ACTA ASIATICA VARSOVIENSIA

No. 30

Issue 1

SPECIAL ISSUE

ON POWER-SHARING

IN ASIA & OCEANIA

Edited by Krzysztof Trzciński

Warsaw 2017

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Ethnic Accommodation in Oceania: Instances from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands

Abstract

The paper provides an overview of the ways in which recent tensions between ethnic groups in Oceania have been accommodated. It focuses on three cases from the Southwest Pacific: Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands, in order to make a comparative note about the circumstances of these contexts in which constitutional exercises have followed violent conflict.

Key words: ethnic conflict, ethnic accommodation, civil war in Bougainville, Fiji, Solomon Islands

Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the ways in which recent tensions between ethnic groups in the Pacific Islands (also referred to as Oceania) have been accommodated through the implementation of specific policies, passage of laws or formalization in constitutions. Indeed, negotiating the terms of power-sharing is as much a tradition of small states and societies as it is of larger states elsewhere; and conflict – whether economic, socio-cultural, or political – was ever-present in Pacific Island societies prior to European contact, throughout the period of colonization and now in the post-independence era.[1]

The population of Oceania is approximately 10 million, living in tens of thousands of villages, hamlets, settlements and towns, on thousands of

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[1] Andreas Holtz, Matthias Kowasch and Oliver Hasenkamp (eds), *A Region in Transition: Politics and Power in the Pacific Islands Countries*, Saarbrücken: Universaar, Saarbrücken, 2016.

islands, spread across some 20 countries and an ocean area of 550,000 square kilometres. Independent countries range in size from 10,000 (Nauru) to 8 million (Papua New Guinea). These are some of the "small island states" of the contemporary era; additional ten countries remain dependent on one or other metropolitan power. These dependent and independent states, as well as their land area and current population, are shown on the following chart.[2]

Region/country or territory	Political Status	Land area (km²)	Population 2016
MELANESIA		**540,030**	**10,250,400**
Fiji	independent	18,333	880,400
New Caledonia	French territory	18,576	277,000
Papua New Guinea	independent	462,840	8,151,300
Solomon Islands	independent	28,230	651,700
Vanuatu	independent	12,281	289,700
MICRONESIA		**3,156**	
Federated States of Micronesia	independent	701	104,600
Guam	United States Island Territory	541	169,500
Kiribati		811	ɾ

[2] Pacific Regional Statistics: http://prism.spc.int/ (accessed 17.05.2017).

Marshall Islands	independent	181	55,000
Nauru	independent	21	10,800
Northern Mariana Islands	United States Commonwealth	457	55,700
Palau	independent	444	17,800
POLYNESIA		**8,126**	664,800
American Samoa	United States Territory	199	56,400
Cook Islands	Independent, but part of "realm of New Zealand"	237	15,200
French Polynesia	French territory	3,521	273,800
Niue	Associated State, part of "realm of New Zealand"	259	1,600
Pitcairn Islands	British Overseas Territory	47	n.a.
Samoa	Independent	2,934	194,000
Tokelau	Associated State, part of "realm of New Zealand"	12	1,400

Tonga	independent	749	100,600
Tuvalu	independent	26	10,100
Wallis and Futuna	French territory	142	11,800

The history of nations and nationhood in Oceania differs from that of Europe, although it has similarities with some parts of Africa. In the years before European contact, Pacific societies evolved economic and political systems suited to their environment. These were mostly small-scale and kin-based. In the eastern Pacific (Polynesia) leadership was inherited by successive generations of the strongest families, while to the West (Melanesia) leadership was more commonly contested within successive generations. Some cultures developed collaborative rather than individual leadership systems. Traditional leadership was much altered by both colonial regimes and Christian missionaries. The archipelagic composition of these communities contributed to the diversification of languages, customs and ethnic identities and provides an on-going challenge to the building of national identities.

European contact brought considerable change, as every island and people across the Pacific was either annexed or else sought protection from its preferred European power (as with Tonga, which sought British rather than German "protection"). Political subordination was accompanied by economic and cultural subordination. Material cultures based on ritualised subsistence, barter, exchange, and gift, were monetised through the introduction of currencies, taxation, and wage labour, and this alteration of economic relations carried ramifications for all other aspects of social functioning. Needless to say, the distances across water have meant that ethnic conflict, where it does occur in the Pacific Islands, is *within* contemporary societies rather than *between* them; it is a domestic challenge rather than a cross-boundary one.

Some instances of ethnic conflict in Oceania are better known than others: in New Caledonia the Kanak struggle for independence from France in the 1980s; in Papua New Guinea the civil war on Bougainville in the 1990s; in Fiji the rivalry between indigenous Fijians and Indian *girmitiya*; and at the boundary between Asia and the Pacific, the status of

West Papua, an Indonesian province with ethnic ties to Melanesians rather than Javanese and Malays. An overview of tensions between the introduced and traditional systems of government was recently published elsewhere. [3] The current paper focuses on just three cases from the Southwest Pacific: Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands.

Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea, by far the largest of the Pacific Island Countries, with a population of approximately 8 million, and a land area of 462,840 sq kms, gained in dependence in 1975. It had been administered by Australia as a mandate of the League of Nations from 1920 and then as a Trusteeship of the United Nations from 1946. The presence of some 800 ethnic groups has resulted in the perpetual presence of ethnic tension in the country. However, although tribes from the highland provinces (Eastern, Southern and Western Highlands, Chimbu, and Enga) are numerically larger than those from provinces to the south where the capital city of Port Moresby is located, and their large-scale migration from rural to urban areas has placed pressure on land and housing, employment opportunities, the diversity of culture and language in the country has mitigated against the possibility of any one group dominating politics, government or commerce. Ethnic competition exists in politics and economically, but has not required formalised sharing of executive power.

Although separatist movements emerged prior to and consequent to independence in 1975, the most significant of these was felt on Bougainville, a large island in the country's east. Although the dispute had an element of separatist sentiment on the basis of ethnic difference, there were other equally weighty precipitating factors, notably the operation of a large open-cut copper mine at Panguna, which had brought environmental degradation affecting the livelihoods of local communities who in addition felt their share of royalties was far too small. What differentiated the Bougainville dispute from others in Papua New Guinea was the way in which it deteriorated from a political to a physical conflict, and by its later partial resolution through formal peace agreements and constitutional dialogue. In between, there were an estimated 10,000

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[3] Graham Hassall, 'Democracy in the Pacific: Tensions between System and Life-World' in *A Region in Transition: Politics and Power in the Pacific Islands Countries*, Saarbrücken: Universaar, Saarbrücken, 2016, Andreas Holtz, Mathias Kowasch and Oliver Hasenkamp (eds), pp. 313–360.

(mostly civilian) deaths, and the province lost a decade of social and economic development.

The passage from conflict to a future plebiscite involved four phases: a) 1987–1997 political and military conflict; b) 1997 – agreement to cease hostilities and negotiate peace treaties; c) restoration of services; and d) 1998–2004 constitutional dialogue and amendment. [4] A referendum is currently being prepared for implementation in 2018.

The preamble to the 2004 Constitution of the autonomous Province of Bougainville[5] recalls some of this conflict and sets out the justification for the new arrangements: "Conscious of the noble heritage and customs of our Ancestors and of the freedom and autonomy which they enjoyed in time immemorial; Mindful of the restrictions wrought on our freedom, autonomy and customs by colonial aggression, foreign influences and the devastation of foreign wars; Proud of our long struggle to free ourselves from adverse colonial and foreign influences and to renew our freedom, autonomy and customs; Chastened by internal conflict that arose during our struggle for freedom; Recognising the sacrifice of Bougainvilleans for the causes of autonomy and self-determination; Heartened by the process of healing, reconciliation and unity pursued during the years of conflict and thereafter…".

Successful completion of the peace process required reform of both National and Provincial Constitutions. At national level, the Constitution of Papua New Guinea had to be amended to grant the "Autonomous Province of Bougainville" greater powers than those possessed by all other provinces in the country. These included greater legislative, executive, and judicial powers, as well as recognition of some rights over foreign affairs. The constitution of the Autonomous Province of Bougainville was the product of Constituent Assembly deliberations rather than simple reform of the former provincial Constitution, and included such peace-making compromises as guaranteed seats in the Provincial Assembly for former combatants.

Change to the national constitution paved the way for the establishment of Bougainville as an "autonomous province". Now with

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[4] Anthony J. Regan, 'The Bougainville Peace Agreement, 20012002: Towards Order and Stability for Bougainville?' in *'Arc of Instability'? Melanesia in the Early 2000s*, R.J. May (ed.), Canberra and Christchurch: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project, ANU, and Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury, 2002.

[5] Constitution of Bougainville: http://www.paclii.org/pg/constitution-bougainville-2004.html (accessed 17.05.2017).

its own parliament, and hence legislative and executive powers beyond those possessed by all other Provinces in the country, Bougainville's House of Representatives has passed legislation regularly since 2005, in an effort to "draw-down" powers from the National Government, and prove its ability to develop and oversee government services.

In addition to the conflict on Bougainville, localised ethnic tensions recur regularly in a number of other provinces. Known as "tribal fights", these clashes which were traditionally contests for land, females or other resources, but here again, even though such clashes continue to occur, they have not required formal accommodation through power-sharing. It may be relevant to add here the fact that general elections, held at five-year intervals, have been accompanied by violence between the supporters of contending candidates (the most recent occurrence being general elections in 2017), although here, again, political conflict has not sought resolution through power-sharing accommodation.

Fiji

The nation of Fiji (population 840,000 on a land area of 18,333 sq km) experienced four coups between 1986 and 2006, each with individual triggers and motivations. The Fijian people are located at the boundary of the Polynesian and Melanesian cultures, and traditional leadership similarly ranges between chieftain and clan models from these two cultures. Chiefs were accommodated in Britain's "indirect rule" of the Fijian Crown Colony between 1874 and independence attained in 1970. Both before and after independence, land has belonged to customary Fijian owners, and chiefs have continued to hold their titles and socio-economic influence (although the colonial and later the post-colonial state administered leases and rents).

This colonial context was made more complex when the British introduced some 100,000 Indians, primarily to work on sugar plantations. These labourers, having nothing to return to in India upon expiration of their period of indenture, chose to remain in Fiji. Although landless, and reliant on agricultural wages or commercial activities, their numbers eventually expanded to equal those of the land-owning indigenous Fijians. Rivalry between the two communities occurred through the colonial period but was most evident after independence. In 1987 elements of Fiji's military forces opposed the installation of the country's democratically elected government which had, for the first time, a Fijian Prime Minister but a majority of Indian members. The army mounted a

coup and a period of constitutional and political upheaval followed, during which the two communities eventually found a point of accommodation, if not equity. The accommodation included an electoral system which guaranteed a Fijian majority in parliament and government and included an affirmative programme inspired by Malaysia's "pro-Bumiputra" policies which privileged Fijian economic interests over Indian. A Fijian Council of Chiefs was given increased advisory power in customary matters, and the right to appoint some members of parliament's upper house. All of these racially-defined regulations were legitimated in the 1990 and 1997 constitutions.

Following general elections in 2006 the major party, *Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua*, (SDL), reluctantly established a multi-party government of national unity, as called for by the constitution, whilst simultaneously pressing forward with manifestly pro-Fijian policy proposals. One, for example, sought to re-assert Fijian ownership of traditional fishing rights, which would have prohibited all other communities from accessing beaches without permission.

Ironically, a military coup in December 2006 advocated removing such preferential policies and introduced equal treatment of citizens irrespective of race. But although the constitution was re-written to replace pro-*itaukei* (pro-native) policies with others espousing race equality, the action is currently causing unease amongst indigenous Fijians who feel that their paramountcy in the islands is once again being questioned, and threatened. The government has dismantled the Great Council of Chiefs *(Bose Levu Vakaturaga)* which had existed since the colonial period, and has also ended a wide range of preferential policy settings which had previously advantaged indigenous Fijians in business and education. The fact that most Indian Fijians are Hindu or Muslim has stoked a simmering ideology that wishes Fiji to become a "Christian State".

Solomon Islands

The third country reviewed in this paper, Solomon Islands, a group of islands comprising 515,000 people on total land area of 28,000 sq kms) attained independence in 1978 after almost a century of British colonial rule, and with very little economic infrastructure in place or human capital developed. Although the population is overwhelmingly Melanesian, it nonetheless speaks approximately 65 Austronesian languages across the country's nine provinces, and "breakaway movements" existed both prior

to and after independence. Although constitutional reform exercises have on several occasions proposed a shift to some form of federalism so as to cater for regional aspirations for greater autonomy, the national parliament has never had the conviction to shift away from the existing unitary system of government.

Ethnic tensions were greatest on Guadalcanal, the island on which the country's capital Honiara is situated. After several decades of migrants shifting to this main urban centre from the various outer islands, land-owners on Guadalcanal began to resent the encroachment on their land and domination of the island's economy and employment opportunities. In the late 1980s verbal protests transformed into physical confrontation. The 'Demands by the Bone Fide and Indigenous People of Guadalcanal' included formation of a state government for Guadalcanal under a federal system, a demand which had previously been put to the national government in 1988 in a document titled 'Petition by the Indigenous People of Guadalcanal'. Other 'Bone Fide' demands included: the return of alienated lands; the reform of land legislation to restrict ownership by people from other provinces; that Guadalcanal Province be granted 50% of the revenue from resource projects on the island; and that legislation be introduced to 'control and manage' internal migration.[6]

Rather than addressing such issues, political leaders stoked animosities until conflict erupted in 2000–2001. State-owned buildings and resources were literally seized by rebel groups and the government was ousted. After a period of social and political chaos, the surrounding Pacific states (but including Australia and New Zealand), mobilised military and police units in 2003 to re-establish the rule of law and work towards the rebuilding of the state institutions. This mission, termed "RAMSI" (Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands), relied on regional security agreements that had emerged following the region's inability to respond to the earlier crises in Bougainville and Fiji. In 1992 Pacific Island leaders outlined in the *Honiara Declaration* the main principles for law enforcement cooperation. This was followed by the Aitutaki Declaration on regional security cooperation of 1997, the *Biketawa Declaration of* 2000, and the *Nasonini Declaration on Regional Security* of 2002. (Other components of comprehensive security policy

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[6] Matthew G. Allen, 'Land, Identity and Conflict on Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands', *Australian Geographer*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2012, pp. 163–180.

are the Forum Economic Ministers' Meeting (FEMM) principles for good governance, and the Forum Leadership Code).

The provisions of the Biketawa Declaration were first used in 2003 when the Solomon Islands government Forum sought the region's assistance in re-establish the rule of law. The subsequent Assistance Mission stabilised the country within three months and collected almost 4,000 weapons without a shot being fired, before moving to phases of rehabilitation of the nation's "machinery of government". Peace treaties were brokered between the parties in conflict, but these have an indeterminate legal status, with no direct influence on constitutional, legal, or policy reform. A Constitutional reform exercise has been underway since soon after the cessation of hostilities which more than a decade later is still to come to fruition.

Discussion

A comparative note can be made about the circumstances of Papua New Guinea, Bougainville, Fiji and the Solomon Islands – Pacific contexts in which constitutional exercises have followed violent conflict. Whereas in the case of Papua New Guinea, the "Bougainville Peace Agreement" became embedded in Papua New Guinea Law and provided a legal framework for the establishment of the Constitution of the Autonomous Province of Bougainville, the "peace agreements" that concluded conflict in the Solomon Islands did not create law, and on-going efforts toward reconciliation appear to be parallel to, rather than part of, constitutional reform. In Fiji, constitutional reform has accompanied each of the coups, which have ranged from efforts to entrench ethnic hegemony on the one hand (1987) to efforts to remove it (2006).

Whereas federalism is often suggested as a solution to governing multi-ethnic or divided societies, there are few examples of such a solution being implemented in the ethnically diverse Pacific Islands. In the North Pacific the Federated States of Micronesia bring together four culturally distinct communities under a complex system of revenue sharing and decision-making, and the Republic of Palau distributes some powers to no less than 18 micro-states. But in the Pacific states that have experienced some of the most overt ethnic conflict the system of government has not been reformed in this way. The Solomon Islands has deliberated on a federal model since independence in 1978. A first major

review concluded in 1987[7] did not result in any substantial change. A subsequent exercise initiated by the Kemakeza government in 2002 obtained UNDP support and continued through the Sogovare and Sikua governments. A 32-member Constitutional Congress launched by then PM Sogovare in June 2007 existed throughout the following year but toward the end of 2009 had been halted through lack of operational funds and the onset of preparations for parliamentary elections in 2010. Up to 2017 the Parliament had not taken the step of voting on proposed constitutional amendments. In contrast, Bougainville's constitution was agreed to by the National Parliament of Papua New Guinea in December 2004, a move that cleared the path for holding a general election for the province's executive and legislative bodies in 2005, and for gradual movement toward a plebiscite on the future of the Province. The reason why the Pacific states do not rely more on constitutional mechanisms to resolve issues of ethnic tension is generally thought to be due to the presence of multiple distinct communities rather than just two or three, the main exception to this being Fiji, where ethnic accommodation attempted under the 1990 constitution is currently considered to have been a failure.

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[7] Solomon Islands Provincial Government Review Committee, *Report of the Provincial Government Review Committee, 1986–1987*, Honiara, Solomon Islands: Ministry of Home Affairs & Provincial Government, 1987.