

# Trouble in 'Paradise'

## The Africanisation of the South Pacific

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The South Pacific is rarely viewed through the prism of the international system. Yet for most of the past 20 years, the region has been an 'oasis of democracy' by international standards.<sup>1</sup> While far from perfect, the competitive and participatory nature of democratic politics in the majority of the region's small island states was striking. In contrast to the dominance of authoritarian regimes and one-party states in most of Africa and parts of Asia, change of government in the South Pacific, at (and between) elections, has been remarkably common. The fact that losing government is generally not associated with losing one's basic liberties has helped ensure ongoing commitment to democracy among the island's elites.

Despite this, democracy now appears to be in serious trouble. Recent events—the violent overthrow of the elected government in Fiji, a civil war between rival ethnic militias culminating in the forced resignation of a prime minister in the Solomon Islands, military insubordination in Vanuatu, ongoing political instability in Papua New Guinea, and the killing of a cabinet minister in Samoa—point to an apparent demonstration effect at work, whereby extra-constitutional actions in one island group can, it seems, trigger similar activities in another.

The region has also become mired in sub-standard economic performance. One of the major legitimising claims for democratic government is that it offers the best prospects for development and economic growth. But in the South Pacific, democracy has not brought with it the payoff of economic prosperity. In fact, on many indicators of development, the South Pacific region is on a par with

sub-Saharan Africa in terms of its per capita GDP, literacy and schooling rates, public health statistics and, ominously, in its increasing lack of economic opportunity for young job seekers.

A recent World Bank report<sup>2</sup> found that countries which earn around a quarter of their yearly GDP from the export of unprocessed commodities face a far higher likelihood of civil war than countries with more diversified economies. The report cited its prime candidate for an ethnic civil war as a country with a high dependence on primary commodity exports, low average per capita incomes, slow economic growth, and large diaspora communities.

Conflict was concentrated in countries with little education (a country which has ten percentage points more of its youths in schools—55% instead of 45%—cuts its risk of conflict from 14% to around 10%) and with fast population growth (each percentage point on the rate of population growth raises the risk of conflict by around 2.5 percentage points). The report also found that countries that earn more than a quarter of GDP from exports of natural resources are *acutely* at risk of civil conflict.

With the exception of large diaspora communities, all of these factors are present in much of the South Pacific

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region, suggesting a serious risk of increasing internal conflicts in the years ahead.

These facts make it hard to escape the conclusion that we are today witnessing the progressive 'Africanisation' of the South Pacific region. 'Africanisation' refers to four inter-related phenomena that have long been associated with violent conflict and the failure of democratic government in Africa:

- the growing tensions in the relationship between civil regimes and military forces;
- the intermixture between ethnic identity and the competition for control of natural resources as factors driving conflicts;
- the weakness of basic institutions of governance such as prime ministers, parliaments and, especially, political parties; and
- the increasing centrality of the state as a means of gaining wealth and of accessing and exploiting resources.

Taken together, these factors indicate a growing weakness of democracy and an increasing likelihood of further troubles in the region in the future. In particular, they indicate that some of the problems that have plagued states in sub-saharan Africa may well be emerging in the South Pacific as well, creating enormous challenges for both the island states themselves and for regional powers such as Australia and New Zealand, which aspire to influence regional developments.

### Civil-military relations

The first and most immediately apparent factor in the Africanisation of the region—exemplified by last year's events in Fiji and the Solomon Islands—is a growing tension and unpredictability in civil-military relations.

This trend first came to prominence in March 1997 during the Sandline affair in Papua New Guinea (PNG), when the PNG Defence Force's refusal to accept the presence of a foreign mercenary organisation to assist the government in its ongoing secessionist war on Bougainville led to a military insurrection against the government's decision.<sup>3</sup>

The revolt—led by the commander of the Defence Force, Brigadier-General Jerry Singirok—stopped well short of a full-scale attempted coup, but nonetheless forced Prime Minister Julius Chan to stand aside in the lead-up to the 1997 elections, in which he and most of his cabinet lost their seats. While their actions were widely

praised at the time, the PNG Defence Force's actions created a precedent in terms of civilian command over the military that has had echoes in a number of more recent cases.

The South Pacific's geographic isolation has, until recently, protected it from the abundant supply of cheap light armaments that has been a major factor in many ongoing African conflicts. But there are other ways in which guns can be placed in the hands of rebel forces, as indicated by the way elements of the Fijian military supported George Speight's coup attempt in Fiji.

Utilising weapons apparently stolen from army depots, Speight and his supporters—some of them members of the Fijian army's Special Forces Unit—amassed an extraordinary armory of firepower. This enabled them not only to take Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and most of the cabinet hostage, but also to engineer the collapse of most of the state institutions that had been developed as part of Fiji's return to constitutional rule—including not just the parliament and the prime ministership but also the presidency and even the Great Council of Chiefs. Apparently robust institutions and forums fell apart at the first push. The traditional defenders of public order, the police and the army, were nowhere to be seen. Indeed, it is clear that significant elements of both institutions actively supported the overthrow of the elected government.

A similar process was in evidence in the Solomons, where Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu resigned under duress in June last year after armed rebels seized the capital and held him briefly at gunpoint.

There it was the police force, not the army, whose weapons were used to overthrow the state.

### The PNG Defence Force's actions created a precedent in terms of civilian control over the military.

### Group inequality and identity politics

The second element in the Africanisation of the South Pacific is the intermixture between ethnic identity and perceptions of group inequality on the one hand, and the struggle for control of natural resources on the other, as factors driving violent conflict.

Tensions over land ownership are especially important. In Africa, a process that began in the 1970s with the departure of white farmers from countries like Kenya, Malawi and Mozambique as part of the liberation struggle turned into a Fiji-like crusade against the community from the Indian subcontinent in Uganda, when Idi Amin forced thousands of ethnic Indians, who

played a vital role in the country's economy, to leave the country. We are now seeing the endgame of this process of coerced removal being played out by Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, as the remaining white farmers are slowly forced out of the country. This has parallels with George Speight's seizure of power in Fiji, which appeared to leave the country's Indo-Fijian population (who dominate both the professions and the vital sugarcane industry) with nowhere to go but out.

Outside Fiji and New Caledonia, tensions between indigenous and settler groups are not the main game in terms of ethnic conflict. The South Pacific region is amazingly diverse in ethno-linguistic terms: in Melanesia alone there are over 1200 languages spoken by a mere six million people, making it easily the world's most diverse region on this score. It is these divisions—between language group, clan and region—that are increasingly coming to the fore as sources of ethnic conflict, just as it is the tensions between Zulus and Xhosa in South Africa, Ndebele and Shona in Zimbabwe, the north and the south in Mozambique, and so on that form the real issue of conflict in many parts of Africa.

Despite its more fragmented nature, ethnicity in the South Pacific remains similar to that of Africa: an easily-manipulable and combustible resource that is increasingly being exploited for political success. This was the case in the long-running Bougainville war, and again more recently in the Solomon Islands, where ethnic tensions between different island populations have been ruthlessly exploited by 'ethnic entrepreneurs' to challenge the legitimacy of the state itself. Even in Fiji, the underlying issue behind Speight's coup appeared to be as much a redistribution of forces within the indigenous Fijian community itself as a simple attack upon Indo-Fijians.

This type of manipulation of ethnicity by would-be political leaders and the centrality of exploitable resources to many apparently 'ethnic' conflicts has not yet been sufficiently appreciated by some commentators on the South Pacific. Many readily accept ethnic explanations for what are, in reality, power struggles over the control of resources and control of the state.

The World Bank study discussed earlier found that the usual explanations for civil wars—poverty, income inequality, authoritarian government—had little

explanatory power when tested empirically. By contrast, the presence of exploitable and exportable natural resources was a consistent factor across nearly all contemporary intra-state conflicts.

In Africa, such conflicts are predominantly about access to and control over the continent's mineral wealth: gold, diamonds, oil. In the South Pacific, the most obvious manifestation of this resource-driven pattern of conflict is the lucrative tropical timber industry, the exploitation of which has played an important role in contributing to corruption, distortion of the marketplace, and the resort to violence in both Fiji and the Solomon Islands, and in PNG as well. The most precious resource dispute across the region, however, is over land—its ownership, redistribution, reform and exploitation. This longstanding issue has been a major factor underlying much supposedly ethnic or political conflict.

There appear to be two main types of conflicts over land at work in the region. In the first type, tensions between indigenous populations and settler groups, each with different approaches to land ownership and exploitation, act as a combustible formula to mobilise deep (but often latent) perceptions of ethnic difference. This has been a recurring pattern in countries with an identifiable indigenous-settler cleavage, such as Fiji and New Caledonia, where disputes over land ownership have been deepened by differences in the skills and livelihoods of the particular ethnic groups.

But the second type of conflict is likely to become more common in the future. This is a conflict between established local populations and internal migrants from adjacent islands, as is the case in the Solomon Islands and the movements of people from Malaita to the main island of Guadalcanal. In this and other recent conflicts over land in the region, tensions between traditional forms of title and ownership of private property are increasingly prevalent.



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In both cases, however, access to land and perceptions of ethnic group inequality have proved to be potent mobilising forces that have been readily exploited by unscrupulous political entrepreneurs.

### **Brittle governance**

The third element in the Africanisation of the region is the increasing weakness of basic institutions of government such as prime ministers, presidents, parliaments, and, most strikingly, political parties.

As in Africa, the democratic institutions of most South Pacific states were inherited from colonial powers rather than being generated by or designed for the conditions that faced the newly-independent countries themselves. The Westminster parliamentary model is particularly prevalent, given the high proportion of South Pacific states colonised by the British. In much of post-colonial Africa, such arrangements tended to fall apart very quickly in the first few years following independence. But in the South Pacific they have persisted, although often more through inertia than any particular logic in the system itself.

In contrast to the ideal Westminster model of a relatively stable two-party system based around class divisions of the type that emerged in the British dominion states of Australia, Canada and New Zealand, the political party structures that emerged in much of the South Pacific have been weak, fragmented, amorphous and increasingly irrelevant. In the few cases where there has been a meaningful party system—in Fiji, for example, or in Vanuatu—party structures have been formed primarily around identity-based factors, such as the Indian-Fijian split in Fiji, or the Anglophone-Francophone division in Vanuatu.

A good example of the steady decline of the region's political parties comes from the largest and most important state, Papua New Guinea, which has been plagued since independence by unstable government and parliamentary votes of no confidence. In PNG, and a number of other countries, there have been more changes of government on the floor of parliament than at elections.

The lack of a meaningful party system has been a key factor in PNG's wider problems of unstable executives (no government since independence has survived as elected for a full parliamentary term),

parliamentary fragmentation (there were 20 registered parties before the most recent 1997 election), lack of policy coherence (parties tend to operate as parliamentary factions, based around one or two dominant personalities, rather than as coherent, broad-based vehicles for translating public preferences into government policy) and the increasing perception of elected government as a device for representing local rather than national interests (at both the 1992 and 1997 PNG elections, independent candidates mostly representing local clan groups won over 50% of the total vote). Such a trend points towards an ongoing crisis of governance and governability.

### **Weak states**

A final aspect of the region's Africanisation is the increasing centrality of the state as a means for accessing, controlling and exploiting the nation's limited resources.

Across the South Pacific region, and particularly in Melanesia, access to the state is a (perhaps the) crucial determinant of economic success. The state, not the market, is the primary instrument for accumulation of resources such as foreign aid and domestic revenue. Opportunities in the relatively limited private sector that exists are few, and the main alternative of traditional subsistence living offers even fewer opportunities. Hence there is a tendency to view the state itself as the main avenue for accessing wealth.

The democratic process of elections is thus important not just as an entrée to the political arena, but also as a primary means of accessing goods, services and other resources. This in turn means that the struggle for control of the state is a game with much higher stakes than simply access to political power: it also holds out the promise of access to considerable financial resources which are effectively unattainable elsewhere.

One of the effects of this pattern is to heighten the contest for political office. An indicator of this is excessive candidature for elections: in the Solomon Islands, for example, all together nine parties and 350 candidates vied for the parliament's 50 seats at their most recent elections in 1997. A similar pattern has been evident in many other countries—again, taken to an extreme in PNG, where the last elections saw 2370 candidates standing for election at an average of almost 22 candidates per seat.

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This apparently positive feature—a highly competitive political process—has masked many deeper problems with democracy. In most countries, for example, election continues to be via the ‘first-past-the-post’, single-member constituency type inherited from Britain. But the other facilitating conditions associated with the classic British model—a relatively homogenous social structure and a few strong, programmatic political parties, for example—are absent.

The result is that elections quickly become a contest to see whose extended family and clan groups can gain enough support to get elected. Often this is not much support at all. Under first-past-the-post systems, candidates do not need to gain widespread support but merely more votes than anyone else. Thus, elections are often won with remarkably low vote totals.

Not surprisingly, such unrepresentative parliaments often lead to unstable governments, disconnected from the concerns of ordinary electors. This amplifies the distance between the interests of the ordinary rural voters and the largely educated, urban political elite, contributing further to the crisis of legitimacy that democratic institutions are facing across the region.

In Fiji, the electoral system used for the 1999 election which brought Chaudhry to power guaranteed majority victors on a seat-by-seat basis, but the overall results of the 1999 poll were highly disproportionate. This led to an excessively large government majority and a weak and under-represented opposition—a factor cited by some observers as having contributed to Speight’s seizure of power by taking most of the government hostage in May 2000.<sup>4</sup>

### Conclusion

Optimists point out that democracy is, when it works, a conflict management device. Well-structured democratic institutions allow conflicts to formulate, find expression and be managed in a sustainable way, via institutional outlets such as political parties and representative parliaments, rather than being suppressed or ignored.<sup>5</sup>

In the South Pacific, however, it is clear from recent events that democratic government has, when challenged, often failed to provide this conflict management role. Indeed, the evidence of both Fiji and the Solomons suggests the opposite: aggrieved parties who acted by recourse to violence often had greater success and gained

greater support than the putatively representative institutions they challenged.

This is a trend that major governments across the region should find deeply worrying, as it suggests that democratic institutions generally have little broad legitimacy and could easily fall victim to the same kind of pressures evidenced in Fiji and the Solomons.

It may be that attempts to create democratic states are floundering not so much on the concept of democracy as on that of the state itself. Democracy, as popularly understood, presumes the existence of a functioning state. But in a globalising world, where all states are becoming weaker, the fragility and artificiality of many South Pacific states is magnified. Fragile, multi-ethnic, post-colonial states encompassing different languages, ethnic groups, islands, and torn between the rival claims of tradition

and modernity, raise serious questions about the viability of current state structures and their ability to manage internal conflicts.

A major process of democratic renewal is clearly required, a process that, ultimately, can only come from the island states’ people and their governments, not from outside forces.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Alfred Stepan and Cindy Skach found that of the 93 countries of the world that became independent between 1945 and 1979, only 15 were still continuous democracies in 1980-89—and that one-third of these were in the South Pacific: A. Stepan and C. Skach, ‘Constitutional Frameworks and Democratic Consolidation: Parliamentarism versus Presidentialism’, *World Politics* 46: 1 (1993), 1-22.
- <sup>2</sup> Paul Collier, *Economic Causes of Civil Conflict and Their Implications for Policy* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2000).
- <sup>3</sup> S. Dinnen, R.J. May, and A. J. Regan (eds), *Challenging the State: The Sandline Affair in Papua New Guinea* (Canberra: Regime Change/Regime Maintenance Discussion Paper No. 21, National Centre for Development Studies and Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, 1997).
- <sup>4</sup> J. Fraenkel, ‘Fiddling with Democracy Fails’, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (8 June 2000).
- <sup>5</sup> P. Harris and B. Reilly (eds), *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 1998).