

The Africanisation of the South Pacific

Australian Journal of International Affairs; Canberra, Nov 2000; Ben Reilly;

Volume: 54
Issue: 3
Start Page: 261-268
ISSN: 10357718
Subject Terms: Democracy
Economic development
Economic growth
Conflicts
Minority & ethnic violence
Economic conditions

Geographic Names: South Pacific

Abstract:

In the past year, the perception of the South Pacific has changed from an "oasis of democracy" to an "arc of instability," with the violent overthrow of the elected government in Fiji, an ethnic civil war between rival ethnic militias culminating in the forced resignation of a prime minister in the Solomon Islands, and other situations. One of the major legitimizing claims for democratic government is that it offers the best prospects for development and economic growth, but in the South Pacific, democracy has clearly not brought with it the payoff of economic prosperity.

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These are troubled times for democracy in the South Pacific. Ten years after the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Cold War, many optimistic observers had come to take for granted the appeal of democratic government as a guiding norm around the world. Alternative regime models, they argued, had simply lost any claim to legitimacy they might once have enjoyed. The 'end of history' was nigh. Even the much-vaunted 'Asian model' of quasi-authoritarian government appeared to lose its appeal as an alternative that could be emulated after the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98. But the events of the past year suggest that declarations of democracy's inexorable march forward may have been premature. Across the world, initially promising cases of democratisation in Russia, Southern Africa, Central Asia, Latin America and elsewhere have proven to be less consolidated and more unstable than many of the more optimistic observers expected in the early 1990s.

To this list of instability we can now add the South Pacific, where the second and third-largest countries in the region-Fiji and the Solomon Islands-are both, at the time of writing, controlled by governments installed by the power of the bullet rather than the ballot. This marks a momentous shift in the region's political affairs. Although seldom viewed through the prism of the international system, for most of the past 20 years the South Pacific region has been an 'oasis of democracy' by international standards. While far from perfect, the competitive and participatory nature of democratic politics in the majority of the small island states that make up the region was quite striking, particularly when compared to many other world regions. For example, the most recent (1998-99) report from the US private foundation Freedom House, which publishes a detailed annual ranking of political and civil rights for every country, places the entire South Pacific region in the 'free' category (bar 'partly free' Fiji)-a distinction shared with only one other world region, Europe, where Northern Ireland was the odd man out (Freedom House 1999). By contrast, most of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the former Soviet Union and Latin America were ranked as less than 'free' on a combined index of political rights and civil liberties.

Moreover, over the past two decades, democracy in the region appeared to have been increasingly consolidated-to the point where some comparative studies have counted states like Papua New Guinea among the very rare number of 'established democracies' in the developing world (Lijphart 1999).² Especially in the larger and more populous Melanesian states of Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and-intermittently-- Fiji, freely contested and highly competitive national and local elections have occurred regularly. With the exception of Tonga and Samoa, where traditional chiefs remain in constitutionally privileged positions, participation and contestation for political office across the region has, in general, remained unrestricted. Judiciaries have, by and large, remained independent, and civil and political liberties have generally been upheld, as have the basic freedoms of the media

and organised labour. One indicator of the quality of democracy, the level of voter turnout, has been consistently higher than in such bastions of democracy as the United States or the United Kingdom.

While governments were seldom effective and parliaments were often unstable, the most basic prerequisite of formal democracy—the ability to ‘throw the rascals out’ via the electoral process—has actually worked remarkably well (some would say too well). Incumbents in the South Pacific often last only one term before being replaced by voters. In contrast to the dominance of authoritarian regimes and one-party states in Africa and Asia, in the South Pacific change of government at (and between) elections has been remarkably common, as a combination of weak political parties and highly contested elections have seen an abundant turnover of incumbent politicians and their governments in many countries. In most of the region, transfer of executive power is a regular feature of competitive politics, with numerous changes of government having occurred in PNG, the Solomons, Vanuatu and most of Micronesia. Again, this ‘turnover test’ of democratic maturity points to the exceptional nature of the South Pacific compared to many comparable regions. The most ‘democratic’ states in Africa, by contrast—Botswana, Namibia, post-apartheid South Africa—have yet to experience one turnover of government via the regular electoral process. The same is true of prominent quasi-democracies in Asia (e.g. Malaysia) and Latin America (e.g. until July 2000, Mexico). The fact that in the South Pacific losing government is not associated with losing one’s basic liberties has been a major factor in ensuring an ongoing commitment to democracy among the islands’ elites.

But despite this, democracy in the region appears to be in serious trouble. In the past year, the perception of the South Pacific has changed from an ‘oasis of democracy’ to an ‘arc of instability’, with the violent overthrow of the elected government in Fiji, an ethnic 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 PNG, the killing of a cabinet minister in Samoa and, most worryingly, an apparent demonstration effect at work, whereby extra-constitutional actions in one island group can, it seems, trigger similar activities in another. In addition, the region has 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 clearly 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.

The Africanisation of the South Pacific

As these facts suggest, it is 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 both for 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 this year’s events in Fiji and the Solomon Islands—is a growing tension and unpredictability in terms of civil-military relations. This phenomenon first came to prominence in March 1997 during the Sandline affair in Papua New Guinea, 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 (Dinnen et al. 1997). 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 also created a dangerous precedent in terms of civilian command over the military which 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, as exemplified by the way elements of the Fijian military supported George Speight’s coup attempt in Fiji, there are other ways in which guns can be placed in the hands of rebel forces. 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 armoury of firepower. This enabled them not only to take Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and most of the cabinet hostage [in that symbol of democracy, the parliament building itself, no less, in an echo of the original coup in 1987 (see Thakur and Wood 1989)], 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 after armed rebels seized the capital and held him briefly at gunpoint. Both countries now have governments whose route to power has been via the barrel of a gun.

Group inequality and identity politics

The second element of 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 elements driving violent conflict. Tensions over land ownership and control 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 end-game of this process of coerced removal being played out by Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, as the country's remaining white farmers are being slowly forced out of the country. This has frightening parallels with the likely consequences of George Speight's seizing of power in Fiji, which has left the country's Indo-Fijian population (who dominate both the professions and the vital sugarcane industry) with nowhere to go but out. Amin's actions badly damaged the fragile Ugandan economy; Mugabe's actions attacked the economic lifeblood of Zimbabwe; and Speight's actions will just as surely wreak havoc upon the economy of Fiji.

However, outside Fiji and New Caledonia, the 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 most diverse region in the world 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 much more fragmented nature, ethnicity in the South Pacific remains similar to that of Africa: an easily manipulable and combustible resource which 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 appears 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 is now a commonplace political phenomenon in many regions. Across the world the most violent and intractable conflicts now take place within existing states: of the 110 armed conflicts around the world in the 10-year period between 1989 and 1999, only seven were traditional inter-state conflicts. The remaining 103 took place within existing states, and were mostly motivated by mobilised ethnic identities and grievances combined with a struggle over control of natural resources (Wallensteen and Sollenberg 2000). The centrality of exploitable resources to many apparently 'ethnic' conflicts has not yet been sufficiently appreciated by commentators on the South Pacific, many of whom too readily accept ethnic explanations for what are, in reality, power struggles over the control of resources and control of the state. A recent World Bank study found that the usual explanations for civil wars-poverty, income inequality, authoritarian government-in fact had little explanatory power when tested empirically (Collier 2000). 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 of all across the region is ownership of land itself.

As the comparative scholarship on the issue suggests, land (its ownership, redistribution, reform and exploitation) 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 between movements of people from Malaita to the main island of Guadalcanal. In this and a number of other recent conflicts over land in the region, tensions between traditional forms of title and ownership of private property are increasingly prevalent. In both cases, however, access to land and perceptions of ethnic group inequality have proved to be potent mobilising forces that have been readily exploitable by unscrupulous political entrepreneurs.

Brittle governance

The third element of 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 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. Significantly, 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 in the region, 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 per cent of the total vote). Such a trend points towards an ongoing crisis of governance and governability.

Weak states

A final, and in many ways most serious, 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, as the state, not the market, is itself 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 are thus of importance not just as an entree 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, altogether 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.

But this apparently positive feature-a highly competitive political process-has masked many deeper problems with democracy. The region has often been saddled with ill-conceived imitations of Western political institutions, which have tended to function quite differently in a South Pacific setting from the way they worked in more mature democracies. 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: because under first-past-the-post systems candidates do not need to gain widespread support but merely more votes than anyone else, elections are often won with remarkably low vote totals. In PNG, for example, winning members supported by an absolute majority of their electorate have declined from 19 in 1977 to just four in 1997. In 1997, 15 parliamentarians were elected with less than 10 per cent of the vote each. This pattern has also been repeated, in less extreme fashion, in the other Melanesian countries (which contain 80 per cent of the region's total population) and has led to remarkably unrepresentative parliaments, most of whose members are not supported by but have actually been rejected by the vast majority of their electorate.

Not surprisingly, such grossly unrepresentative parliaments often lead to unstable and often unrepresentative 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, thus contributing further to the crisis of legitimacy that democratic institutions are facing across the region. In times of stress, politicians are not responsive to the demands of their constituents because, for many MPs, their actual constituency is not their electorate as a whole but the much smaller sub-group of voters to whom they owe their allegiance and parliamentary positions. In PNG, for example, 'it is assumed that "representatives" will only work for the benefit of a small minority who actually voted for them, which can be as low as 7 percent under the first-past-the-post ballot' and that 'usually the majority ... of voters opposed the winner, and often refuse to let their elected member visit them' (Standish 1994:60). 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, leading 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 (Fraenkel 2000). In summary, the weakness of democracy across the region can be traced back, in part, to the increasingly unrepresentative nature of many supposedly representative institutions.

Conclusion

Despite much talk over the years of the democratically inclined nature of most Pacific societies, particularly the egalitarian, competitive social structures of Melanesia, the evidence of the past year gives little basis for claiming that democracy has deep roots in the region. But there is also, it should be noted, precious little evidence for the reverse—that is, that the region is somehow susceptible to the outdated charms of authoritarianism (occasional wistful glances in the direction of Singapore notwithstanding). Demagogues are likely to have even less success than democrats. Essentially, 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.

The World Bank report mentioned earlier 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 10 percentage points more of its youths in schools—55 instead of 45 per cent—cuts its risk of conflict from 14 to around 10 per cent) 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 which 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 phenomena are strongly present in much of the South Pacific region, suggesting a serious risk of increasing internal conflicts in the years ahead.

At this point, optimists would point out that democracy is also, when it works, itself a conflict management device. Within certain circumscribed boundaries, conflict is considered legitimate, is expected to occur and is handled through established institutional means when it does occur. Disputes under democracy are never definitively 'solved'; rather they are temporarily accommodated and thus reformulated for the next time. Well-structured democratic institutions thus 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 (see Harris and Reilly 1998). 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. A major process of democratic renewal is required, a process that, ultimately, can only come from the island states' people and their governments, not from outside forces.

[Footnote]

See, for example, Stepan and Skach (1993). They 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.

2 'Established' democracies were defined as countries with a population of over 250 000 which are democratic now and have been continuously democratic for at least 20 years. India, Mauritius and Trinidad and Tobago were the only other plural societies in the developing world that Lijphart categorised as having met these criteria.

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* Thanks to Reg Austin and Ron May for their helpful comments.

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