



YOUTHQUAKE: will Melanesian democracy be sunk by demography?

Key messages:

- » The systems of parliamentary democracy are increasingly under pressure in Melanesia.
- » Left unchecked, the trend is likely to shift towards more autocratic forms of government.
- » Half the population of the region is under 24, and Melanesia has the highest urbanisation rates in the Pacific. With growth rates of 4.7 per cent, urban populations are doubling every 17 years.
- » Young people are increasingly disillusioned with barely functioning parliaments, corrupt land and resource sales and few if any employment prospects.
- » PNG is now better described as an autocracy verging on kleptocracy, while Fiji is a full-blown military dictatorship. The Solomon Islands and Vanuatu may be heading in this direction unless there are substantial reforms of political systems and other pressure release measures, including labour mobility.
- » Australia and its allies would do well to prioritise Melanesia, or risk being caught out as everyone was by the swift change that swept through the Arab world this year.

Discussion
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It is 1:00AM and Papua New Guinea's parliament house is under siege from special forces soldiers during the height of the Sandline crisis of 1997. The army has rebelled against the introduction of foreign mercenaries brought in by the government and demanded the resignation of the prime minister, Sir Julius Chan. Soldiers are rattling the gates, yelling through loudspeakers and threatening to come inside. MPs have huddled in their parliamentary chambers while police patrol the grounds outside. The situation is tense – PNG is on the brink. Sir Michael Somare, then an MP, withdraws to his own chambers wondering aloud to the only journalist inside parliament during the siege. 'This feels strange because it is the first time I have been a hostage' he says wearily, 'it is a sad day to see our democracy under attack like this'.

Sitting with Sir Michael the obvious question arose – is parliamentary democracy a suitable governing system for such a tribal country, and region? It seemed a poignant time to ask this fundamental question. Fiji coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka had famously said even before the Sandline crisis 'democracy is a foreign flower that has been planted in this region'.

'There's nothing wrong with democratic principles and they are not incompatible with Melanesian values', Sir Michael counters. 'The issue is that parliamentary democracy has to be adapted to the local situation. It's a bit like a brand new four wheel drive coming off the ship for sale here. The basic model is good, but if it is to work here in PNG then you need to change the tyres, boost the suspension and modify a few things. You can't expect one model is going to suit every condition, especially with the roads we have here'.

In the end, Sir Julius Chan resigned, the Sandline mercenaries were booted out and the situation was defused without serious bloodshed. This was testament to cool leadership on opposing sides, who pulled back from the brink to avoid a coup and perhaps the end of democracy. Will PNG be so lucky next time?

As the Middle East and North Africa continue on their chaotic spring of revolutionary change, observers are looking to see if this is likely to spill over into other areas of the world. Where authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Tunisia have fallen under popular pressure, in our part of the world the pressure is on parliamentary democracy itself.

It is now 14 years since Sandline, and Sir Michael presides over a barely functioning parliament. Despite great wealth from abundant resources, the quality of every level of government has declined, service delivery is negligible and the Grand Chief is himself under siege. He has prevented parliament from sitting to avoid votes of no-confidence, he unconstitutionally tried to reappoint the Governor General and is facing a leadership tribunal. This is not to single out Sir Michael, as PNG's situation is eerily similar throughout Melanesia. There is growing anger directed at politicians over the dysfunctionality of the present governing systems. It is well past time to acknowledge that parliamentary democracy, Westminster style, is failing the region. This is not to say people are losing faith in democracy itself, but there is growing disillusionment with current systems and the antics of political big men, who treat politics as a self-serving game. Unless there is urgent reform, a combination of demographics and new geo-politics could spell the end of democracy as we know it in the Pacific, beginning with Melanesia.

It has already begun in Fiji.

No confidence in the system

The Pacific is far from the angry casbahs of Egypt, but that is not to say there is nothing to be learnt in our region by the current upheavals of the Arab world. Already Fijian dissidents like Suliasi Daunitutu have planned action in Suva to 'piggy back on protests in the Middle East'. The Fijian regime, as the only recognised dictatorship in the region, is an obvious candidate for public dissent. But there are other political issues beneath the surface, throughout Melanesia relating to democracy and demographics, which are cause for concern.

Melanesia's political trend is the opposite to that of the Middle East. The island nations of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji have enjoyed 'relative' democracy for the most part of the 30-40 years since becoming independent, but are increasingly moving towards a more authoritarian, 'guided' democracy that is changing the political and security landscape. Equally disturbing, is that Australia and its Pacific allies do not seem to understand that parliamentary democracy is failing Melanesia in its current form and so they are rapidly losing influence. Just as America's support for Arab dictatorships is now unravelling, Australia, New Zealand and Europe's support for the status quo in Melanesia is quietly unravelling.

The chronic instability of parliaments in Melanesia, with regular votes of no-confidence, constantly undermines governments' ability to oversee the affairs of state and provide its citizens with service delivery. In his assessment of political fragmentation in Vanuatu, Michael Morgan¹ points to 'widespread disenchantment with the electoral system', concluding 'key local leaders have argued that democratic government is leading Melanesian people inexorably to calamity'. Some argue that 'too much democracy' in a tribal, developing region is part of the problem. The problem is getting worse. Every day, letters pages in national newspapers are filled with anger and frustration by citizens directed towards their elected leaders, decrying the lack of basic services, endless corruption and failure of leadership. Morgan further notes:

An enduring irony is that while public criticisms of the fragmented national parliament and the apparent inertia of governments are commonplace, voters have discarded the major parties in favour of locally credible independent candidates or members of smaller parties. And [this] motors political instability.

In PNG, the *Organic Law on Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates* sought to regulate party politics. It has not worked. The PNG government led by Somare and recent governments in the Solomon Islands have taken to closing parliament sessions – unconstitutionally - in a bid to prevent motions of no-confidence from being tabled. Vanuatu has weathered nearly a dozen votes of no confidence in the past few years. Vast amounts of time and money are wasted on supporting or toppling governing coalitions, with the net result that the populations of Melanesia are increasingly starting to feel that parliamentary democracy is a waste of time. Political leaders are seeking ways to consolidate power. This is a dangerous trend that Canberra, Wellington and Brussels seem oblivious to, as they continue to pour aid money into 'good governance' programmes that fail to address the underlying socio-political challenges.

1. *The Origins and Effects of Party Fragmentation in Vanuatu*, in Rich et al (2008), p.135

The trend is moving towards Frank's Fiji, not Julia's Australia

The continued bleating about the need for a 'return to democracy' in Fiji fails to grasp an important point: democracy never meaningfully existed in Fiji under its previous gerrymandered systems. Four coups in 20 years demonstrated that the system was broke and needed serious reform. Where was Britain and Australia to help Fiji move towards political reform and more equal representation? That is not to condone the military takeover, and there is good reason to be suspicious of the Commodore's intentions and his hijacking of the MSG is a case in point. He may be a dictator, but he is in the ironic position of claiming to have taken control to introduce a truly 'one man one vote' democratic system to replace the previous rigged system that supported an indigenous elite. It is his only card, but a strong one.

Many across the Pacific have long advocated a more constructive approach than the Australian led policy of isolating Fiji. The horse has already bolted, so better now to take Bainimarama at his word, to ensure that the promised 2014 elections are indeed free and fair and give him no chance to replace one gerrymandered system with another. It is encouraging that the recent meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum Ministerial Contact Group² was addressed by the Fiji foreign minister, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola. Ministers warmly welcomed Fiji's invitation for the group to visit Fiji in the near future as an important opportunity to meet stakeholders in order to appreciate the political, social and economic challenges currently facing the country³. Lets hope this invitation is not withdrawn, and that Canberra shifts to a more nuanced policy vis-à-vis engagement. Perhaps it is timely to think about appointing a special envoy and for officials to engage in dialogue with their counterparts in Suva. Time to think about meaningful assistance with the challenges and help Fiji move towards political reform and more equal representation. Time to realise others, who do not hold the same affinity for democracy, are filling the void.

The Australian policy on Fiji has continued to fail and risks contagion in other Pacific nations. Last year, Australia withdrew its army advisor to the Vanuatu Mobile Force (VMF) seemingly in the well-intentioned belief that it should be under police control. But the VMF will always consider itself a national army, and so now has agreed to training by Fiji's military and the PNG defence force instead. Meanwhile China and Indonesia both increase their defence assistance to the militaries and para militaries of Melanesia. Both are also pumping money into the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), which not only endorses Bainimarama's agenda, but has now given Indonesia 'observer status'. Australia, despite being an immediate neighbour, with key interests, has so far not applied for observer membership, a curious strategic oversight that highlights a wider malaise. So far the only new initiative of the Gillard government in Melanesia is to suggest using East Timor as a processing centre for asylum seekers and allowing the much touted seasonal labour programme to wither.

2. Chaired by the Hon. Meltek Sato Kilman Livtuvanu, prime minister of Vanuatu on 14 February 2011 in Port Vila, Vanuatu

3. See Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (2011).

Australia will have no presence at the 18th Melanesian Spearhead Group Leaders' Summit⁴ while the Melanesian countries will be there, with Indonesia and Timor Leste as observers, and Luxembourg as a special guest. China will be on the sidelines. Australia takes for granted that its near neighbours will remain happy with the status quo of failing parliamentary governments, its failure to embrace Melanesia and allow more open migration for its closest neighbours, by its domination of regional fora like the Pacific Islands Forum, its silence on West Papua and by its hard line on the Fiji situation. In the absence of a Melanesian lobby in the departments of defence and foreign affairs, Australia's regional foreign policy seems to be more influenced by the Indonesianists in Canberra, despite Indonesia now clearly undermining Australian influence among its Pacific neighbours by supporting the Fiji regime and MSG. Further, at a time when there is already a massive trade imbalance with the region, Australia continues to push its PACER Plus agenda, which many in the islands simply perceive as a barely disguised free trade deal that will be much more in Australia and, to a lesser extent, New Zealand's favour. In short, Australian policy in Melanesia is adrift as the region increasingly looks north to Asia – and its more autocratic forms of government.

Increasing pressures on democracy

Any democracy relies on the checks and balances inherent within the system, to stop it being abused by corrupt or megalomaniac leaders. But often it is these very checks and balances that are being used as an excuse to topple governments regularly. The problem is made more acute by the fact that other political safeguards – such as a robust Ombudsman – generally don't exist. Ideally, elected governments should be allowed to serve their full term with a strong Ombudsman and Leadership Tribunals to deal with abuse of power, but that does not happen. The same leaders get recycled over and over again.

Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare, now the 'elderly statesman' of Melanesia, supports the Fijian regime, Indonesian control over (Melanesian) West Papua and incrementally, his own nation. He has undermined the authority of the Ombudsman and Public Prosecutor, illegally tried to re-install the Governor General without parliamentary approval and has introduced bills to prevent landowners contesting large resource deals done by the state. His political role model is Malaysia's Mahathir Mohammed not Thomas Jefferson. Thus in the two biggest Pacific nations, PNG is now better described as an autocracy verging on kleptocracy with sharply deteriorating control over corruption over the last decade leaving PNG in the bottom 10 per cent of countries in the world⁵. Fiji is a full-blown military dictatorship. The Solomon Islands and Vanuatu may be heading in this direction unless there are substantial reforms of their political systems.

Vanuatu is an interesting case since it is the only republic in the region (with a president as head of state) but it has simultaneously used the Westminster parliamentary system since independence. It is arguably the most successful of the Melanesian nations, does not suffer the 'resource curse' and has earned its accolade as 'the happiest nation on earth'.

4. To be held on 31 March, 2001 at the Vale ni Bose Complex in Fiji.

5. See for example Morris (2010)

Yet its mixed parliamentary republic system is also failing the nation and its people, with the political environment spiralling back to the chronic instability that typified the late 1990s and early 2000s. The difference now is people seem to care more, because there is more at stake. Young people are getting angrier at the increasingly alienation of their birthright - their land. There are more and more young people, increasingly urbanised, many without *kastom*⁶ land to return to and few opportunities for formal employment. Higher costs of living, rising food prices and land being sold off to foreigners are all adding to the pressure. What happens when a couple of generations have no jobs and no land?

The demographic dilemma

One area where there is similarity between the Middle East and Melanesia is demographics. Both have large, youthful populations that are tired of the status quo and leaders who have failed to manage change, including generational change of political leadership. Much of Melanesian politics is still dominated by its independence leaders from 40 years ago, personified by Somare. Statistics⁷ give a window on the demographic challenge. More than half the population is under 24. Across the Pacific, Melanesia has the highest growth rates both in terms of population (average is 2.0 per cent) and urbanisation. The Solomon Islands, for instance, shows an urban growth rate of 4.7 per cent as opposed to the rural growth rate of 1.8 per cent. A population growth rate of 2 per cent or more means that these island nations are roughly doubling in size every 30 years, while their urban populations are doubling every 17 years.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute⁸ released a paper on the Solomon Islands recently suggesting Australia dramatically expand its south Pacific guest worker program if the Solomon Islands is to avoid another descent into instability and internal conflict. The Sydney Morning Herald's headline for the story puts it starkly: *Jobs may avert war*⁹.

One of the main issues in the region is that political parties do not really represent any substantial ideological positions, the way they have done so traditionally in the West. The Pacific is a region that never talks about 'left' or 'right', 'conservative' or 'progressive' or any of the other political language that is such a strong element of political discourse elsewhere. In some ways it is perhaps beneficial not to have Pacific politics trapped with such clumsy labels, but it also means that when viewing political parties in the run up to elections and beyond, it is hard to tell what any of them actually stand for. In an era when every party declares they want the usual mantras – 'sustainable development', 'improved health and education' and 'good governance' – but nothing ever happens in this direction – politics has become full of cheap slogans with no meaningful commitment to enact clear, distinct party policy. There are no discernable differences between political parties, making it hard for voters to exercise real choice, something that is also becoming evident in Western democracies too.

6. *Kastom* is a pijin word used to refer to traditional culture, including religion, economics, art and tradition in Melanesia.

7. Secretariat of the Pacific Community (2011) *Statistics for Development* - online at <http://www.spc.int/sdp/>

8. See Allen (2011)

9. Sydney Morning Herald (2011) *Jobs may avert war: report*, online at <http://www.smh.com.au/world/jobs-may-avert-war-report-20110316-1bxb2.html>

Reform or revolution?

We are still in the era of Big Man politics in Melanesia, where people generally vote according to tribal, chiefly and personal loyalties, not because of any policy platforms linked to political parties.

Roland Rich has summarised a core underlying issue:

As in Africa, the elites leading the independence movements reimagined their lands and islands in accordance with the maps drawn by their colonisers. The debate was not about the return to the pre-national existence of pre-colonialism, but rather the demand to take over the local institutions of colonial governance. The national revolution took place by way of this thought transfer. All at once, disparate peoples became ni-Vanuatu or Solomon Islanders or Papua New Guineans. The problem with this conceptual revolution is that it has been restricted to a small band of urban educated leaders. The majority of the people of these nations think of themselves primarily and perhaps at times exclusively in terms of their village, their island or their wantok. The nation suggested by map-makers remains a sparsely imagined construct. Little wonder that we do not see broadly based political parties emerging¹⁰.

Another factor is the absence of any substantial, educated middle class in Melanesia, which is generally made up of 'leaders' and 'grassroots' instead. In this respect, some observers suggest that the Pacific now is where the Middle East was 30 years ago. Until such time as we see a middle class evolve in Melanesia, the trend will likely continue towards the 'stability' of Big Man autocracy rather than vibrant democracy. The struggle between communal values and individual rights remains a deep faultline of modern politics in the region.

This month, 14 years after the Sandline crisis, former defence force commander Brigadier General (retired) Jerry Singirok wrote an opinion piece for the PNG Post Courier saying none of the lessons had been learnt and also warns of the demographic challenges ahead.

While Papua New Guinea continues to go down a path of self destruction based on omissions, self serving and false proclamation of the wealth creation for only a few, the reality is that the next generation of Papua New Guineans may turn out to be a generation of disgruntled, misfits, uneducated, city roamers who may see those in authority as tyrants, self serving and may decide to take up arms to engage in a prolonged armed resurrection against the Government, foreign investors and exploiters. In any case this security quagmire scenarios anticipated in the coming decade would be very difficult to deal with as lessons in the past have never been learnt.

In Vanuatu, a new political movement is emerging, led by former heads of state and proponents of a national presidential system – that aims for a directly elected president with four levels of leadership: President, Governor, District and Chiefly level according to one its leaders, Denny Arksai¹¹. The model appears to be closer to the American and French presidential systems than the British Westminster system. Of course there is no guarantee that a shift to a presidential system will bring better results or reduce corruption but clearly there is a desire to initiate reform, which is positive.

Putting ideas on the table and generating debate aimed at reform is important in order to define a political model that suits the local social, cultural and political context. At the same time, Australia and its allies would do well to prioritise Melanesia. Entering the debate on no-fly zones in Libya might be worthwhile, however entering the debate on the future of Melanesia is essential.

10. *Analysing and Categorising Political Parties In The Pacific Islands*, in Rich et al (2008), p.22.

11. Len Garae (2011) *Movement plans over 1,000 presidential committees*. Vanuatu Daily Post, 15 March 2011 - online at <http://www.dailypost.vu/content/movement-plans-over-1000-presidential-committees>

The Pacific Institute of Public Policy is an independent, not-for-profit and non-partisan think tank, and exists to stimulate and support informed policy debate affecting Pacific island countries.

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