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# Coups, Conflicts, and Crises: The New Pacific Way?

**Gerard A. Finin and Terence A. Wesley-Smith**

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**Coups, Conflicts and Crises: The New Pacific Way?**


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"I coined the term [the Pacific Way] more than twenty-five years ago [suggesting].…people of different races, opinions and cultures can live and work together for the good of all, can differ without rancour, govern without malice, and accept responsibility as reasonable people intent on serving the interests of all."

<div align="right">

Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara
*The Pacific Way: A Memoir*

</div>


**Islands of Instability**

The recent coup d'etat in Fiji, with members of the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry held hostage at gunpoint for more than 30 days, focused international attention on a region often thought of as an idyllic backwater in a troubled world. Mention of Fiji may bring to mind a tourist destination once billed as "The Way the World Should Be," home of champion golfer Vijay Singh, or even a country whose troops are regularly deployed to mediate other peoples' conflicts as United Nations peacekeepers in the Balkans, Lebanon, and East Timor. The news footage of masked gunmen in the grounds of Parliament, and the looting and burning of Suva's commercial district, left many observers wondering how Fiji had gone from a regional hub for trade and diplomacy to what former President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara described as the "bottom of the pariah list."

Less than three weeks after rebels took control of Fiji's Parliament, another coup, also involving the armed detention of a prime minister, occurred in the Solomon Islands, where Bartholomew Ulufaʻalu was forced to resign. These islands are familiar to many Americans from the fierce battle of Guadalcanal dramatized in the 1999 film *The Thin Red Line*, as well as from the late President John Kennedy's famous PT109 patrol boat

<div align="center">1</div>

experience near Gizo. The takeover by the self-styled Malaita Eagle Force took place after talks broke down with a rival militia, the Guadalcanal-based Isatabu Freedom Movement. At issue was the fate of migrants from the island of Malaita who for many years have lived and worked on Guadalcanal, the commercial and administrative hub of the Solomon Islands (see Map 1). Since early 1999, civil unrest between residents of these two islands has caused the relocation of some 20,000 people and brought violence to the streets of Honiara, the national capital. Ironically, the peace negotiations were being mediated by Sitiveni Rabuka, who as an officer in Fiji's military conducted the South Pacific's first coup in 1987, and for the next decade served as the country's prime minister.[1]
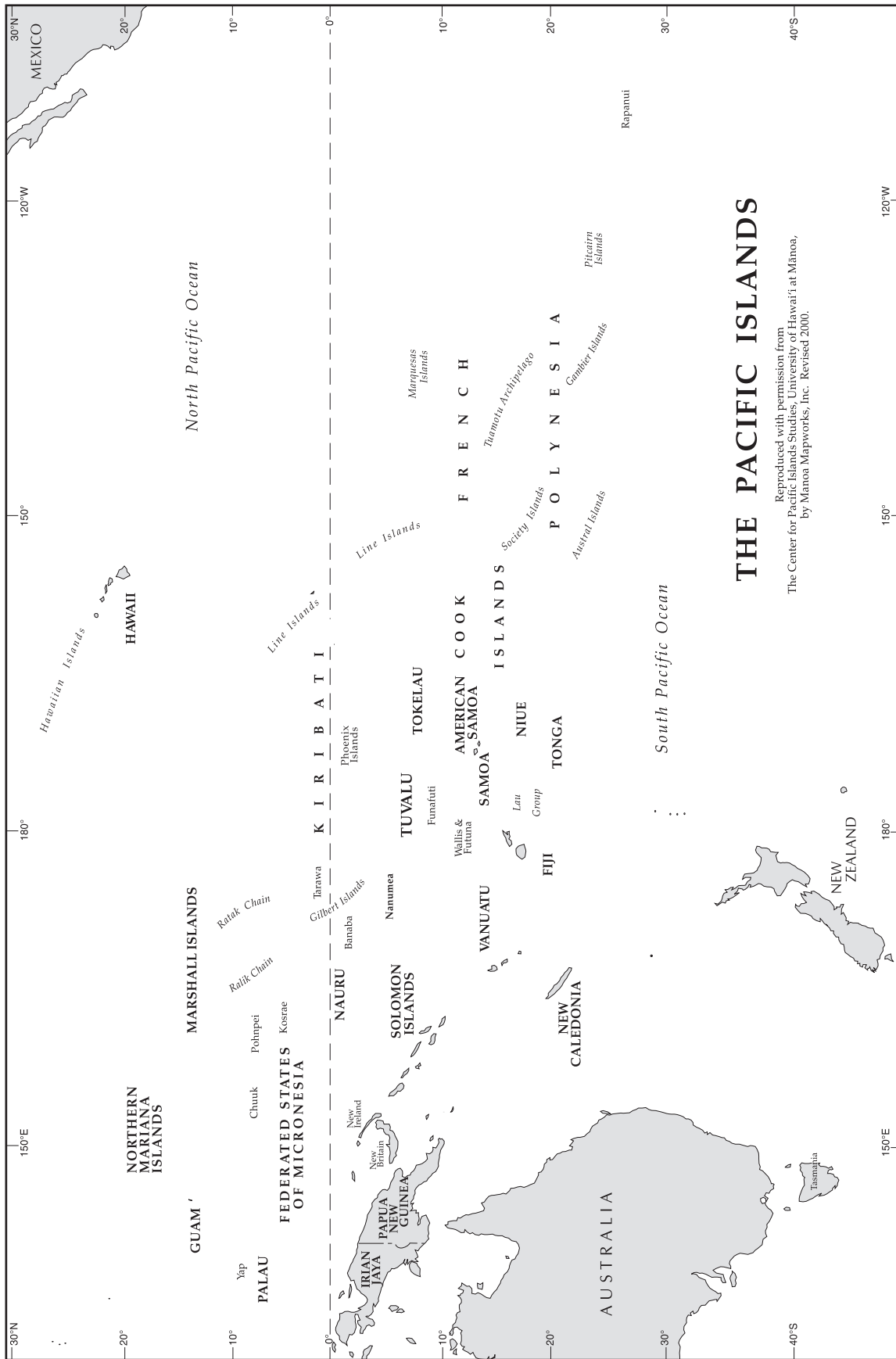
These dramatic events occurred just as public memories of the bloody secessionist crisis on the Island of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea, the region's largest and most populous nation, were beginning to fade. Sparked by the negative impacts of a giant copper and gold mine, the decade-long conflict between the Bougainville Revolutionary Army and Papua New Guinea's Defence Force cost the lives of more than 10,000 people, displaced many more, and effectively destroyed the island's modern economy and infrastructure. Although a fragile peace has endured on Bougainville for more than two years, the situation remains tense and uncertain, with no lasting political solution in sight.

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[1] It is perhaps useful to recall that the Pacific islands region saw its first coup in 1893, when the government of Hawai'i was overthrown. Convinced that a newly proposed constitution would threaten business interests, a small group of white settlers calling themselves the "Committee of Public Safety" forcibly took control of government buildings and deposed Queen Lili'uokalani, who chose to avoid bloodshed. Representatives of the U.S. government stationed in Hawai'i were complicit in the coup. This usurpation of the rule of law was in time accepted by the United States. The economic prosperity which followed, based primarily on agriculture, military expenditures, and tourism, augured well for generations of island residents, save one group: the indigenous Hawaiians.

## MAP 1.
## SOLOMON ISLANDS

## MAP 2.
## THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

MEXICO

North Pacific Ocean

Rapanui

Pitcairn Islands

Marquesas Islands

F R E N C H

Tuamotu Archipelago

Gambier Islands

P O L Y N E S I A

Society Islands

Austral Islands

THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

Line Islands

Hawaiian Islands

HAWAII

Line Islands

K I R I B A T I

TOKELAU

AMERICAN COOK
SAMOA

C O O K

I S L A N D S

NIUE

TONGA

Phoenix Islands

TUVALU

Funafuti

SAMOA

Lau
Group

Wallis &
Futuna

FIJI

VANUATU

South Pacific Ocean

NEW
ZEALAND

MARSHALL ISLANDS

Ratak Chain

Tarawa

Gilbert Islands

Nanumea

Banaba

Ralik Chain

NAURU

SOLOMON
ISLANDS

NEW
CALEDONIA

Kosrae

Pohnpei

Chuuk

NORTHERN
MARIANA
ISLANDS

FEDERATED STATES
OF MICRONESIA

New
Ireland

New
Britain

GUAM

Yap

PALAU

IRIAN
JAYA

PAPUA
NEW
GUINEA

A U S T R A L I A

Tasmania

## POLITICAL STATUSES OF PACIFIC ISLANDS

| METROPOLITAN OR COLONIAL POWERS | NINE INDEPENDENT STATES | FIVE SELF-GOVERNING IN FREE ASSOCIATION | ELEVEN DEPENDENCIES OR INTEGRAL PARTS OF METROPOLITAN POWERS | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Australia** | * **Nauru** (1968) <br> * **Papua New Guinea** (1975) | | | COMMONWEALTH CONNECTIONS |
| **New Zealand** | * **Samoa** (1962) | **Cook Islands** (1965) <br> **Niue** (1974) | Tokelau | |
| United Kingdom | * **Fiji** (1970) % <br> * **Tonga** (1970) <br> **Tuvalu** (1978) <br> * **Solomon Islands** (1978) <br> * **Kiribati** (1979) <br> * **Vanuatu** (1980) # | | Pitcairn | |
| France | * **Vanuatu** | | French Polynesia <br> New Caledonia <br> Wallis & Futuna | |
| United States | | *† **Marshall Is.** (1986) <br> *† **Federated States of Micronesia** (1986) <br> *† **Palau** (1994) | American Samoa <br> Guam <br> † Commonwealth of No. Mariana Is. (1986) | |
| United States | | | Hawai'i | |
| Chile | | | Rapa Nui (Easter Island) | |
| Indonesia | | | Irian Jaya (West Papua) | |

PACIFIC COMMUNITY (SPC)

% Fiji is currently suspended from Commonwealth ministerial meetings.

# Vanuatu appears twice.  In the colonial era, it was jointly administered by the United Kingdom and France.

* Members of the United Nations (11 in number)

† Formerly part of  the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (4 in number)

Years in parentheses indicate dates that independence, free association, or commonwealth was achieved.

**Bold face font** = Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Members

ISLANDS NOT LISTED.  They are atolls and reefs. One is a French dependency, Clipperton Island, west of the Panama Canal.  Eight others are U.S. possessions. Howland, Baker, and Jarvis Islands are situated near the equator north of Phoenix Islands. Kingman Reef and Palmyra Atoll are the northernmost of the Line Islands about 1,000 miles south of Hawai'i.  Johnston Atoll, southwest of Hawai'i and about half way to the Marshall Islands, is the site of a chemical weapons disposal operation, Johnston Atoll Chemical Agent Disposal Systems (JACADS). Midway (western end of the Hawaiian chain) and Wake (north of the Marshalls) are coral atolls utilized by the navy and weather service. Johnston, Midway, and Wake are inhabited by American personnel. A French fishing operation is located on Clipperton.

(Rev. 1/2000. *Source:  Center for Pacific Islands Studies, School of Hawaiian, Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Hawai'i*)

**Deep Changes, Shallow Understanding**

These disturbing developments reflect a number of major changes underway in a region that covers a third of the globe, and includes 14 independent and self-governing nations (see Map 2 and Figure). The region's changed circumstances appear to have escaped the notice of many external powers, including the United States, who in the post–Cold War era have turned their attention toward Asia and the newly emerging European states. Those powers that remain engaged, most notably Australia and New Zealand, and increasingly Japan, have in recent years pursued regional policies that may well increase the chances of instability and violence. The initial responses of external powers to the Fiji and the Solomons crises demonstrate little understanding of regional dynamics. Strident calls for the immediate restoration of democratic government belie the complexity of the political situation in both nations, and strike concerned island leaders as hollow and paternalistic.

Upheavals in Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, or elsewhere in the Pacific Islands are often characterized in simplistic racial or ethnic terms. A complex society with a dynamic history of social change is soon reduced in media accounts to "a racially charged cauldron" where primordial "ethnic resentments" have suddenly spilled over to produce turmoil. With daily reports of the aftermath of ethnic cleansing in Europe, and an array of so-called tribal conflicts in Africa, the emergence of superficially similar problems in the Pacific is presumed to be a natural and perhaps inevitable state of affairs.

While the use of violence to achieve political objectives may suggest parallels with other parts of the world, the problems confronting the Pacific Islands are rooted in a specific set of historical and contemporary circumstances. The legacies of colonial rule, the lingering effects of cold-war politics, and the powerful forces of globalization, as well as policies pursued in recent decades by Pacific Island governments themselves, have all contributed to the challenges confronting island societies today. These are challenges that make Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's ideal of the Pacific Way increasingly difficult to sustain.

**Nation Building**

Decolonization, which started with the independence of Samoa[2] in 1962, ostensibly gave colonized Pacific peoples the right to determine their own political futures. Although the armed struggles that occurred in places such as the Philippines and Indonesia were conspicuously absent, the process was not without its difficulties. Indigenous communities in Hawai'i, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, Guam, and New Caledonia found their choices seriously compromised by the presence of dominant settler populations. The one million Melanesian inhabitants of Dutch New Guinea (West Papua) were forcibly incorporated by Indonesia as the province of Irian Jaya in 1963, and the residents of French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and Rapanui continue to face colonial powers that have no intention of withdrawing from the region. Movements for self-determination remain active in most of these places, increasing the potential for instability and violence. Early in June this year, indigenous groups in West Papua declared the territory independent of Indonesia. This was by no means the first such declaration in forty years of resistance. However, the recent weakening of the Indonesian state and the success of the independence movement in East Timor, enhance their prospects of finally achieving some degree of political autonomy.

In places where the colonial powers willingly accepted decolonization, it was not always obvious where the boundaries of the emerging political entities should be drawn. In the Pacific, as elsewhere in the colonized world, the more or less arbitrary borders established by the colonial powers tended to endure, even though they seldom reflected any strong internal sense of community. The Melanesian entities of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, were the most problematic in this respect, each embracing literally hundreds of separate cultural and linguistic communities that had had little or nothing to do with each other until the time of independence. It is hardly surprising that these Pacific places have experienced the most problems in their attempts to build viable nation-states. Secessionist leaders in Bougainville, for example, have long bemoaned the accidents of colonial history that linked their political and economic destiny to what is now the

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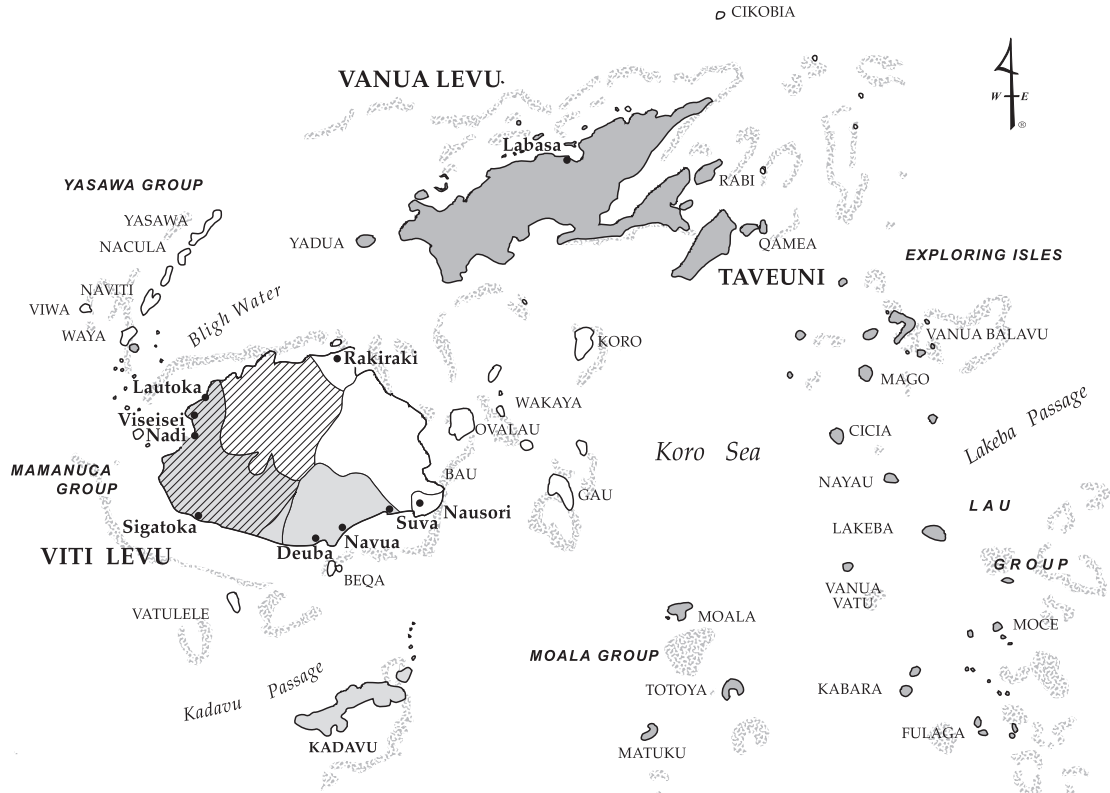[2] Samoa refers to the former "Western Samoa."

independent state of Papua New Guinea, and are quick to point out that Bougainvilleans have never consented to this political arrangement. They are inclined to see the central government in Port Moresby as a modern-day colonizer, exploiting their resources for others' gain. Similarly, the primary identification for ordinary people in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands is a village or language group, perhaps with an additional sense of belonging to a province or island. The problem with these Pacific states is not so much that they are prone to falling apart, but rather that they have never really been put together.

Fiji's current situation highlights the illusion of national coherence. As media accounts of the current crisis make quite clear, indigenous Fijians do not share a common identity with citizens of South Asian descent, who constitute some 44 percent of the total population. Less obvious is the fragility of the indigenous "nation." While indirect British colonial rule through a centralized network of traditional chiefdoms gave the appearance of unity, Fijian nationhood was never really established fully and remains contested. The May 19 coup was ostensibly conducted in opposition to Indo-Fijian political power and in the name of indigenous rights, but the major conflicts since then have been among competing indigenous Fijian groups. Coup leader George Speight, who does not speak Fijian, has pressed his demands in defiance of the commander of the overwhelmingly indigenous Fijian armed forces, as well as the Great Council of Chiefs, the supreme repository of traditional power. In addition, he has forced the removal of President Mara, whose traditional authority derives from some of the highest titles in the land. Indeed, the media often overlooks the fact that approximately one-third of Speight's hostages are indigenous Fijians who served as ministers in the multiethnic Chaudhry government.

It is no accident that many of Speight's supporters come from the traditional Kubuna confederacy, long resentful of the power enjoyed by Mara and other members of the Tovatu grouping, as well as their tacit alliance with Burebasaga, the third recognized confederacy. Meanwhile, some chiefs in the Western part of the main island of Viti Levu,

**MAP 3.**
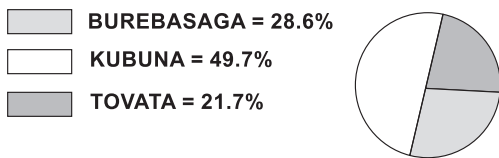**FIJI CONFEDERACIES**

# FIJIAN CONFEDERACIES

CIKOBIA

VANUA LEVU

Labasa

RABI

YASAWA GROUP

YASAWA

NACULA

YADUA

QAMEA

EXPLORING ISLES

TAVEUNI

NAVITI

VIWA

WAYA

*Bligh Water*

Rakiraki

VANUA BALAVU

MAGO

Lautoka

KORO

Viseisei

Nadi

WAKAYA

OVALAU

CICIA

*Koro   Sea*

*Lakeba   Passage*

MAMANUCA
GROUP

BAU

NAYAU

*L A U*

Sigatoka

Suva  Nausori

GAU

LAKEBA

*G R O U P*

VITI   LEVU

Deuba  Navua

BEQA

VANUA
VATU

MOCE

VATULELE

MOALA

*MOALA GROUP*

TOTOYA

KABARA

FULAGA

*Kadavu   Passage*

KADAVU

MATUKU

## PROVINCES INCLUDED IN EACH CONFEDERACY:

| ■ **BUREBASAGA** | □ **KUBUNA** | ■ **TOVATA** | ▨ **YASAYASA VAKA RA\*** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rewa | Tailevu | Lau | Ba |
| Kadavu | Ra | Cakaudrove | Yasawa |
| Serua/Namosi | Lomaiviti | Bua | Nadroga |
| Nadroga/Navosa | Naitasiri | Macuata | parts of Navosa |
| parts of Ba | parts of Ba | | parts of Ra |
| parts of Yasawa | parts of Yasawa | | parts of Serua |
| | | | parts of Namosi |

*\* Yasayasa Vaka Ra would be formed out of parts of the original 3 confederacies*

## 3 CONFEDERACIES:
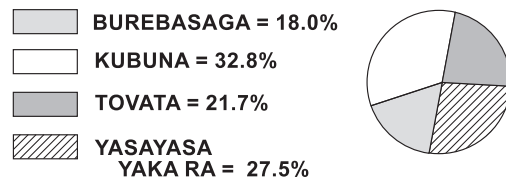
BUREBASAGA = 28.6%

KUBUNA = 49.7%

TOVATA = 21.7%

## 4 CONFEDERACIES:

BUREBASAGA = 18.0%

KUBUNA = 32.8%

TOVATA = 21.7%

▨ YASAYASA
YAKA RA =  27.5%

who for many years sought recognition of a fourth confederacy, have denounced the coup and expressed a desire to form a separate nation-state (see Map 3). Within Fiji's chiefly system, divisions also exist between chiefs who are highly westernized and those who are more involved in customary village-based ways. In light of these deep internal fissures, the so-called Indian threat, a rhetorical device often employed by Fijian politicians to maintain national unity, seems increasingly transparent and empty.

**Old and New Structures of Governance**

The colonial powers often tried to work through traditional forms of governance in order to establish their authority over Pacific territories. This was most effective in Polynesia and some parts of Micronesia, which had hierarchical systems of chiefly rule when westerners first arrived. In places such as Hawai'i and Tahiti, settler patronage boosted the power of traditional systems for a time, but by the beginning of the twentieth century many of those systems had been swept aside in favor of western forms of administration. However, in other places such as Samoa and the Kingdom of Tonga (which was never directly colonized), traditional forms of authority fared much better and still play an important role in governance. In Fiji, the legacy of British colonial policy, designed explicitly to preserve and protect the indigenous way of life, is readily apparent today in institutions such as the Great Council of Chiefs and the Native Land Trust Board, which oversees the management of native lands.

A critical problem with enduring "traditional" forms of governance in the Pacific is that they no longer operate in "traditional" ways. Commoners in Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji, increasingly complain about their chiefs, but not necessarily because they want to abolish traditional forms of authority. Rather, they see some chiefs selfishly taking advantage of traditional authority to further their own economic and political interests while losing sight of the fundamental obligation to serve their communities. Accountability is the catchword of the (misnamed) pro-democracy movement in Tonga, which derives much of

its support from individuals who wish to make the royal family and the nobles more responsive to community needs rather than to overthrow the traditional system.

For external observers, but not necessarily residents, a further problem with traditional forms of authority is their apparent lack of conformity with western models of democratic government. Unlike Tonga, which had never been a colony, systems of government established to carry Samoa and Fiji into independence needed to pass muster with an international community whose ideal type owed much to the "developed" nation-states of Europe and North America. In Samoa, skeptical United Nations officials had to be convinced that the people were really in favor of a constitution that institutionalized chiefly power and restricted voting and candidacy to holders of traditional *matai* titles. In Fiji, the main concern at independence in 1970 was how the constitution balanced the interests of the indigenous and Indo-Fijian communities, rather than how it recognized chiefly authority. It did so only indirectly by allowing the Great Council of Chiefs to nominate members of the Senate and by effectively giving those senators veto power on legislative matters relating to traditional land and custom. The power and status of the Great Council of Chiefs has been significantly enhanced in recent years, first under the terms of the highly discriminatory 1990 constitution put in place in the aftermath of the 1987 coups, and to a lesser extent in the constitution adopted in 1997 that sought compromise and reconciliation. Chiefs have become what anthropologist Geoffrey White aptly terms "icons of 'custom'—personifications of larger ideologies of cultural identity."[3]

External powers have rightly condemned the recent Fiji coup as a gross violation of the basic principles of fair and democratic government, and an unjustifiable attempt to strip away the political rights of nearly half of the citizens of the country on racial grounds. Nevertheless, it does not follow that the Great Council of Chiefs and other "undemocratic" indigenous institutions have no legitimate or useful role to play in government. A stronger critique would be that these institutions, as presently constituted,

no longer work very well and need to be modified. For all his strident advocacy of indigenous rights, coup leader George Speight has treated chiefly institutions with disdain and disrespect and, according to historian Brij Lal, exposed the Great Council of Chiefs as "a diminished body of dithering men and women, confused, partisan, manipulable."[4]

Although perhaps less obvious, the role of traditional institutions of government is even more important in troubled parts of Melanesia like Bougainville and the Solomon Islands, where Polynesian-style chiefly systems have never been a prominent feature of the cultural landscape. Instead, small-scale, loosely organized, and shifting systems of leadership clustered around competitive "big-men" were more typical. These institutions have to a large extent endured in the face of relatively unsuccessful attempts to impose the paraphernalia of a western-style nation-state. Not only do elected leaders struggle to implement "development" and other policies among peoples whom they cannot control or coerce, but they often have to conform to traditional big-man norms and expectations in order to stay in power. Insofar as ordinary people remain very much in control of their daily lives, these systems may operate far more democratically than most "advanced" western political systems.

The limitations of a government apparatus that effectively lacks the ability to control and coerce are apparent in situations of internal conflict such as that which has erupted in the Solomon Islands over the last 18 months or so. Contrary to widespread reports of a contagion of "ethnic fighting," the conflict has much more to do with the allocation of state resources than with any primordial cultural characteristics. The problem dates back to 1946, when the British moved their administrative center from Tulagi to Guadalcanal, but tended to favor people from the populous island of Malaita for educational opportunities and public service jobs. Since independence in 1978, successive governments have done little to counter the dominance of Malaitans in the bureaucracy,

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[3] Geoffrey M. White and Lamont Lindstrom (eds.) *Chiefs Today: Traditional Pacific Leadership and the Postcolonial State.* Stanford: University Press, 1997, p. 231.
[4] "Wandering Between Two Worlds," Pacific Islands Report, June 2, 2000, http://pidp.ewc.hawaii.edu/PIReport/2000/June/06-02upsup2.htm

nor to foster decentralized forms of economic development that might stem the tide of migration into Honiara. In early 1999 people of Guadalcanal began to organize the Isatabu Freedom Movement, acquire arms, and take matters into their own hands. There was little that state authorities could do but attempt to negotiate a settlement between the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the Malaita Eagle Force, the organization formed to defend Malaitan interests. It took only a few hours during an early morning operation on June 3 for the Malaita Eagle Force to commandeer nearly all of the nation's weapons, including an armed patrol boat, and use them to prosecute its coup and subsequent attacks on the Isatabu militia. The Malaita Eagle Force took control of Honiara, while the Isatabu Freedom Movement held other areas of Guadalcanal.

**The Life of the Land**

Land tenure and use have always been central to Pacific Islands societies and economies, and land issues lie at the heart of many contemporary disputes. In addition to providing for their daily subsistence needs, land continues to hold deep social and spiritual value for most Pacific Islanders. For this reason the permanent transfer or exchange of land is severely limited in all but a small number of island societies, and changes in land use and land tenure arrangements are among the most sensitive issues for island populations.

Landowners in Bougainville strenuously resisted the establishment of the Panguna copper mine in the late 1960s. Although subsequent protests often took the form of demands for a greater share of the wealth generated by the mine, it became apparent that no amount of money could adequately compensate local people for the myriad social and environmental ills that they attributed to the project. The relatively large amounts of cash that mining introduced into local communities probably only accelerated the sense of social disintegration, and helped inspire the acts of sabotage against the mine in late 1988 and early 1989. These actions, along with the heavy-handed response of the Papua New Guinea state, sparked the so-called Bougainville crisis that forced the closure of the mine in mid-1989 and escalated into a decade-long civil war.

A key element in Fiji's current unrest involves the way the Chaudhry government handled the vital issue of the renewal of long-term leases for agricultural land, many of which have expired in recent years. Although some 83 percent of all land in Fiji remains under indigenous Fijian tenure, Indo-Fijian farmers have for generations leased plots to grow cane for the sugar industry that represents the backbone of the economy. The legislation governing the allocation of leases, as well as many of the leases themselves, expired during Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka's term in office, but land-related issues remained unresolved when he was defeated at the polls in 1999. His successor, Prime Minister Chaudhry, hoped to enhance the security of more than 20,000 Indo-Fijian tenant farmers whose leases were expiring, but he was in no position to push through any legislation that eroded Fijian land rights. Under the terms of the 1997 constitution, such legislation had to be approved by the Great Council of Chiefs. When George Speight and his allies conducted the coup, claiming that Prime Minister Chaudhry had threatened Fijian interests in land, the government's proposed legislation had been duly submitted to the Great Council of Chiefs. In turn, the council referred the matter to the Native Lands Trust Board. Chaudhry's mistake was to move too fast on such a sensitive and complex issue, providing ample opportunity for his many enemies in *both* the indigenous and the Indo-Fijian communities to play on deep seated fears about land issues.

Salman Rushdie has written recently about the role of land as it relates to the crisis in Fiji. Provocatively entitled "Fiji's Bigotry of Domain,"[5] his editorial highlights once again the tendency to miss important elements of this complex issue. Rushdie's lambaste of Fiji's land policies favoring indigenous Fijians, and comparisons with Idi Amin's expulsion of Ugandan Asians in the 1970s, paints a picture of hatred and forced exodus. Yet few people of any public stature have raised the idea of expelling Indo-Fijians from Fiji as a viable option. Moreover, Fiji's current problem centers not on a despotic murderer of

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[5] *The New York Times*, June 8, 2000.

thousands like Amin, but on a leadership vacuum that has left the nation in the hands of a politically inexperienced military commander.[6]

The current Solomon Islands crisis, frequently mischaracterized as an "ethnic clash," also hinges in large measure on land. Solomon Island scholar Tarcisius Kabutaulaka highlights the fact that over past decades many Guadalcanal males have unilaterally sold rights to customary land around the capital, Honiara. These transactions are strongly resented by Guadalcanal's younger generations, particularly women, who decry the loss of a traditional inheritance that would normally pass down through the female side of the family in this matrilineal society. Customary owners have demanded additional compensation from the Malaitan migrants who reside in these settlements, and from the government for the "public" land on which Honiara is built. The people of Guadalcanal generally object to the presence in their domain of large numbers of outsiders, some of whom who reside at a large oil palm plantation on the Guadalcanal plains.[7]

**Globalization**

Contrary to a popular image of places isolated in time and space, Pacific Island nations are becoming more firmly integrated into global economic and cultural systems than ever before. This accelerating process is facilitated by improved transport and communication systems, and driven by the global economy's insatiable demand for consumers, raw materials, and cheap labor. Today urban centers in the Pacific Islands display all the accoutrements of western-style consumer culture, complete with air-conditioned shopping malls, fast food outlets, and multiscreen cinemas featuring the latest Hollywood releases. Members of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army sport Rambo-style bandannas and communicate with the outside world via satellite phone, while Fiji's warriors for indigenous rights, as well as combatants in the Solomons, wear clothing styles that owe much to the design departments of corporate giants like Nike and LA Gear.

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[6] Moreover, while Rushdie admires the California success story of Americans of South Asian ancestry working in Silicon Valley (which took generations of struggle to achieve), he overlooks the ongoing marginalization of huge numbers of North America's indigenous peoples.
[7] Pacific Islands Report, June 9, 2000

This is but the latest stage in a lengthy process of globalization that for most Pacific societies began in the nineteenth century with the arrival of westerners pursuing a variety of economic, political, and spiritual agendas. By the time of independence in the 1960s and 1970s, most Pacific Island economies were already heavily dependent on trade with the outside world, usually struggling to balance exports of a narrow range of primary products against a burgeoning range of imported manufactured products and foodstuffs. Rising expectations were not matched by internally generated resources. Not only was the gap between export receipts and import costs typically large, but the new governments usually lacked the resources to expand or even maintain the rudimentary material and social infrastructure inherited from the departing colonial power. When Papua New Guinea achieved independence in 1975, for example, only a very few citizens had access to post-primary education, average life expectancy at birth was less than 50 years, and not a single road existed to travel from the capital city, Port Moresby, to any other urban center.

To some extent these post-independence challenges were mitigated by generous transfers of "development assistance" from western metropolitan powers intent on fostering regional security and stability in the face of potential cold war challenges for influence from the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries. The Compacts of Free Association that defined the post-independence relationship between the United States and the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau represent the most spectacular examples of aid-for-security deals in the region, although almost all Pacific Island nations received significant subsidies from external powers. During this boom period, annual per capita foreign aid expenditures were among the highest in the developing world. Given this onslaught of "use it or lose it" aid and the limited absorptive capacities of island states, it is not surprising that much of the assistance was not well spent. Influential Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa recalls, "Our national leaders were in the vanguard of a rush to secure financial aid from every quarter; our economies were stagnating or declining; our environments were deteriorating or were threatened and

we could do little about it; our own people were evacuating themselves to greener pastures elsewhere."[8] Only tiny Tuvalu (formerly the Ellice Islands), a nation of some 10,000 people, had the vision to use bilateral aid to establish a well-managed trust fund that would underwrite development investments for years to come.

The aid transfers of the cold war era went almost exclusively to national governments, expanding the public sector well beyond what the local tax base could reasonably sustain. They served to increase overall standards of living and helped alleviate the trauma of rapid change, but the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 heralded the arrival of a harsher era for Pacific Islands societies. It is not so much reductions in aid levels that have made the difference. In fact, aid levels have tended to remain more or less the same as new donors such as Japan and Taiwan step in to fill gaps left by countries like the United States and Britain that have turned their attention elsewhere. Rather, what distinguishes the new post cold war era are the conditions—some might say coercion—accompanying the aid, reinforced by similar mandates from powerful financial institutions like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

Metropolitan countries no longer invite Pacific Island nations to join them as "partners in progress" or "allies in the defense of freedom." Instead, their new message is salvation through economic development, to be achieved by emphasizing transparency, good governance, and privatization. The new "reform" agenda, which has gained considerable currency among island governments and regional organizations over the past decade, has so far shown far greater concern for economic growth than it has for equity or social stability. Instead of advocating policies that nurture local industries, island governments are now urged to strip away protective tariffs and create attractive conditions for foreign investment—at almost any cost. Rather than supporting government-led development projects as before, the new formula advocates the sale of public assets and the wholesale privatization of public enterprise.

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[8] *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*. Suva: School of Social and Economic Development,

Under the new development regime, a number of Pacific Island governments have been rightly criticized for wasteful spending, ill-conceived policies, poor performance, and official corruption. Nevertheless, for most island nations implementation of the reform agenda involves enormous social costs with no guarantee of widely shared rewards. In the Federated States of Micronesia and the Cook Islands, for example, the public sector has been drastically reduced and large numbers of public servants laid off. However, most of the dismissed workers have been forced to seek employment overseas, and growth in the private sector remains sluggish in both places. In much larger Fiji, where the economic shocks associated with the first coups in 1987 helped push the government to pursue more open-market policies, the results have been mixed. The garment industry has certainly grown rapidly in response to favorable tax and wages policies, and is now the largest employer in the country. However, because the wages are lower than what the government itself estimates is required to avoid poverty, it is not entirely clear who has actually benefited from this development.

Where private-sector development has proved most successful, it has tended to favor either foreign investors or local entrepreneurs who are already well established. This is not of major concern under the present orthodoxy, which stresses global economic growth rather than national development. However, what it means at the local level is widening income and class differentials. Indeed, increasing inequality appears to be a common feature of all Pacific Island hot spots. Tensions associated with the distribution of mining wealth were certainly a factor in the origins of the Bougainville crisis. In the Solomon Islands, supporters of the Isatabu Freedom Movement are clearly concerned about the inequitable distribution of development benefits and opportunities. And in Fiji, one of the groups supporting coup leader George Speight consists of aspiring Fijian businessmen whose interests were threatened by the more egalitarian policies of Chaudhry's Labour Party government. Ironically, other Speight supporters appear to come from the ranks of

University of the South Pacific, 1993, p.4.

those most marginalized by what scholar Tere Teaiwa calls the "can-do capitalism" promoted by previous governments.[9]

University of the South Pacific Professor Stewart Firth has summarized well the challenge facing Pacific Island nations in an era of globalization: "The trouble is that the new rules of a globalizing world are being set by people who have little interest in small places or special cases. On the contrary, the whole logic of globalization is to standardize rules so that there are no special breaks for any country whatever its circumstances. Comparative advantage is everything, and if you don't have many comparative advantages, that's bad luck."[10] Of course, developed countries are not entirely immune to the negative effects of the globalization policies they advocate. As Australia and New Zealand have already discovered in Bougainville, and are now contemplating in Fiji and the Solomons, crises in Pacific Island places can easily effect their own trade and investment interests, aggravate already tense immigration situations, and extract significant costs for regional peacekeeping and rehabilitation efforts in strife-torn areas.

**Settler Populations**

Globalization also has a direct impact on migration patterns, and has transformed the demographic profile of Oceania over the last century or so. The demand for cheap labor generated by pastoral, plantation, and mining economies during the colonial era caused considerable human movement within the region, as well as significant in-migration from Europe and Asia. By the early 20th century, indigenous populations in New Zealand, Australia, and Hawai'i were heavily outnumbered by settler populations, and in the 1970s the indigenous Kanaks became a minority in New Caledonia. By that time, the population of Fiji was almost equally divided between indigenous Fijians and the descendants of the indentured laborers who had arrived from India to work the sugar plantations three or four generations earlier.

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[9] Pacific Islands Report "An Analysis of the Current Political Crisis in Fiji." May 22, 2000
http://pidp.ewc.hawaii.edu/PIReport/2000/May/05-22-up2.htm
[10] "The Pacific Islands and the Globalization Agenda." *The Contemporary Pacific* 12(1) Spring 2000 pp. 177-192.

The results of these movements, as well as the extent to which ethnic divisions have remained stable, have varied considerably. For example, high rates of intermarriage among the various Pacific Islander, Asian, and European populations of Hawai'i contrast with extremely low rates of intermarriage between Fijians and settlers from South Asia, even after several generations. However, the most significant variable is the distribution of economic and political power among the various resident communities. In New Zealand, Hawai'i, and New Caledonia, settler communities are not only numerically superior but politically and economically dominant as well. In these situations it is easy for the powerful to insist on democratic principles of government, principles that the indigenous communities may, based on experience elsewhere, see as practically guaranteeing their permanent social, cultural, and economic marginalization.

The relative balance, rather than the imbalance, of power between the indigenous and settler communities makes the Fiji situation potentially more volatile than others in the Pacific. Insofar as there was a social contract in Fiji at the time of independence in 1970, it was based on the idea that the economic advantages enjoyed by Indians would be balanced by the Fijian control of land and politics. The well-established principle of Fijian "paramountcy" over other resident communities was built into the first constitution by giving the Great Council of Chiefs the final say on matters to do with land and custom. The complex system of communal voting and cross-voting allowed Indo-Fijians to participate in politics, but rendered unlikely the possibility of an Indo-Fijian-led government—if the Fijian community remained united.

The most significant destabilizing factor since independence has been the fracturing of Fijian political solidarity along class and regional lines. This first became apparent during the 1977 elections, when enough Fijian voters defected from the ruling Alliance Party to give a coalition of Indo-Fijian parties their first opportunity to form a government. As it turned out, the parties were unable to agree on the composition of such a government, the governor general intervened, and Ratu Mara, the country's only prime minister since

independence, resumed his position. The next time indigenous Fijian voters were significantly divided was in 1987, when a new Fiji Labour Party siphoned off votes that might otherwise have gone to the dominant Alliance Party, and prevented Ratu Mara from claiming yet another term as prime minister. The resulting coalition government, which included both Fijians and Indo-Fijians in key cabinet posts, was toppled by Sitiveni Rabuka's military coup before it had a chance to govern.

The fracturing of the Fijian political community in 1987 reflected growing dissatisfaction over the increasing wealth and privilege, not of Indo-Fijians, but of certain individuals and groups within the indigenous Fijian community. As in 2000, the 1987 coup was justified as necessary to protect indigenous rights against encroaching Indo-Fijian political power. However, although one of the coalition partners was the National Federation Party, which had long represented Indo-Fijian political interests, the new prime minister was an indigenous Fijian, albeit one from the wrong traditional confederacy in the western part of the country. Sitiveni Rabuka's armed intervention received support not only because it seemed to remove an "Indian-dominated" government from power, but because it neutralized a challenge to the dominance of a particular ruling cadre within the indigenous Fijian community.

The 1987 coups seriously damaged the already fragile relations between indigenous and settler communities, precipitating the exodus of an estimated 70,000 Indo-Fijians to Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. However, any electoral advantage that this might have afforded the Fijian community was more than offset by the coups' disintegrative effects within that community. As a commoner, Sitiveni Rabuka's intervention into politics could only be justified in traditional terms as a temporary measure in the service of the chiefs of his confederacy. However, his subsequent election as prime minister, and installation as Chair of the Great Council of Chiefs, established major new political precedents that, along with the economic policies of his government, helped shape the outcome of the 1999 elections. If these elections produced a stunning victory for a multiracial party committed to widespread social and economic reform, Fiji's new

fragmented politics were also apparent in the violent ouster of the new government in May 2000. In a real sense, this was a coup on two fronts: first against a government led by an Indo-Fijian, second against a chiefly establishment that had wielded considerable power in Fiji for more that a century.

It is difficult to imagine constitutional mechanisms that can by themselves effectively mediate these deep-seated social, economic, and cultural divisions. The 1990 constitution discriminated so heavily against nearly half of the population that it was probably unsustainable in the long term, except by the more widespread use of state coercion. The 1997 constitution was a masterful attempt to balance competing political forces, but its abandonment almost immediately after the armed takeover of Parliament on May 19th demonstrated that its support in the Fijian community was shallow indeed.

The lessons from the large-scale importation of labor in previous eras have not been fully appreciated. Major government-supported demographic changes based on labor needs continue in the Pacific today. For example, policymakers in Palau, the Pacific's newest independent nation, have actively encouraged the entry of low-cost contract workers from Asia to staff a burgeoning tourism industry that brings thousands of visitors from Japan and Taiwan. Approximately one-third of Palau's population is now composed of Filipinos who came as temporary guest workers but increasingly see themselves as permanent settlers. Increasing questions about the long-term social and cultural implications of these policies, and growing social friction, suggest that these rapid changes will not come without a cost for indigenous Palauans. Similar problems exist in Guam and the Northern Marianas Islands (Saipan), where more than half of the resident populations are of Asian descent.

**Policy Implications for the International Community**

A history of close regional cooperation makes it difficult for island governments to openly criticize each other's policies, although they show considerable solidarity when

one of their own is involved in a dispute with a metropolitan power.[11] This was clearly

evident by the public silence of the Pacific Island leaders during the Bougainville war, the

region's most devastating crisis since World War II, although they regularly issued

condemnations of France's activities in New Caledonia and French Polynesia. Statements

that hint of moralizing or suggest a continuing colonial relationship are seen as an affront

to the dignity of all. The recent remark by Australia's Foreign Minister Alexander

Downer that "You can't have a situation where twice in the space of 15 years, you have a

coup because somebody of Indian heritage has become prime minister" not only belies

the obvious, but also generates resentment among individuals actively attempting to

restore democratic processes.[12] Such "big brother" statements also overlook the fact that

the vast majority of Pacific Islanders do not support the use of violence to bring about

political change.

Western powers should weigh carefully their predilection to immediately denounce Fiji

and the Solomon Islands for recent events and to impose punishing sanctions. Although

sanctions would certainly convey a stern message of displeasure, they would undoubtedly

hurt the victims of the coups more than the perpetrators and would likely prove

counterproductive.[13] As former Cook Islands Prime Minister Sir Geoffrey Henry

cautions, "Window-shutting and door-closing from the international community will fire

up the situation, and polarize people at the wrong ends of some very confrontational

issues. That could lead to some deadly results."[14] The sanctions imposed by Australia and

New Zealand after the 1987 coups in Fiji not only failed to produce the desired results but

benefited other powers, like France, that quickly moved in to fill the diplomatic and

strategic void. As 2000 coup leader George Speight has shrewdly noted, it wasn't long

after the 1987 coups that Australia and New Zealand were scrambling to normalize their

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[11]For example, political leaders of Papua New Guinea, Solomons, and Vanuatu issued a joint statement in
defense of Fiji following Australia's and New Zealand's criticisms of the 1987 coup.
[12] British Broadcasting Corporation World News, May 26,2000:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/asia-pacific/newsid_765000/765096.stm
[13] If the outcome of a coup attempt remains uncertain, the threat of sanctions may have some positive
influence in working with local forces to restore democracy.
[14] *Cook Islands News,* May 27, 2000: http://pidp.ewc.hawaii.edu/pireport/2000/June/06-02.01.htm

relations with Fiji, and warmly welcomed the leader of the earlier coups, Sitiveni Rabuka, to their shores.[15]

In the Solomons, a much larger percentage of the population relies on the subsistence economy and is therefore largely immune to the pressures that international sanctions would bring. Although pointed measures that specifically undermine lawless elements and symbolically suggest relations are not "business as usual" may have merit, a successful long-range policy for ensuring peace and stability in the Pacific Island region cannot be built around sanctions, isolation, or indifference.

The long-term interests of the international community are for several reasons best served by increasing rather than reducing international engagement in Fiji and the Solomon Islands in particular, and in the Pacific Island region more generally. First, in purely practical terms, there is a need for the international community to immediately engage the very substantial proportions of the population in Fiji and the Solomon Islands that are committed to restoring democratic rule. There is also a need for external powers to explore policies that might address the causes, rather than the symptoms, of these crises. The recent visits by high level Australia and New Zealand delegations to Honiara and Suva are indicative of how this process can be initiated. In both instances the delegations have expressed interest in understanding the positions of the various parties and have offered to facilitate further steps toward resolution.

Engagement is also desirable at this juncture precisely because Pacific Island democracies do not yet suffer from the same intransigent structural problems found elsewhere in the developing world. While by no means corruption free, Pacific Islands nations have so far managed to avoid the plundering "crony capitalism" that has plagued parts of Southeast Asia, and the repressive and exploitative regimes found in parts of the Caribbean and Latin America. With the single exception of Bougainville, the region has also escaped the gruesome bloodshed and widespread human rights abuses that characterize many

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[15] It is important to note that trade unions are in many instances able to independently impose sanctions

countries in Africa. Instead, within the last five years democratic processes have brought a peaceful transition of leadership in ten of the fourteen independent Pacific Island nations, and free and fair elections have been held in the rest. Only two countries (Papua New Guinea and Fiji) have attracted the sustained attention of international human rights organizations like Amnesty International.

Given these strengths, the current situation should be viewed by policymakers as an opportunity to find new ways to build supportive linkages in the Pacific and work as partners in arresting current negative trends. Such an approach would include at least five essential elements.

The first priority must be the return of democratic government in Fiji and the Solomon Islands. The fluidity of the current situations requires careful attention to the opportunities for constructive engagement—even if this means supporting elements of the military or political parties that have expressed sympathy with the coup-makers' causes. At the same time, it would be a mistake to accept conditions that require overly lengthy peace talks or constitutional revisions. Fiji's ten-year saga of constitutional revision suggests that a legitimate constitution is only part of a much larger process of nation building.

The second element involves efforts to advance cooperation and understanding between the Pacific Islands and Pacific Rim nations. Special attention needs to be given to strengthening awareness of the island region in the larger countries of Asia and the Americas, perhaps through regular high-level forums that bring together island and rim leaders, policymakers, and academics. Such opportunities for frank exchanges might increase understanding of post-cold war developments in island societies. Currently, the only opportunity for multilateral dialogue occurs after the annual meeting of the Pacific Forum, the islands' foremost regional political organization. These post-Forum dialogues are too often scripted, formal, and lacking in substance.

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without approval of government.

Third, there is a need to rethink bilateral and multilateral aid programs that advocate economic growth at any cost, and neglect sensitive issues of culture and tradition. A renewed emphasis on such basic public-sector endeavors as education, health, and infrastructure would help create conditions that are conducive to social and political stability. Such programs of human development are also necessary for the healthy growth of the private sector and might allow Pacific Island nations to avoid reliance on the labor-intensive, low-wage industries that afford little opportunity for meaningful forms of development. Increased employment opportunities are especially important for growing numbers of youth who have lost interest in village life yet find few chances to make use of their talents in the national capitals.

Fourth, the international community is well positioned to make the terms of trade more advantageous to developing island economies. There is increased pressure on Pacific Island economies from global markets as a result of new World Trade Organization arrangements, particularly in Fiji, where the possible loss of price support for the sugar industry could not come at a worse time. In some cases, the temporary extension of price support or other trade arrangements may be sufficient to ensure a smooth transition to a new regime, but in others the loss of preferences could be devastating to economic and social stability. Similarly, the proposal by Australia and New Zealand to assist with land compensation claims in the Solomon Islands may offer scope for temporarily relieving acute social pressures. However, resolution of the complex issues discussed here will require more substantial and long-term commitments.

Finally, there is a clear need to significantly increase the region's peacekeeping capabilities. Recent events in Fiji and the Solomons have demonstrated the ease with which political ends can be achieved through relatively modest armed interventions, as well as the devastating effects of such acts. Papua New Guinea and Fiji are the only island nations to maintain significant armed forces, although Tonga has long maintained a defense force and the Solomons was obliged to expand the paramilitary branch of its police force in the 1990s to cope with the spill-over effects of the Bougainville crisis. The

Papua New Guinea Defence Force proved incapable of dealing with the Bougainville crisis, and an unarmed regional force has been facilitating the peace process there for several years. Probably for political more than logistical reasons, Fiji's army has been unable to maintain effective internal security during the present crisis, or to secure the release of the hostages. In the absence of identifiable external military threats, and in light of their limited capacity to maintain internal security, it may be useful to examine whether there is a need for national Pacific Island armies at all.

The recent proposals for the United Nations to establish a tough and effective rapid reaction force recruited from all parts of the world and intervening only on the directives of the Security Council might prove a potent element for restoring stability and order in Pacific places when all else fails.[16] Alternatively, it might be time to reconsider the establishment of a similar type of regional peacekeeping force, a proposal first put forth by former Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan in 1980 after the successful deployment of Papua New Guinea troops to deal with a secessionist crisis in newly independent Vanuatu. Of course there are no satisfactory military solutions to the social, political, and economic problems discussed here, and, as is often noted, peacekeeping forces are only effective if there is a peace to keep.

**Engaging the New Pacific**

If talk of "Pacific balkanization" or "island contagion" overstates the regional significance of recent events in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, it is also misleading to regard these as isolated phenomena. The current crises in the Pacific are connected, but not simply by outbreaks of "ethnic fighting." All island governments face challenges to their stability and security arising from colonial legacies, conflicts between traditional and introduced modes of governance, and the erosive effects of globalization. In light of the magnitude of these problems, it is perhaps surprising that more island governments have not yet had to confront serious challenges to their authority.

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[16] See Brian Urquhart, "Some Thoughts on Sierre Leone," *New York Review of Books*, June 15, 2000. Urquhart asks rhetorically, "Surely the nations of the world are not frightened of UN peacekeeping becoming too effective and too efficient?"

It is unrealistic to expect Pacific Island nations to stand as paragons of western-style democracy, especially when these processes often fall short of the ideal in "developed" countries as well. Electoral democracy is a "foreign flower" that must be imbued with local cultural values in order to take root. This is a large order in multiethnic societies like Fiji and the Solomon Islands, where for most people the idea of belonging to a single national political community remains elusive. The negative reaction by Pacific Islanders to the recent coups suggests that the basic principles of democratic rule are accepted and valued. The coups should not be seen as a general negation of democratic ideals by Pacific Islanders, but a reflection of the stresses that local democratic institutions of governance must endure.

Greater engagement by the international community would help avert more intractable problems in the Pacific Island region in the future. Japan's ascending position in Pacific Island affairs, as demonstrated by its recent summit with Pacific Islands leaders, suggests an understanding that regional stability on the one hand and Japan's national interests on the other are inextricably intertwined. Other countries might follow this example. However, there is also a need to review the nature of the engagement, in order to avoid heavy-handed approaches and responses, as well as blunt policy instruments that contribute to island problems.