

ISLANDS OF NEGLECT

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Weak governance, widespread corruption, economic mismanagement, rising crime, and violent ethnic conflicts are undermining the stability of the island nations of the South Pacific. As some countries assume the status of Somalia-like 'failed states', the formerly benign South Pacific islands represent a growing threat to regional security.

This process has been hastened by the lack of attention to the region's problems by traditional powers like the United States, Australia and New Zealand. Now, rising Asian powers like China and Taiwan – which have important diplomatic, economic and strategic interests in the region – are moving to fill the vacuum created by the weakness of the region's states and their debilitating internal conflicts.

The facts of these internal conflicts are grim. Over the past year, there has been a coup in Fiji, followed two weeks later by the overthrow, at gunpoint, of the Solomon Islands government and a bloody civil war between rival ethnic militias. There has also been insubordination by the disciplined forces in Vanuatu, the assassination of a cabinet minister in Samoa, and growing criminal influence in 'microstates' like Nauru and Tuvalu. In March 2001 the region's largest country, Papua New Guinea, saw a short-lived uprising by elements of the Defence Force against their own government as part of a pay dispute.

The region is also mired in sub-standard economic performance. In fact, the South Pacific is on a par with sub-Saharan Africa in its per capita GDP, literacy and schooling rates, public health statistics and, ominously, in its lack of economic opportunity for young job seekers. What underlying forces are driving this 'Africanization' of the South Pacific region?

Civil-military relations

Growing tensions between civilian governments and their armies across the region – exemplified by last year's events in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, and the recent military insurrection in Papua New Guinea – is problem number one.

Most Pacific island countries do not have a standing army. But those that do are finding it increasingly difficult to keep military forces under civilian rule. In Fiji, for example, members of the armed forces actively conspired with criminal groups last year to overthrow the elected government they were duty-bound to protect.

Increasing military insubordination over pay claims and industrial matters is another problem. This first came to prominence in Vanuatu two years ago, when members of the country's Mobile Force abducted a cabinet minister over a pay dispute. In March, this practice spread to Papua New Guinea, where elements of the army rebelled over attempts to downsize the country's unwieldy and inefficient military.

In all cases, there are now clear questions as to the degree of civilian control over the military. In Africa, the worst abuses of civilian populations have been performed by their own armies. This grim scenario is becoming increasingly possible in the Pacific as well.

Small arms proliferation

Until recently, the South Pacific's geographic isolation helped protect it from the abundant supply of cheap light weapons that have fuelled African conflicts for decades. But there are other ways in which guns can be placed in the hands of rebel forces, as was shown by the Fiji coup in May last year. Utilizing arms stolen from military depots, coup-leader George Speight and his supporters – including members of the Fijian army's Special Forces Unit – amassed an extraordinary armory of firepower, taking the government hostage and crippling, perhaps permanently, Fiji's nascent democracy. Two weeks later, in the Solomon Islands, Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu was forced to resign at gunpoint after armed rebels from the Malaitan Eagle Force seized the capital. There, it was the police force (whose members are overwhelmingly Malaitan), that supplied the weapons.

In each case, the key has been access to weapons, mostly stolen from military or police armouries. Aggrieved groups have discovered the truth of Chairman Mao's adage that power grows out of the barrel of a gun. As a result, both Fiji and the Solomons today have governments installed by the bullet, not the ballot.

Group inequality and identity politics

A third element driving conflicts in the South Pacific is ethnic identities and inequalities, combined with the struggle for control of natural resources.

Tensions over land ownership are especially important. In some countries, hostilities between indigenous populations and perceived 'settler' groups – such as Indians in Fiji – are partly driven by deep-rooted concerns about land rights. But elsewhere, many conflicts are between rival tribes or clan groupings – as in the Solomon Islands, where movements of people from the island of Malaita to the main island of Guadalcanal is a root cause of the current civil war.

Perceptions of ethnic group inequality have also proved to be a potent mobilizing force. In the long-running Bougainville war, and again more recently in the Solomon Islands, ethnic tensions between different areas have been ruthlessly exploited by unscrupulous leaders. Many 'ethnic' conflicts are, in reality, power struggles over the control of resources and control of the state. But the ethno-linguistic fragmentation of the South Pacific makes identity issues a potent mobilizing force. It is these divisions – between language group, clan, and region – that are increasingly coming to the fore as sources of ethnic conflict.

Brittle governance

A fourth element in the Africanization of the region is the increasing weakness of basic institutions of representative government. As in Africa, the democratic institutions of most South Pacific states were transferred from colonial powers. Despite cases like Papua New Guinea, where a local body drew up the independence constitution, these institutions invariably drew on overseas experience rather than being designed for the newly-independent countries themselves. The Westminster parliamentary model is particularly prevalent, due to the high proportion of South Pacific states colonized by Britain. But in contrast to the Westminster ideal of a stable two-party system, most political parties in the South Pacific have proved to be weak, fragmented and incapable of generating stable government.

The region's largest and most important state, Papua New Guinea, has been plagued since independence by parliamentary votes of no confidence, with more changes of government on the floor of parliament than at elections. At the 1997 elections independent candidates, mostly representing local clan groups, won a majority of the total vote, although the average support level of elected candidates was just 19 per cent of the vote. The situation in the Solomon Islands is even more extreme.

The result is that elections are a contest to see whose extended family and clan groups can gain enough votes to get elected. Under the first-past-the-post systems used in the region, candidates do not need to gain widespread support, and elections are often won with remarkably low vote totals. As a result, most elected governments represent only a small fraction of their population.

China rising

A final – and most serious – aspect of the region's Africanization is the increasing weakness of the region's states, and their growing search for external support. Many Pacific states are turning to new benefactors and supporters, as traditional powers like Australia, New Zealand and the United States increasingly lose interest in the region and its problems. As a result, the South Pacific is undergoing a geopolitical shift away from the West and towards Asia.

Along with Japan, China and Taiwan have been particularly prominent in exploiting this shift. Both have offered financial support to island governments, building parliamentary complexes and government offices, in return for votes of support at the UN.

China has also forged new defence ties with Papua New Guinea and other governments, and in 1997 established a military satellite-tracking facility on the Micronesian island of Kiribati. Taiwan has also been an active player in the region, particularly in the Solomon Islands, which grants diplomatic recognition to Taiwan over China in return for large cash subsidies.

As the Africanization of the South Pacific continues, weak and unstable regional governments will increasingly seek this kind of external support. This will have long-term strategic consequences, not just for the island state themselves but for the entire Asia-Pacific region.

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