet only rarely has this been a viable pathway to executive power for women in the region.

Opposition leadership, however, is not simply a pathway to power—it provides an important democratic check and balance in Westminster-style democracy. While this has not always been present and effective in the Pacific, we can see examples of where women have used the symbolism of the role of opposition leader to highlight and work to ameliorate democratic deficits. This suggests gendered politics at play, whereby the presence of women in senior positions is perceived to advance and legitimise democracy. This is undermined, however, by the way in which women opposition leaders have been largely unsupported as legitimate political actors, and ultimately replaced by men who are seen as more viable prime ministerial candidates.

This research sheds some light into the complex relationship between gender, Westminster-style democracy, and opposition leadership in the parliaments of the Pacific region. Our conclusion is tentative, based as it is on a small number of successful cases. A more thorough theorisation must wait for more women to assume leadership roles, including leader of the opposition, so that patterns relating to the intersection between gender, ethnicity, rank, class, and other identities can be distinguished. For now, we have taken the modest yet still fundamental step of analysing the select few cases that exist to highlight that gender dynamics are important, poorly understood, and will require further research.

Acknowledgments

We are indebted to our colleagues Ceridwen Spark and John Cox with whom Corbett has collaborated when researching the success of Dame Carol Kidu, Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, and Hilda Heine (e.g., Cox et al., 2020; Spark et al., 2018, 2019; Spark & Corbett, 2020). We do not draw on that material directly here—except when quoting from these joint publications—but it has obviously tacitly informed our analysis.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Baker, K. (2016). *The highest glass ceiling—Women, politics and executive power in the Pacific* (In Brief 2016/7). The Australian National University. https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2016-04/ib-2016-07-baker.pdf

Baker, K. (2018). Great expectations: Gender and political representation in the Pacific Islands. *Government and Opposition*, *53*(3), 542–568.

Baker, K. (2019). *Pacific women in politics: Gender quota campaigns in the Pacific Islands*. University of Hawai'i Press.

Baker, K. (2021). *Gender quotas and the 2021 Samoan constitutional crisis: What next for the "10 percent law?"* (In Brief 2021/29). The Australian National University.

Baker, K., & Palmieri, S. (2021). Can women dynasty politicians disrupt social norms of political leadership? A proposed typology of normative change. *International Political Science Review*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121211048298

Bishop, M. L., Corbett, J., & Veenendaal, W. (2020). Labor movements and party system development: Why does the Caribbean have stable two-party systems, but the Pacific does not? *World Development*, *126*, Article 104719.

Blackwell, E. (2012, February 15). Queensland woman becomes PNG opposition leader. *Courier Mail*. https://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/australian-woman-becomes-png-opposition-leader/news-story/8c42928f7854b3f1eb56da0011b361fe

Blackwell, E., & AAP PNG Correspondent. (2012, February 15). Qld-born woman new PNG opposition leader. *Sydney Morning Herald*. https://www.smh.com.au/world/qldborn-woman-new-png-opposition-leader-20120215-1t5g1.html

Carucci, L. M. (1997). *Irooj ro ad*: Measures of chiefly ideology and practice in the Marshall Islands. In G. M. White & L. Lindstrom (Eds.), *Chiefs today: Traditional Pacific leadership and the postcolonial state* (pp. 197–210). Stanford University Press.

Connell, J. (2006). Nauru: The first failed Pacific state? *The Round Table*, *95*(383), 47–63.

Corbett, J. (2015a). *Being political: Leadership and democracy in the Pacific Islands*. University of Hawai'i Press.

Corbett, J. (2015b). Small fish swimming in the shape of a shark: Why politicians join political parties in the Pacific Islands. *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, *53*(2), 130–152.

Corbett, J., & Veenendaal, W. (2018). *Democracy in small states: Persisting against all odds*. Oxford University Press.

Cox, J., Corbett, J., & Spark, C. (2020). Being the president: Hilda Heine, gender and political leadership in the Marshall Islands. *Small States and Territories*, *3*(2), 339–358.

Dingler, S., Helms, L., & Müller, H. (2023). Women opposition leaders: Conceptual issues and empirical agendas. *Politics and Governance*, *11*(1), 80–84.

Durutalo, A. L. (2008). Fiji: Party politics in the post independence period. In R. Rich, L. Hambly, & M. G. Morgan (Eds.), *Political parties in the Pacific Islands* (pp. 165–183). ANU Press.

Fraenkel, J. (2006). The impact of electoral systems on women's representation in Pacific parliaments. In E. Huffer (Ed.), *A woman's place is in the house—The House of Parliament: Research to advance women's political representation in Forum island countries* (pp. 57–106). Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

Fraenkel, J. (2016). Conclusion: Political institutions in the Pacific. In S. Levine (Ed.), *Pacific ways: Government and politics in the Pacific Islands* (2nd ed., pp. 395–416). Victoria University Press.

Fraenkel, J. (2019). Ethnic politics and strongman loyalties in Fiji's 2018 election. *Journal of Pacific History*, *54*(4), 480–506.

Frankel, J., & Firth, S. (Eds.). (2007). *From election to coup in Fiji: The 2006 campaigns and its aftermath*. ANU Press.

Helms, L. (2008). Studying parliamentary opposition in old and new democracies: Issues and perspectives. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *14*(1/2), 6–19.

Helms, L. (2022). Political oppositions in democratic and authoritarian regimes: A state-of-the-field(s) review. *Government and Opposition.* Advanced Online Publication. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.25

Huffer, E. (2006). Desk review of the factors which enable and constrain the advancement of women's political representation in Forum island countries. In E. Huffer (Ed.), *A woman's place is in the house—The House of Parliament: Research to advance women's political representation in Forum island countries* (pp. 1–56). Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

Iati, I. (2013). Samoa's price for 25 years of political stability. *The Journal of Pacific History*, *48*(4), 443–463.

Jalalzai, F. (2013). *Shattered, cracked, or firmly intact? Women and the executive glass ceiling worldwide.* Oxford University Press.

Kabuni, M., Laveil, M., Milli, G., & Wood, T. (2022). *Elections and politics.* In S. Howes & L. N. Pillai (Eds.), *Papua New Guinea: Government, economy and society* (pp. 17–55). ANU Press.

Kidu, C. (2002). *A remarkable journey*. Pearson Education.

Kidu, C., & Setae, S. (2002). Winning and losing in politics: Key issues in Papua New Guinea. *Development Bulletin*, *59*, 51–53.

Kupferman, D.W. (2016). Marshall Islands. In S. Levine

(Ed.), *Pacific ways: Government and politics in the Pacific Islands* (2nd ed., pp. 132–147). Victoria University Press.

LaBriola, M. C. (2017). Marshall Islands. *The Contemporary Pacific*, *29*(1), 111–118.

Lal, B. V. (1992). *Broken waves: A history of the Fiji islands in the twentieth century*. University of Hawai'i Press.

Lal, B. V. (2014). In Frank Bainimarama's shadow: Fiji, elections and the future. *The Journal of Pacific History*, *49*(4), 457–468.

Lal, B. V., & Pretes, M. (Eds.). (2001). *Coup: Reflections on the political crisis in Fiji*. Pandanus Books.

Larmour, P. (2005). *Foreign flowers: Institutional transfer and good governance in the Pacific Islands*. University of Hawai'i Press.

Lawson, S. (1996). *Tradition versus democracy in the South Pacific: Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa*. Cambridge University Press.

Lawson, S. (2016). Chiefly leadership in Fiji after the 2016 elections. In S. Ratuva & S. Lawson (Eds.), *The people have spoken: The 2014 elections in Fiji* (pp. 41–58). ANU Press.

May, R. J. (2017). *Papua New Guinea under the O'Neill government: Has there been a shift in political style?* (Paper 2017/6). The Australian National University.

Meleisea, M., & Schoeffel, P. (2022). Sāmoan custom, individual rights, and the three 2020 acts: Reorganizing the Land and Titles Court. *The Journal of Pacific History*, *57*(4), 439–450. https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2022.2058475

Morgan, M. (2005). *Cultures of dominance: Institutional and cultural influences on parliamentary politics in Melanesia.* (Paper 2005/2). The Australian National University.

Nanau, G. L. (2015). Representative democracy, the constitution and electoral engineering in Fiji: 2014 and beyond. *The Journal of Pacific Studies*, *35*(2), 17–34.

National Democratic Institute. (2020). *#NotTheCost: Qualitative research report on violence against women in politics in Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands*.

O'Brien, D. Z. (2015). Rising to the top: Gender, political performance, and party leadership in parliamentary democracies. *American Journal of Political Science*, *59*(4), 1022–1039.

Okole, H. (2005). The "fluid" party system of Papua New Guinea. *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, *43*(3), 362–381.

Parliament of Fiji. (2014). *Hansard: Monday, 13th October, 2014*. https://www.parliament.gov.fj/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/MONDAY-13TH-OCTOBER-2014.pdf

Potter, A. (1966). Great Britain: Opposition with a capital "O." In R. A. Dahl (Ed.), *Political oppositions in western democracies* (pp. 3–33). Yale University Press.

Rasigatale, M. (2003). *Kepa: A Fijian princess (Dua na Raluve ni Viti).* Mak Heritage.

Ratuva, S. (2015). Protectionism versus reformism: The battle for *Taukei* ascendancy in Fiji's 2014 general election. *The Round Table*, *104*(2), 137–149.

Rich, R., Hambly, L., & Morgan, M. G. (Eds.). (2008). *Political parties in the Pacific Islands*. ANU Press.

Ryan, M. K., & Haslam, S. A. (2005). The glass cliff: Evidence the women are over-represented in precarious leadership positions. *British Journal of Management*, *16*(2), 81–90.

Ryan, M. K., Haslam, S. A., & Kulich, C. (2010). Politics and the glass cliff: Evidence that women are preferentially selected to contest hard-to-win seats. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *34*(1), 56–64.

Saumaki, B. (2007). Bose ni Vanua and democratic politics in Rewa. In J. Frankel & S. Firth (Eds.), *From election to coup in Fiji: The 2006 campaigns and its aftermath* (pp. 213–224). ANU Press.

So'o, A. (2008). The establishment and operation of Samoa's political party system. In R. Rich, L. Hambly, & M. G. Morgan (Eds.), *Political parties in the Pacific Islands* (pp. 185–206). ANU Press.

Spark, C., & Corbett, J. (2018). Emerging women leaders' views on political participation in Melanesia. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *20*(2), 221–235.

Spark, C., & Corbett, J. (2020). Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa: Samoa's first woman deputy prime minister. *The Journal of Pacific History*, *55*(4), 453–474.

Spark, C., Corbett, J., & Fairbairn-Dunlop, P. (2021). Tomorrow's woman? *The Journal of Pacific History*, *57*(4), 528–531.

Spark, C., Cox, J., & Corbett, J. (2018). *Being the first: Women leaders in the Pacific Islands*. Developmental Leadership Program.

Spark, C., Cox, J., & Corbett, J. (2019). Gender, political representation and symbolic capital: How some women politicians succeed. *Third World Quarterly*, *40*(7), 1227–1245.

Spark, C., Cox, J., & Corbett, J. (2021). "Keeping an eye out for women": Implicit feminism, political leadership, and social changes in the Pacific Islands. *The Contemporary Pacific*, *33*(1), 64–95.

Steeves, J. S. (1996). Unbounded politics in the Solomon Islands: Leadership and party alignments. *Pacific Studies*, *19*(1), 115–138.

Suaalii-Sauni, T. S., & O'Brien, P. (2021, April 12). Samoa's stunning election result: On the verge of a new ruling party for the first time in 40 years. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/samoas-stunning-election-result-on-the-verge-of-a-new-ruling-party-for-the-first-time-in-40-years-158608

Waylen, G. (2015). Engendering the "crisis of democracy": Institutions, representation and participation. *Government and Opposition*, *50*(3), 495–520.

Zetlin, D. (2014). Women in parliaments in the Pacific region. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, *49*(2), 252–266.

About the Authors

Kerryn Baker is a fellow in the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University. She is the author of *Pacific Women in Politics: Gender Quota Campaigns in the Pacific Islands* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2019) and the co-editor (with Marian Sawer) of *Gender Innovation in Political Science: New Norms, New Knowledge* (Palgrave, 2019).

Jack Corbett is professor and head of the School of Social Sciences at Monash University. His latest book is *Statehood à la Carte in the Caribbean and the Pacific: Secession, Regionalism, and Postcolonial Politics* (forthcoming, Oxford University Press).