



Foreign Actors, Geopolitics and Riots in the Pacific

Anouk Ride and Denghua Zhang

DOI: 10.25911/2974-SV10

13 February 2024

Incidents of collective violence that include targeted violence against migrants or outsiders are a growing concern in parts of the Pacific region. Urban riots targeting Asian businesses have occurred in three Pacific countries since 2006. The most recent example involved Port Moresby, Lae, Goroka and some other locations of Papua New Guinea (PNG) in January 2024.

Focusing on interactions between Chinese migrants and Pacific Islanders, this In Brief outlines how competition between these two groups, and geopolitical competition more broadly, can inflame domestic politics, unrest and insecurity in the Pacific. There are, of course, many factors contributing to or associated with particular riots, as shown in [recent analyses of PNG's riots](#). This paper outlines two examples of Pacific riots, each with its distinct characteristics and background, in order to highlight some key security considerations. The two cases presented are from Tonga and Solomon Islands.

Geopolitics and domestic politics

In recent years, the Pacific region has witnessed intensifying geostrategic competition between China and the United States along with its Western allies, including Australia, France and New Zealand. Individual island countries have taken different positions on this big power competition, affecting their domestic politics, particularly in places where leaders and popular views may not align. Competition also plays out regionally, with, for example, [PIF leaders calling on member countries to engage with China collectively](#).

A regional review of riots by one of the authors, identifying common grievances across the 14 independent Pacific Island countries over the past 15 years, found that perceptions of foreign interference and/or control was a theme in 69% of all Pacific riots (Ride 2022). Large city-wide riots during that period were most likely to happen at times of political transition, such as election and leadership changes or reforms to political systems (62% of all riots) (Ride 2022).

Tonga 2006

In November 2006, a riot took place, following months of protests by pro-democracy activists and resistance to change from supporters of Tonga's monarchy. Eight people died in fires lit by rioters and two-thirds of the central business district in the capital, Nukualofa, was burned down, [causing business losses of US\\$61.75 million](#).

While reasons for the riot were complex, including large youth populations and high unemployment (Ratuva 2018), how the riot unfolded, in particular who and where were targeted, was influenced by tensions between Tongans and Chinese migrants. There had been a sudden, large influx of Chinese migrants in the first two decades of the new millennium, most of them small business owners (Zhang 2022a:51). These economic migrants have opened stores across Tonga, including on Tongatapu, the largest and most populous island. While some Tongan actors benefit from and facilitate Chinese investment, many local Tongan business owners have become resentful, feeling they are losing out to these newcomers, while others see the foreign stores as a sign of their own growing exclusion from economic activities. As a result, the Asian, especially Chinese-owned retail, businesses were targeted in the riot.

The riot had a significant impact on Tonga–China relations. To rebuild Nukualofa's central business district, the Tongan government borrowed around US\$70 million in concessional loans from the China Export-Import Bank. Categorized as aid by China, these loans, accounting for about two-thirds of Tonga's total debt, will not be written off, although the period for repayment can be extended. Two five-year extensions of principal repayment of Chinese concessional loans have been approved by China, in 2013 and 2018 respectively. If no further grace is granted, Tonga will need to repay both the principal and interest of these loans, starting from 2024.

However, the riot appears not to have significantly impacted Chinese migration to Tonga. Many of the affected store owners who repatriated to China after the riot returned to Tonga to do business as usual when the situation stabilised. In a survey of both new and old Chinese business owners in Tonga, the vast majority (77–78%) think new Chinese migrants have less engagement with local communities, are mainly interested in making money and sometimes sell low-quality goods (Zhang 2022a:54). This indicates awareness of local grievances by the Chinese themselves. However, it does not appear to have affected their ways of doing business or their limited engagement with local communities; this may be also due to lack of strong leadership and coordination among Chinese business owners.

Solomon Islands 2021

Under Prime Minister Sogavare, Solomon Islands' relationship with China has flourished since the diplomatic switch from Taiwan in 2019. However, despite infrastructure developments and funding, the Sogavare government's embrace of China has not won the support of the opposition party or some local leaders, such as the former premier of Malaita Daniel Suidani and his provincial executive. Complaints, including lack of inclusion in decision-making, were expressed in petitions from civil society groups and the Malaita Provincial Government. Opposition was also voiced against closer ties with the Chinese Communist Party. These, in turn, were ignored by the prime minister's office. The November 2021 riot was the culmination of [a struggle against what was perceived by many Solomon Islanders as too much control by China](#), as well as too much control by the prime minister over the nine provinces. As in Tonga, men and youths (who experience high unemployment) comprised the bulk of rioting crowds in Honiara.

The violent and destructive targeting of Chinese businesses devastated many retail operators. However, there was some nuance in rioters' behaviour. For example, one complex in Chinatown, rented to a Taiwanese business owner and flying the Taiwanese flag, was left untouched. Other large Chinese businesses that avoided burning or looting included those that had longstanding relations with the local community or that employed security guards from particular ethnic groups to deter potential looters.

In the days after the riot, China made a request to send armed personnel to protect their assets, and a few months later Prime Minister Sogavare signed a security treaty with China. [Details from a leaked version of the secretive pact](#) appeared to open up the possibility for Solomon Islands to host Chinese police, armed police, military and the navy. The prime minister claimed the riot demonstrated that security could not be adequately provided through the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force and existing security arrangements, despite years of capacity building and other assistance provided under the Australian-funded Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Meanwhile, there was no political dialogue to address underlying grievances pertaining to the riots.

Looking forward

Looking into the future, further anti-Chinese riots are likely in Pacific countries where Asian businesses dominate certain economic sectors and where popular

grievances with governments remain unaddressed. There is a danger that [geopolitical competition becomes progressively entangled with domestic politics and popular discontent](#), leading to protests directed at vulnerable and highly visible Asian migrants, rather than at the political leaders responsible for addressing underlying grievances.

In a recent survey of 33 Pacific Island scholars, 58% thought there could be new anti-Chinese riots in their countries (Zhang 2022b:580). A survey of 99 Papua New Guinean university students found a higher proportion (84%) hold an affirmative answer to this question, while 86% said they dislike Chinese retailers in their neighbourhood (ibid.:583). In another survey of 93 Solomon Islands university students conducted by one of the authors in 2023, 76% of respondents believed there could be new anti-Chinese riots in their country in the future.

These new kinds of riots may arise from regional and local interactions between islanders and foreigners, while the occurrence of the riot itself also changes relations between these actors. Such interactions can lead to further insecurity, or conversely, and more hopefully, to new approaches to conflict resolution that bring together foreign, local and political actors to transform these conflict dynamics.

Author notes

Anouk Ride and Denghua Zhang are research fellows at ANU's Department of Pacific Affairs. Ride conducts cross-disciplinary research on peace and conflict and environmental issues in Solomon Islands and the Pacific Islands region. Zhang's research article '[China's Influence and Local Perceptions: The Case of Pacific Island Countries](#)' won the Boyer prize as the best article of *Australian Journal of International Affairs* for 2022.

References

- Ratuva, S. 2018. *Contested Terrain: Reconceptualising Security in the Pacific*. Canberra: ANU Press. doi.org/10.22459/CT.2019.
- Ride, A. 26/4/2019. Riots in the Solomon Islands: The Day After. *Australian Outlook*.
- Ride, A. 2022. [Riots in the Pacific: Control and Change](#). Australia Pacific Security College Discussion Paper. Canberra: ANU.
- Zhang, D. 2022a. China's Diplomacy and Diaspora Perceptions: Evidence from the Pacific Region. *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 10(1-3):46-62.
- Zhang, D. 2022b. China's Influence and Local Perceptions: The Case of Pacific Island Countries. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 76(5):575-95.



Pacific Research Program *An Initiative of the Australian Aid Program*



Australian
National
University

Department of
Pacific Affairs

Development
Policy Centre

**LOWY
INSTITUTE**

The **Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA)** is the leading international centre for applied multidisciplinary research and analysis concerning contemporary state, society and governance in the Pacific. DPA acknowledges the Australian Government's support for the production of the In Brief series. The views, findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Australian National University or the Australian Government. The Australian Government, as represented by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), does not guarantee, and accepts no legal liability whatsoever, arising from, or connected to, the accuracy, reliability, currency or completeness of any information herein. This publication, which may include the views or recommendations of third parties, has been created independently of DFAT and is not intended to be, nor should it be, viewed as reflecting the views of DFAT, or indicative of its commitment to a particular course or courses of action.

dpa@anu.edu.au

dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au

DepartmentofPacificAffairs

@anudpa

DepartmentofPacificAffairs

ISSN 2209-9557 (Print)

ISSN 2209-9549 (Online)