

Security and Stability in the South Pacific: Issues and Responses

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Political Status and Political Stability

The 'South Pacific' or 'Pacific Islands' region consists of the 22 political entities of the Pacific Community:

American Samoa	US territory
Cook Islands	free association with NZ
Federated States of Micronesia	free association with USA
Fiji	independent
French Polynesia	overseas territory of France
Guam	US territory
Kiribati	independent
Marshall Islands	free association with USA
Nauru	independent
New Caledonia	overseas territory of France
Niue	self-governing in free association with NZ
Northern Mariana Islands	Commonwealth of the USA
Palau	free association with USA
Papua New Guinea	independent
Pitcairn Islands	dependency of the United Kingdom
Samoa (formerly 'Western Samoa')	independent
Solomon Islands	independent
Tokelau	territory of New Zealand
Tonga	independent
Tuvalu	independent
Vanuatu	independent
Wallis and Futuna	overseas territory of France

To define the Pacific Islands region is to point to the importance of political status in determining political stability. Eight of the 22 entities are overseas territories of one kind or another belonging to an external state (Guam, the Northern Marianas and American Samoa to the USA; New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis & Futuna to France; Tokelau to New Zealand; Pitcairn to the UK). The external states guarantee the security and stability of their territories and subsidise them generously. A further five Pacific Islands countries enjoy the status of 'free association' with external powers (Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands with the USA; the Cook Islands

and Niue with New Zealand). They too are subsidised by external powers, their citizens may freely migrate to either the USA or New Zealand, and their security is guaranteed.

Once these 13 territories and freely associated states are accounted for, we are left with the nine independent states of the Pacific Community:

State	Population	Land Area Km ²
Fiji	828,000	18,272
Kiribati	98,000	811
Nauru	12,000	21
Papua New Guinea	6,100,000	462,243
Samoa	185,000	2,934
Solomon Islands	550,000	28,530
Tonga	102,000	699
Tuvalu	10,500	26
Vanuatu	221,000	12,190

All nine independent Pacific states have small populations by South East Asian standards. Papua New Guinea has a land area larger than that of either the Philippines or Malaysia, and is almost as big as Thailand, but its population – while growing fast – is still under 7 million compared with Thailand's 61 million. The remaining independent countries are all microstates, small in both area and population.

How, then, can such small countries pose such large problems of political stability? How can they become so unstable as in some cases to require intervention by Australia, New Zealand and other regional states?

Three of the nine independent Pacific states – Kiribati, Samoa and Tuvalu – have been models of stable government since independence, and another, Vanuatu, has not so far experienced significant instability or unrest. Tiny Nauru, immensely rich on mining royalties 20 years ago, has gone bankrupt and is being assisted by another Australian-led mission, but is not unstable and does not pose a security threat to the region.

That leaves four countries where stability has been seriously threatened since independence, and they include the three most populous ones. Papua New Guinea lacks central government authority in some provinces and fought a nine-year war against secessionists on the island of Bougainville in the 1990s. Solomon Islands degenerated into a country of warring militias between 1998 and 2003 and is now being governed, in part, by an Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission which has no plans to leave. Fiji's 2006 coup was the fourth in less than 20 years. Tonga is a traditional kingdom whose capital was partly destroyed by pro-democracy rioters in 2006.

What are the root causes of instability, then, in these four Pacific countries – Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji and Tonga?

We can begin by excluding smallness itself as a cause of instability, because the smallest Pacific countries are generally the most stable. We must look, instead, to other factors, beginning with **cultural heritage and the awkward fit between traditional Pacific polities and the modern state**. These apply particularly to Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Solomon Islands.

1. Cultural Heritage: Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

Melanesian societies seem peculiarly unsuited to meet the demands of modern nation-state. The cultures of Melanesia outside Fiji are characterized by small-scale societies of related kin, numerous languages (820 in PNG alone), leadership based on achievement rather than ascription, and political loyalties that remain intensely local. In PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, a sense of national identity has been slow to form, and successful politicians are those who respond not to national needs but to the particular demands of the kin group who voted for them. They are states defined by territory rather than national identity and are subject to secessionism of the kind that caused a war between PNG and its renegade island of Bougainville in the 1990s.

Far from being 'failed' or 'failing' states as is often claimed, PNG and Solomon Islands are best seen as states under construction and as emerging from a traditional and colonial past without having achieved effective central authority in the first place. The key transformations needed to create a modern state were only just under way at independence thirty years ago: from personal to impersonal authority, from local loyalties to national loyalties, from strong kin attachments to neutral rule-following, from particularism to an acceptance of the legitimacy of centralised state authority. Traditional ways of thinking and acting politically remain robust and the new structure of the state, superimposed upon them, has been culturally adapted along Melanesian lines. The Westminster parliamentary system of government, for example, was rapidly indigenized after independence and takes the form of elaborate patronage systems built around access to the resources of the state and mediated by politicians who look after kin. Political parties exist but in a weak form, meaning that governments are formed after elections by leaders able to attract enough followers who are willing to offer temporary support. Ideology plays no part in party loyalties.

PNG is the most populous, most diverse and least governable of all South Pacific countries. The paradox of PNG is that its record of successful elections – unbroken since independence in 1975 – does not translate into successful government or development. PNG's Southern Highlands Province, for example, has been largely beyond government control since 2000. Violence was so widespread in the region during the 2002 elections that the Electoral Commission declared the exercise a failure, and arranged for supplementary elections a year later. The 2007 elections were conducted in an orderly fashion because of the presence of troops from the PNG Defence Force, but by then 15,000 to 20,000 guns were said to be held in Southern Highlands. Many people carry guns routinely, and safe passage is guaranteed only to those with armed protectors. States

of emergency regularly declared in the province by the central Government have little effect. Southern Highlands is the extreme case, but government tends to be ineffective throughout PNG. HIV/AIDS is spreading rapidly among a population with male-dominant cultures that hinder counter-measures. Unofficial figures in parts of the country suggest HIV infection rates of sub-Saharan proportions among young people – 30% and above – though rates in the country as a whole are much lower.

Solomon Islands is a country of small communities and particularist identities, numerous languages (more than 80) and faint national consciousness. Government broke down after a coup in 2000. Foreigners fled while looters ransacked their houses and the capital Honiara became a wasteland ruled by young men with guns. Militias competed for control of the main island of Guadalcanal. A peace agreement brokered by Australia in 2000 failed to resolve the crisis. The economy contracted sharply. GDP fell 14% in 2000 and a further 25% in 2001. Major plantation and mining companies ceased production. And the Solomon Islands government, such as it was, survived on monthly infusions of cash from Taiwan, given in return for recognition of Taiwan as the true China.

Under Australian leadership, South Pacific countries organised a Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands with hundreds of police backed by 1,700 military personnel. The mission arrived in July 2003 and enjoyed remarkable success in arresting and charging militants, purging the police force of criminals, and destroying thousands of weapons. The Regional Assistance Mission then moved to the more challenging task of constructing a workable state apparatus in Solomon Islands. Australians and mission personnel from elsewhere in the South Pacific now work in key ministries and government departments in Honiara with the aim of restoring good governance and efficient public administration.

‘Building the state’ in Solomon Islands, however, is no easy task. Serious riots erupted in Honiara following the elections of April 2006. By the time the rioters had finished, they had destroyed much of the capital’s Chinatown district, forcing the evacuation from the country of hundreds of Chinese who played a key role in its commercial life. Australia sent 400 troops to stabilise the situation. The present recent prime minister, Derek Sikua, is a strong supporter of the Australian-led regional assistance mission to his country.

2. Colonial Legacy: Fiji

Cultural traditions in Fiji (as in Polynesia to the east) are better suited to the demands of the modern nation state than in the rest of Melanesia. Fijian society is hierarchical, with an elaborate chiefly system, deference shown by commoners to chiefs, and a graded system of chiefly titles. The British conserved Fijian tradition, and the result is that Fiji’s chiefly system and Great Council of Chiefs remain important institutions today. Unlike other Melanesian countries, Fiji has only one indigenous language with a number of dialects – Fijian – giving rise to a strong sense of indigenous Fijian national identity.

Nor is Fiji a poor country or emergent state like Papua New Guinea or Solomon Islands. Fiji has a diversified export sector, based on tourism, sugar, garments, gold, remittances from Fiji citizens working overseas and niche exports such as Fiji Water. Fiji

scores much better on the UN Human Development Index than Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands: most children go to school, at least half the population is urban, the literacy rate is high, the health system is passable, and government administration is reasonably efficient, drawing on the legacy of British colonial rule and on Fiji's own traditions of competent government.

Fiji is not a weak state but a weak democracy, and the origins of that weakness can be found in the ethnic legacy of British colonial rule. At independence in 1970 the single largest community, by a small margin, was of Indian origin, mostly the descendants of plantation labourers introduced by the British before 1916; the next largest was of indigenous Fijian heritage. Now, following repeated coups and periods of instability, many Fiji citizens of Indian descent have migrated to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and elsewhere, and the Indian proportion of the population has fallen to about 37% with a corresponding rise in the indigenous population, who are now the majority by a comfortable margin. Around 120,000 people have left Fiji permanently since 1987, 90% of them of Indian origin, and in the process Fiji has lost its most talented and best educated people.

The problem for Fiji, then, has not been adapting culture to the modern state, but rather the ongoing legacy of British colonial rule and the complications – familiar to Malaysia – of accommodating the aspirations both of the indigenous population and of the descendants of immigrants.

The result is that Fiji has established two methods of changing government since 1987: elections and coups. Neither is fully accepted as settling the matter. In Fiji's last six elections, the democratic result has been respected on three occasions (1992, 1994 and 2001) and rejected on the other three (1987, 1999 and 2006). None of Fiji's coups has resulted in lasting military government. Instead, the coups have brought temporary military government while a new return to democracy evolves. Fiji has had three constitutions since independence (those of 1970, 1990 and 1999). The rules of the system are accepted up to a point, but not if they threaten interests too directly or deliver the 'wrong' outcome. Then it is time for people to blame the constitution for creating Fiji's problems and to call for a new one.

An additional factor is the size and professionalism of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, which has grown accustomed to intervening in the country's political life. With a total strength of 3,500, the military forces are miniscule by world standards but large in a country of just 827,000 people. The force was little more than a ceremonial guard of 200 at independence in 1970 but grew rapidly after 1978 because of the opportunities and demands of international peacekeeping, which has been one its major preoccupations. The RFMF was in South Lebanon with UNIFIL for 22 years until 2002. The commitment to the Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai continues a quarter of a century later, and Fijians have served in regional peacekeeping missions in East Timor, Bougainville and Solomon Islands. Having tasted power in the 1987 coup, when they took control of the country, the military forces have continued to see themselves as the final arbiters of order and public security. They intervened again in May 2000, and the

most recent intervention has been the coup of 5 December 2006 under Commander Frank Bainimarama, who deposed a government democratically elected seven months earlier.

The earlier coups were undertaken in the name of protecting or restoring the rights of the indigenous Fijian people, who were said to be at risk of losing their land and their place in government to Fiji citizens of Indian origin. But the 2006 coup is modernist in orientation: the coup leader and prime minister Bainimarama sees his coup as a 'good governance' coup that will sweep away Fiji's endless preoccupation with race and replace it with nation-building modernity in which race is no longer relevant. In a decisive stroke from above, he seeks to remove ethnic politics and bad politicians; dispel bad inclinations such as greed and prejudice; and comprehensively remake Fiji so that it can eventually be returned to multi-racial democracy in virtuous shape. The result is that his coup is seen by most indigenous Fijians as pro-Indian and anti-Fijian. Fiji's fundamental problem – who should rule and for whom? – remains unresolved.

3. Democracy versus Monarchy: Tonga

Like Fiji, Tonga is a hierarchical society. Unlike Fiji, it is a monarchy, governed under a constitution drawn up in 1875 and dominated by the King, who controls parliament, choose his own ministers and can veto any piece of legislation. In Tongan elections, the commoners elect only one-third of the representatives, with the remaining two-thirds being elected by the King and the 33 noble families.

The Tonga riots of 16 November 2006 took everyone by surprise, not least the Tongans themselves, whose history since the formation of the modern kingdom in the nineteenth century has been one of notable political stability under a succession of hereditary monarchs. The riots were estimated to have caused losses to businesses in Tonga of more than US\$60 m., with 153 businesses affected, 700 job losses and incalculable damage to Tonga's international reputation. In the wake of the riots, Australia sent 50 troops and 35 police, and New Zealand sent a further 60 troops to secure the airport. Emergency powers were declared, hundreds of rioters were arrested and restrictions placed on the media. Tonga is now rebuilding its capital, in part with the assistance of a \$US60m soft loan from the People's Republic of China. Tonga has had a vocal pro-democracy lobby for many years, and political reform is now on the agenda, with a revised and more democratic constitution promised by 2010.

4. Rate of Population Growth: high in PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; lower elsewhere in the region

The rate of population growth influences political stability, and the population is growing much faster in PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu than in the wealthier countries to the east. In all three countries cash-paying jobs can be found for only a small minority of young people, and young men in particular are easily recruited to gangs, criminal activities and violent political causes. The young man with the gun was a familiar figure on the streets of the Solomon Islands' capital Honiara during the unrest in that country from 1998-2003.

5. Access to Labour Markets overseas: good for Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, Tuvalu and Kiribati; partial for Vanuatu; poor for PNG and Solomon Islands

Access to the jobs overseas differs from one sub-region of the Pacific to another. Tongans and Samoans have long been able to work in New Zealand and the USA, and Fijians have in recent years worked in large numbers for the British Army and as guards and escorts for private security firms in Iraq, making the most of opportunities created by the Iraq War. Many young men of Kiribati and Tuvalu, similarly, work around the world in the merchant marine. In all cases, Pacific Islanders boost the incomes of their families back home by sending remittances, which are major sources of national income in Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, Kiribati and Tuvalu.

Yet the people of the poorest Pacific countries – PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu – have comparatively little opportunity to work abroad and earn remittances. New Zealand's 'Recognised Seasonal Employer' (RSE) scheme, announced in October 2007, is a partial exception because it allows workers to come from Vanuatu for the first time. The new Australian government is likely to change policy and introduce a similar seasonal labour scheme for the whole of Melanesia in the years ahead, in the belief that limited access to the Australian labour market will boost political stability in nearby Melanesian states.

What are the security implications of instability in the South Pacific for the rest of the Asia-Pacific region?

Australia justified its intervention in Solomon Islands in 2003 as necessary in an age of terrorism. Terrorists, after all, had found haven in failed states elsewhere such as Afghanistan and Somalia. They might, in time, be drawn to the South Pacific for the same reason. This was the reason the Australian prime minister John Howard gave for Australia's decision to intervene.

The risk of Island countries serving as bases for terrorist groups has probably been overstated.

Far more important is the fact that weak Pacific states are targets of least resistance for transnational crime, which may take the form of money laundering, drug trafficking, identity fraud, people smuggling, electronic crimes, illegal trade in small arms and weapons and illegal trade in endangered wildlife. Corruption, weak law enforcement and poor governance create attractive conditions for crime syndicates, as illustrated in 2004 when police discovered a methamphetamine factory in Suva with chemicals capable of producing worth more than \$500 million in Australia or New Zealand. Money laundering has been a problem in the past, and Nauru is said to have been laundering \$70 billion a year in Russian until its overseas banking operations were closed down. The market for illegal drugs (except for cannabis) is mostly in Australia and New Zealand, with the Islands being used as production and staging points, and there seems little doubt that they will continue to be so. Foreigners – especially Chinese – are entering PNG, Solomon

Islands, Fiji and other countries illegally in considerable numbers, and will continue to do so. The weapons trade (some of it from across the border in Indonesian Papua) is flourishing in PNG and will do so for years to come.

What are the economic and political prospects for countries in the region?

Prospects for stability are best in the region's smallest independent states - Kiribati, Tuvalu, Nauru, Samoa and Tonga – all of which have access to labour markets overseas

Kiribati is a net creditor nation and enjoys a strong international financial position because of its Revenue Equalization Reserve Fund, worth \$US666 million in 2006. The Trust Fund in **Tuvalu** is equally well managed. **Nauru** is recovering from economic collapse caused by corruption but embracing reforms leading to greater accountability. **Nauru** is so small that prospects for success from the intervention of Australia and the Pacific Islands Forum are good. **Samoa** has an enviable record of political stability, and its economy is growing more quickly than those of its less stable neighbours Fiji and Tonga. The explanation for Samoa's stability lies in good leadership, carefully sequenced democratisation, successful public service reform, shared pride in Samoan culture, and a colonial legacy that did not create an ethnically divided population. Samoa's prospects are good. The future political stability of **Tonga** was not seriously threatened by the riots of November 2006. Destructive though they were, the riots did not threaten the state itself and are hastening the small kingdom's overdue transition to a more democratic constitution. **Tonga** has a higher standard of living than its Melanesian neighbours, better human development indicators, a more effective government, a lower population growth rate, and access to labour markets overseas.

The most serious threats to stability and security in the Pacific will arise in the Pacific's three largest countries – PNG, Solomon Islands and Fiji – for reasons that have most to do with the way politics works in those countries.

PNG will continue to grapple with multiple problems of human security. In the next twenty years the population of 6.1 million will almost double, HIV/AIDS will become a pervasive health crisis, parts of the country will continue to evade the control of the national government and service delivery will continue to be patchy at best. On the other hand, PNG's considerable reserves of natural gas are likely to treble the country's national income, which is already rising under the impact of the commodities boom.

Solomon Islands is a weak, emergent state with characteristics likely to foster continuing political instability over the next two decades. The population is growing much faster than in more developed Pacific countries. Unemployment for young men is the rule rather than the exception. The economy was seriously affected by the unrest of 1998-2003 and will take decades to recover. The political culture is characterized by top-level corruption, which continues to be stimulated by cultural factors and by the country's heavy dependence on logging and fisheries. The outlook for Solomons is continued dependence on external assistance and on the Regional Assistance Mission.

In Fiji the military forces will continue to have a central role in government. The elections promised for 2009 are likely to be delayed because of preconditions placed upon them by the military commander. Even if elections are held, the military will remain in a supervisory role. Economically, Fiji has great potential but over the next decade it will have to manage the coming of free trade to the sugar and garment industries, both of which are contracting and will contract further. On the other hand, Fiji has transformed itself into a remittance economy over the last decade. Tourism and remittances will continue to underpin the country's economic fortunes.

What can other countries in the Asia Pacific do to help enhance the security and stability of South Pacific nations?

The region is increasingly coming under Asian rather than Western influence in the form of investment, trade and movements of people. As this process intensifies, South East Asian countries could assist the Pacific not only by becoming more aware of it but also by encouraging a two-way information flow, in which Pacific Island students, journalists, public servants and politicians have more opportunities to visit and work in the vast region to their west.

South Pacific nations need foreign investment and access to labour markets more than they need development assistance. They need developmental elites who attach their political legitimacy to the development of the whole nation. Their best educated people need exposure to the way things are done in the more successful and globalised economies of East Asia. And their people need more access to the labour markets of the Pacific Rim.

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