

# 12

## Fiji's evolving foreign policy and Pacific multilateral order: Pre- and post-election

Alex Stewart

### Introduction

This chapter explores the impact that Fiji's foreign policy since 2006 has had on multilateral relations in the Pacific Islands. While Fiji has launched policy initiatives on the wider global stage, their impact on the Pacific Islands has been indirect and harder to quantify. Therefore this chapter focuses on regionally based organisations, rather than on bodies with a wider global reach, such as the Commonwealth or the G77. In particular, it focuses on the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) and the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). These three organisations have formed the focus for the multilateral dimension of Fiji's foreign policy, either as organisations supported by Fiji or standing in opposition in the case of the PIF.

Given the small size of many Pacific Island states, both in terms of population and economy, multilateralism has long been considered an essential part of the region's framework. Small states have problems mustering the human resources, finances and expertise to deliver services and perform sovereign functions adequately when acting

alone. Multilateral regional cooperation is seen by most development partners as the key strategy in mitigating this issue by pooling the resources of several states. As such, the state of multilateral cooperation in the region is of crucial interest. Prior to 2006, multilateral action in the Pacific Islands flowed primarily through the PIF and its associated bodies, flanked by a relatively quiescent MSG focused mostly on developing trade within Melanesia.

In recent years, there have been challenges to that order, driven primarily but not exclusively by Fiji. Since the 2006 military takeover, the Fiji Government has launched a series of confident and often controversial foreign policy initiatives. It has repeatedly challenged the established status quo of regional relations, particularly since its suspension from the PIF in 2009. The unprecedented suspension of Fiji from the peak body of Pacific Island multilateral relations was a major turning point in the region. Rather than isolating Fiji and exerting pressure on the Bainimarama Government to step aside, it fuelled Fiji's efforts to create new avenues for its foreign policy and to sideline Australia, New Zealand and the PIF in the process.

As a key part of this new policy drive, the Fiji Government has placed a greater emphasis on its relations with the other Melanesian states and sought to bypass the central nexus of relations represented by the PIF. This new drive has been channelled through bilateral relations, but also through attempts to shift the equilibrium of multilateral organisations. The primary existing platform for this is the Melanesian Spearhead Group. Beyond this Melanesian initiative, Fiji also sought to engage with the broader region through a series of initiatives that culminated in the establishment of the PIDF. In explicitly challenging Australia and New Zealand, Fiji has set itself up as a champion of Pacific Island interests against domination by the two largest regional forces—Australia and New Zealand. According to Fiji, these two countries represent outside powers rather than being part of the Pacific Islands region (Dobell 2014), and have been interfering with the ability of the Pacific Island states to look for solutions to the region's problems in ways that are appropriate to the unique nature of the Pacific Islands (Bainimarama 2013). This has justified a push towards a new regional architecture that excludes Australia and New Zealand. This new architecture means that the PIF, as presently constituted, is incompatible with Fiji's vision of what Pacific Island multilateralism should look like. This has led the Bainimarama Government to

ignore the lifting of its suspension from the PIF, at least to date. Bainimarama's position is that Fiji will not rejoin until its own terms are met, including the reclassification of Australia and New Zealand as development partners rather than full members (Bolatiki 2014a).

This chapter assesses how successful Fiji has been in its aims. I argue that while Fiji has had some success at influencing multilateral relations, it has not occurred to the extent that was desired, nor has the intended outcome been achieved. More specifically, although Fiji's foreign policy since 2006 has caused a shift in the institutional landscape of Pacific Island foreign relations and altered the centrality of the PIF to regional cooperation, it has not succeeded in undermining the relevance and importance of the PIF as it is presently constituted. Rather, the organisation retains a vital and powerful role in the region. A shift in the balance of forces has not occurred in the form of a zero sum gain by new organisations at the cost of the PIF. Instead, Fiji's policy initiatives have seen a further diversification of multilateral structures in the Pacific Islands and an overall strengthening of the potential for multilateral cooperation in the region.

These initiatives have received a boost in strength by the Bainimarama Government's substantially increased legitimacy after its significant victory in the 2014 elections. Given that the undemocratic nature of the regime prior to the elections was the central focus of attacks by critics, and formed the justification for Fiji's suspension from the PIF, Fiji's position regionally has undoubtedly been strengthened by its return to democratic rule. Given the bullishness of the rhetoric used by the Bainimarama Government and its stated intent to make 'Fiji Great, the pre-eminent Pacific Island nation and one respected the world over' (Bainimarama, quoted in Morris 2014) it seems clear that Fiji will continue efforts to enhance its status and push its own agenda in the region.

## The Pacific Islands Forum

The PIF is both the oldest and the largest multilateral organisation in the Pacific Islands region. Its members include all independent Pacific Island states, as well as Australia and New Zealand. As all of the non-independent states of the region attend summits, at least as observers, the PIF is the only multilateral body in the region to unite all regional

states and bodies at the highest level. Together with the stable funding provided by the backing of Australia and New Zealand this means that the PIF is both well entrenched and well resourced for its operations in the region. Added to this is the fact that the PIF Secretariat (PIFS) coordinates the actions of the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP), which comprise the majority of the task-specific multilateral bodies in the region. Other organisations, such as the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), focus on specific technical and advisory functions, leaving the PIF to serve as the peak political decision-making body. These factors mean that prior to 2009 the PIF was the central hub of virtually all regional multilateral action.

Given the PIF's central role, control of the organisation grants a great deal of influence over the shape of multilateral relations in the region. The common consensus is that the primary influences on the PIF are Australia and New Zealand, thus creating a dominance in regional relations exceeding the soft power already exerted by the bilateral aid provided by these two states. Australia and New Zealand, however, are not the only non-Pacific Island powers exerting influence over the PIF. With large states such as France and the United States having observer status at the PIF, as well as major extra-regional bodies such as the Asia Development Bank, there is a significant top-heavy presence of other actors in the forum. Even if they are only formally observers, the delegations of larger powers at Forum summits can detract attention away from the issues on the agenda. As Maclellan (2012) points out, this can make it hard for the specific concerns of Pacific Island states to be heard, such as in the ongoing issue of West Papua (PACNEWS 2012).

This top-heavy presence and the distraction from Pacific Island issues that it causes is only one of several criticisms made of the PIF. Another important source of dissatisfaction is the fact that it only engages directly with the national governments of its member states. Private sector enterprises and civil society as a whole have inadequate access. This 'democracy deficit' (Pohnpei 2010) is particularly problematic given that many of the Pacific Island states have fairly weak formalised governance over their own territories (Bohane 2010), and rely heavily on civil society groups such as the churches for service delivery and social cohesion. Though these issues were acknowledged in the Pacific Plan reform agenda for the PIF (Huffer 2006), there has been little action on it to this point. A large part of this lack of action has been the accusation against both the PIF and its Pacific Plan

reforms that they are mired in too much bureaucracy to be efficient (Komai 2013). So far the reframing of the Pacific Plan as the Framework for Pacific Regionalism (PIFS 2014) has not brought about a significant change in this deficit. As such, there has been an acknowledged need for reform of the PIF, with some commentators speculating that without reform the Forum could find itself losing relevance (Bohane 2010).

Following Fiji's suspension in 2009, the Bainimarama regime fuelled these criticisms, attacking the PIF repeatedly. This has been flanked by attempts to create competition with other multilateral initiatives such as the PIDF, discussed below. These initiatives have been set up to compete with the PIF not only politically, but also physically through cases of overlapping summit dates (Hayward-Jones 2010). Through all of this, Fiji has pushed the notion that, due to its focus on Western over Pacific Island interests and approaches, the PIF has lost touch with its constituents. According to the Bainimarama Government, Australia's and New Zealand's roles as both members and major donors means that the PIF is too unequal to be functional (Bolatiki 2013). As it stands, it is also irrelevant (Pratibha 2013). These criticisms are not undisputed, but have gained enough momentum that even supporters of the PIF have stated the need for the Forum to 'reaffirm' its relevance (O'Keefe 2012). This is particularly important given the Bainimarama Government's refusal to rejoin the organisation even after the lifting of its suspension (Bolatiki 2014a).

Rhetoric aside, the question that must be addressed is: Has the PIF become as irrelevant as the Bainimarama Government suggests? I argue that this is not the case. While the PIF has lost some of its influence, it is still the peak body of Pacific Island regionalism. It is the best resourced organisation of the regional multilateral bodies. What is more, having Australia and New Zealand as members provides it with substantial security that this will continue to be the case in the future. Apart from Fiji, it remains the only one of the generalist multilateral bodies in the Pacific Islands that unites all of the region's states. Currently, the PIF lacks the legitimacy provided by having all Pacific Island states as members. But unlike the MSG, whose membership is restricted by design, and the PIDF, which several states chose not to join despite receiving invitations, Fiji's absence from the PIF was at least initially not by choice. And despite the anti-PIF rhetoric, the Bainimarama Government nominated Kaliopate Tavola for the 2014 election of a new PIF Secretary-General (Newton-Cain 2014), which does indicate

a desire for participation on Fiji's part. While other fora are often attended by lower-ranking government representatives, all PIF leaders' summits achieve full attendance by the heads of the Pacific Island governments. Ironically, this is helped by the strong attendance of extra regional observers, despite the fact that this can distract from Pacific issues. Even if they are a distraction from Pacific Island issues, outside observers such as the United States and China represent crucial development partners for the region, and Pacific Island governments have good reason to be eager for close ties. As such, it is difficult to endorse claims of PIF irrelevance. The Forum's credibility has been damaged by its own need for reform and the exclusion of Fiji, but it is far from removed.

## The Pacific Islands Development Forum

The PIDF is the end result of the Engaging with the Pacific Leaders (EWTP) summits, a series of conferences held by the Fijian Government since 2010. These summits emerged in response to the suspension of Fiji from the PIF, as well as the cancellation of the 2010 MSG summit (Tarte 2013). The series of EWTP summits led to the formation of the PIDF as a permanent international body with meetings in 2013 and 2014 and plans for future annual summits. The initial PIDF summit drew significant attention from both regional states as well as extra regional players such as Timor Leste and the UAE (Bolatiki 2014c). Despite inviting many extra-regional observers, Bainimarama nonetheless sees the PIDF as a forum for Pacific Islanders based on Pacific Islander values (briefing to USP staffers cited in Tarte 2013).

The stated purposes of the PIDF are to serve as a platform for Pacific Island action on sustainable development and to aggregate the actions of Pacific Island states in the UN Asia-Pacific group (Tarte 2013). However, most scholarly and journalistic commentary on the PIDF has focused on the challenge it potentially poses to the PIF. Although the Fijian Government has denied that the PIDF is intended to compete with the PIF (Kubuabola 2013), this is at odds with Fiji's criticisms of the latter organisation and Bainimarama's thinly veiled barbs aimed at the PIF during the PIDF summits. Fiji's pattern of seeking new

partners and new avenues for international cooperation has been too systematic for it to be otherwise, and the PIDF is very clearly designed to be a vehicle for this policy.

The membership provisions for Pacific Island states means that neither Australia nor New Zealand are eligible for membership, though representatives of embassies in Fiji attended as observers (Kubuabola 2013). Thus Fiji's two largest critics and the dominant powers of the PIF were excluded from being able to significantly influence the new forum. While numerous regional multilateral organisations sent observers to the inaugural PIDF meeting, the PIF was notably absent. Significantly, the summit was scheduled to coincide with key meetings of officials at the PIF. As such there has been little doubt that the PIDF was intended by the Fijian Government as at the very least a symbol of protest against the PIF.

The PIDF is the most readily dismissed of Fiji's multilateral initiatives. Even before the launch of the PIDF, experts were voicing scepticism (Pacific Beat 2013). In interviews, experts willing to credit the impact of Fiji's foreign policy on the regional order of the Pacific Islands have been inclined to take a wait and see approach to this particular initiative. There is some evidence to back this position. So far there have been no major substantive outcomes from the new forum beyond statements of general intent and outcome documents released with a delay after the summits. A secretariat has been established in Suva, but beyond this the PIDF has been thin on the ground with results. Recently, the PIDF has been invited to participate in regional fora such as the SPC summit (*Islands Business* 2014), but again this has yet to produce tangible results.

Beyond the lack of substantive results, the funding needed for the ongoing operation of the PIDF is uncertain. To this point, the funding of the PIDF has relied on the Fijian Government, supplemented by one-off donations from development partners such as China (Tarte 2013). The Fijian Government has provided a secretariat and the ongoing funding for the operations of the PIDF in 2014, but its future beyond that point is uncertain. Unlike the PIF, the PIDF does not have fully committed developed states to rely on for funding, nor does it have the trade outcomes and established clout of the MSG to give its members a vested interest in supporting its continued existence. Given the tight budgetary constraints of even a relatively large Pacific

Island state such as Fiji and the shifting priorities of donor states, it is entirely possible that the PIDF may be financially unsustainable. The PIDF may therefore turn out to be a temporary protest action against Fiji's suspension from the PIF. Several prominent regional experts interviewed on the matter expressed the expectation that the PIDF will not be a lasting phenomenon and would be abandoned as soon as Fiji's PIF suspension was revoked. So far, this has not occurred despite the lifting of the suspension.

I suggest this view is overly pessimistic. Apart from the fact that the revocation of Fiji's suspension has not led to the end of the PIDF, the organisation has some strengths. The PIDF is the initiative of a small developing country, and yet managed to garner the attention of not only regional but also extra regional states. Fiji succeeded in launching the PIDF not only with minimal financial support from larger states, but did so despite active attempts by Australia and New Zealand to isolate the Bainimarama regime on the international stage. As such, the PIDF must be viewed as a genuine Pacific Island movement. Though several Polynesian states such as Samoa boycotted the inaugural session (Pacific Beat 2013), there has been an ongoing commitment by key states. And in this context the invitation to participate in other organisations, such as an invitation to join the SPC, should be viewed as a further sign of support.

While the lack of results to date is indeed an issue, it misses part of the point of the PIDF. Pacific Island culture puts great emphasis on inclusiveness and dialogue as methods of decision-making and conflict resolution. In that respect, holding a well-attended conference can be seen as a milestone in and of itself. During the 2013 PIDF summit, the rhetoric of a significant number of the speakers was focused on finding alternative, Pacific Island solutions to the issues facing the region (Tarte 2014). This inclusiveness and the focus on regional culture on the part of the PIDF is particularly important in the context of the Pacific Plan/Framework for Pacific Regionalism critique of the PIF. If the major weakness of the PIF is its lack of inclusiveness of civil society and Western domination, then the potential impact of the PIDF as an alternative platform for discussion should not be undervalued. Jenny Hayward-Jones (2013) of the Lowy Institute has suggested that one possible future for the PIDF could be as an ancillary discussion group to the PIF, or even as a reform template for the PIF. Part of her expectation for negotiations surrounding Fiji's return to the PIF

hinges on ensuring that the approach taken by the PIDF is preserved. I suggest that although the PIDF will remain a wholly independent platform, and that its existence will not be part of the negotiations for the conditions under which Fiji would agree to return to the PIF, the notion that the PIDF can complement the PIF is entirely plausible.

It is important, however, not to overstate the PIDF's success. Despite the attention it has garnered, and the rhetoric surrounding its essential mission, it has so far failed in its underlying political goal of undermining the PIF. Attendance at PIF summits has not decreased since the inception of the PIDF, whether from regional states or outside observer bodies. The PIDF was also marred by the absence of some of the Pacific Island states, with Samoa's absence being particularly significant, tied as it was to explicit criticisms of the Bainimarama regime. The PIDF therefore cannot claim the same level of legitimacy in terms of representing Pacific Island states as the PIF. Together with the greater financial stability of the PIF, that has persisted even despite recent Australian aid cuts, this makes it unlikely that the PIDF will detract from, let alone replace, its more established counterpart in the foreseeable future. As noted above, all interview respondents were confident of the long-term survival of the PIF while acknowledging the need for reform. I therefore suggest that although the PIDF will make a lasting and worthwhile contribution to Pacific Island regionalism, it will be as a separate and hopefully complementary platform of cooperation rather than as a challenger to the PIF.

## The Melanesian Spearhead Group

The MSG differs from the other two organisations discussed in this chapter in that it does not aim to be a platform for the entire Pacific Islands. However, much like the PIF and PIDF, it provides a broad spectrum political platform rather than an organisation dedicated to a specific topic area such as the CROP organisations that specialise on particular policy areas. As the Melanesian states make up the majority of the region's population and economic power, the influence of the MSG cannot be underestimated. I suggest that the creation of other subregional organisations such as the Polynesian Leaders Group (PLG) (Tavita 2011) are a direct response to the success the Melanesian states

have had in creating a common bloc through the MSG. What is more, the strength of this bloc has arguably been increased due to the greater energy and emphasis placed on it by Fiji's foreign policy since 2006.

The Melanesian states have been Fiji's strongest supporters since the takeover in 2006. Not only have MSG states largely refrained from criticising Fiji, there has also been a backlash from prominent Melanesian political figures such as former Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare against criticisms from other Pacific Island states (ABC 2009). Even beyond that, MSG states have supported virtually every initiative of the Fijian government, including sending high-level representatives up to and including heads of government to events such as the PIDF summits (Manning 2010). Some commentators suggest that the MSG has presented a common front, one that has 'mobilised around Fiji' (Walsh 2010).

This view, however, is not uncontested and there have been questions raised about the cohesiveness of the MSG and the question of how deep MSG support for the post-2006 shift in Fijian policy really runs. Critics of the Bainimarama regime questioned whether or not the support of the MSG was more than simply political rhetoric for appearance sake (Lal 2012). Following this line of reasoning, the lack of criticism of the 2006 coup and the subsequent abrogation of the Fijian Constitution may be attributed more to diplomatic inhibitions against open criticism of fellow Melanesians. The main argument in this context is the cancellation of the 2010 MSG summit in Fiji by then chair Vanuatu, which was scheduled to hand over the chair of the MSG to Fiji at that summit. Prime Minister Natapei of Vanuatu cancelled the meeting, citing concerns about the suitability of Fiji as an undemocratic state to chair the MSG. Given the general hesitancy of Pacific Island states towards open public displays of conflict, this certainly represented a major breach of the norms of regional politics among Pacific Island states.

More generally, critics of the MSG have questioned how cohesive and effective the MSG is as a multilateral body. There have been other signs that the MSG does not present an entirely unified front. Most recently, the relationship of the MSG has been strained by the question of admitting West Papuan independence movements as members in a similar fashion to the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS, or Kanak and Socialist National Liberation

Front) of New Caledonia. Vanuatu's support for independence for Melanesians under Indonesian rule has clashed with Fiji and Papua New Guinea's desire for closer relations with Indonesia (Australia Network News 2014). Currently, Indonesia has observer status at the MSG while the liberation movements for West Papua have so far been unable to achieve any sort of recognised status. The cohesiveness of the MSG could also be strained by tensions between its two largest member states, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Issues such as PNG's Manus Island refugee deal with Australia and the Bainimarama Government's refusal to accept PNG High Commissioner Eafeare as the dean of Suva's diplomatic corps caused diplomatic tensions in late 2013. These tensions prompted observers to suggest that there was a real possibility that Melanesia might be facing a fight for leadership between Fiji and PNG (Hayward-Jones 2013).

While there are certainly differences of opinion and goals among Melanesian states, the MSG is a more cohesive body than its critics give it credit for. Though there are some dissenting opinions (Hayward-Jones 2010), the cancellation of the 2010 MSG summit by Vanuatu has been widely regarded in Fiji as due to outside interference on the part of Australia and New Zealand (Kubuabola 2013). Though there is no direct evidence to support the claim, it is consistent with Australia and New Zealand's policy of isolating Fiji. Regardless of the reason for the cancellation, it is notable that the rift between the MSG members was repaired quickly, and apparently to Fiji's satisfaction. In December of the same year, a reconciliation ceremony was held by Sato Kilman, Edward Natapei's successor as Prime Minister of Vanuatu, at a special meeting of the MSG (Tarte 2011). Given that the next MSG summit was held in Suva (Melanesian Spearhead Group 2011), Vanuatu's boycott is best viewed as a momentary ripple, rather than signalling deeper disunity. Similarly, while there have certainly been tensions between Fiji and PNG that point to the two states having agendas that are not completely aligned, the O'Neill government has strongly denied that these are signs of a deeper rift between the two states. It would appear that the relationship between Fiji and its Melanesian neighbours is a robust one that can withstand a certain level of tension without affecting the overall closeness of ties or willingness of the MSG member states to cooperate. Despite the occasional ripple, the MSG is an important avenue of support for the Bainimarama Government's challenge to the previous regional status quo.

The question though is how far that sympathy goes. It is important to note that the suspension of Fiji from the PIF was unanimous. Thus the Melanesian states obviously agreed to it at the time, although they may have had some private misgivings. While the apparent consensus on Fiji's suspension stands at odds with subsequent MSG support for Fiji, the fact remains notable. While the other MSG members have always pushed for Fiji's suspension from the PIF to be lifted, this has always been with the caveat that Fiji returns to democratic rule. This proviso was only removed in the build-up to the 2014 elections, when most observers started to consider Fiji's return to at least nominal civilian rule inevitable (Dorney 2013). Also, Melanesian leaders have not stopped attending PIF summits, nor withdrawn support for PIF initiatives. It appears, then, that the growing strength of the MSG and its support for Fijian initiatives does not necessarily signal lack of support for the PIF.

## The way forward: The post-2014 elections

Fiji's foreign policy since 2006 has evinced a confident search for new allies in an attempt to reduce the importance of its relationship with Australia. While the Bainimarama regime's ambitions have not been fully realised, his government's strategies have nevertheless yielded some results. Ironically, despite the fact that the core dynamic of Fiji's policy has been to try to circumvent and marginalise the central body of regional multilateralism, there has been no fragmentation or weakening of the region's existing multilateral architecture. The new channels Fiji has opened up, however, are viable avenues for further cooperation both within the Pacific Islands community and beyond. However, the other states of the region have not adopted these new pathways sufficiently for them to replace the PIF as the main nexus of the region's multilateral architecture.

Given that Fiji is one of the larger and more developed Pacific Island states, it should perhaps come as no great surprise that Fiji has had a significant impact on the region. It is located centrally in the region, and controls a significant amount of the infrastructure that is key to the functioning of its neighbours. From the perspective of a developed nation, Fiji's capacities may seem very limited. But relative to the other states of the region, with the exception of PNG, Fiji is not only large,

but also much more sophisticated. Ironically, though Fiji has always held a leadership role in the region, the fact that organisations such as the PIF have been headquartered in Fiji has helped further nurture the growth of a political class with the education and drive to step beyond the national level and onto the international stage.

The main issue for the immediate future of multilateral cooperation in the Pacific Islands is the relationship between Fiji and the PIF. Fiji's suspension highlighted problems surrounding certain elements of PIF practice. Fiji's suspension also undermined the legitimacy of the PIF's status as representing all Pacific Island states as well as standing at odds with the consensus-based 'Pacific Way' (Dobell 2008). The tension caused by this contradiction was exacerbated by the Bainimarama Government's attacks on the Forum over the next several years (Williams 2013). Originally, the suspension was intended and expected to put the government of Fiji under pressure to hold elections sooner rather than later (TVNZ 2009). But this was to prove ineffective and the Bainimarama regime did not become more conciliatory towards its critics. On the contrary, it appeared to gain a certain amount of kudos as a plucky underdog resisting international pressures (Fraenkel 2013). Full reconciliation now appears to be less simple than Australia would have hoped. As Fraenkel (2013) rightly points out, successfully resisting external pressure has brought political benefits to Fiji. Given Bainimarama's rhetoric as a champion of smaller states against metropolitan influences, restoring relations is more than just a matter of 'just kissing cheeks and pretending that nothing ever happened' (Lieutenant-Colonel Sitiveni Qiliho, quoted in Bolatiki 2014a). Accordingly, the Fijian Government has spurned 'olive branches' that amounted to less than full restoration of relations, such as allowing Fiji to participate in the PACER Plus negotiation at lower levels of engagement (MacLellan 2012, p. 364). It was not until Australia and New Zealand unilaterally moved to lift sanctions that Fijian rhetoric against them began to ease. Yet even with bilateral relations between Fiji and the two metropolitan states nominally restored to normal, Fiji is still proceeding at its own pace and on its own terms on issues such as defence cooperation (Bolatiki 2014a).

Rather than making Fiji seem belligerent or uncooperative, the Bainimarama Government has succeeded in continuing to raise questions about the PIF. While this has not been entirely successful, as discussed above, Fiji is not alone in asking difficult questions.

This is shown by the fact that PACER Plus negotiations were moved to a new secretariat, independent of the PIF. Rather than isolating Fiji, the suspension handed down from the PIF has dented the Forum's credibility. This successful, hard-line approach by Fiji strengthens its position as it negotiates its readmission to the Forum leaders meeting. Given Fiji's rhetoric, there is some doubt as to what Fiji will require to agree to attend the Forum again (Pratibha 2013).

Despite Bainimarama's caginess about rejoining the Forum, it is a goal the PIF should pursue. Even leaving aside the potential for there to be a future impact on the credibility of the PIF if Fiji continues to attack its credibility, Fiji has too important a role to play for the region to be excluded from the PIF. The goal of the Forum is regional coordination, an aim that would be severely hampered by the absence of one of the region's most developed states. Add to that the geographical fact that the Forum's secretariat is located in Suva, and there is a significant incentive for the Forum to bring Fiji back to the table. Credibility and logistics are two of the biggest strengths of the PIF, and both selling points are enhanced by cooperation with Fiji.

There is also a strong incentive for the Bainimarama Government to resume its membership of the PIF. Fiji's standoffishness towards the PIF misses certain realities of the Fijian situation. Even as a relatively developed Pacific Island state, Fiji is still a developing country dependent on significant amounts of foreign aid. Furthermore, as a state spread across a large number of islands, Fiji must cope with at least some of the service delivery issues that other Pacific Island states face. The need for cooperation on as wide a basis as possible is still very much in Fiji's interests, as the energetic pursuit of multilateral initiatives demonstrates. Beyond that, Fiji also has an interest in closer ties to development partners, many of whom pay a great deal of attention to the meetings and actions of the PIF. This means that Fiji has much to gain by renewing participation in the PIF. Given the attempt to have a Fijian Secretary-General elected, it is hard to believe that this is a state of affairs that Fiji will wish to sustain much longer. Despite the rhetoric of the Bainimarama Government, the Fijian government will have to face up to the continued significance of the PIF and that attempts to sideline the Forum are going to be unsuccessful. As Brij Lal has pointed out, culturally, geographically and financially, Fiji has more to gain from its traditional allies and development partners than from entirely new affiliations (Lal 2012).

According to Lal, Fiji's return to the PIF is inevitable, not only from the perspective of the Forum, but also on Fiji's part. The analysis put forward in this chapter supports this viewpoint.

The central question facing the PIF is under what conditions will Fiji agree to resume attendance? Bainimarama's demand that Australia and New Zealand cannot be both donors and members will not be met. Not only would the loss of the financial stability Australia and New Zealand provide be disastrous for the PIF, it would also be difficult politically. As much as Australia and New Zealand are more developed and Westernised than the smaller member states, they are still part of the region. New Zealand in particular has a strong claim to being an Islander state through its Maori heritage. If the PIF wants to serve as a platform for all of the Pacific Islands then Australia and New Zealand have a role to play as members. This is not to say that there is no room for a solution. The call for more voice for the nonmetropolitan members has been a strong one, and Bainimarama is in a position to further invigorate that part of the reform agenda for the PIF. Australia and New Zealand should not be excluded, but a shift in the institutional balance of the PIF for the other states is both possible and necessary to strengthen the Forum. In the Pacific Way tradition of compromise and negotiation, I predict an equitable solution in the mid-term, one that will result in a PIF further strengthened by reform.

What this settlement is not likely to involve is an end to the PIDF or a lesser interest in the MSG. Jenny Hayward-Jones's idea of the PIDF becoming a supplementary body of the PIF is an interesting one, but on balance it seems unlikely. Fiji and the other Melanesian states have benefited from establishing alternatives to the PIF. The Bainimarama Government's intention to sideline the PIF may not have succeeded, but there is still sufficient groundwork laid for these organisations to contribute productively to regional cooperation. Moreover, both organisations are sufficiently different from the PIF to have the potential to be complementary rather than conflicting elements of Pacific Island regionalism. The MSG is a specifically subregional grouping and is therefore able to operate in a more focused manner and with fewer stakeholders. However, it lacks the scope to make truly regional decisions. The inclusion of civil society by the PIDF gives it the ability to be more inclusive and find solutions to development issues beyond top-down government policy. On the other hand, including non-governmental bodies means that it is unsuitable for the formation

of treaties or other actions that require sovereign power to take their full effect. These differences mean that the MSG and PIDF will operate more effectively as facets of a diversified regional architecture rather than as competitors to an organisation whose role they are unsuited to fully assume.

This more diversified regional architecture is the logical progression once a settlement is reached and Fiji re-engages with the PIF. There is still a potential for duplication of effort, but if both organisations play to their strengths then this will leave Pacific Island regionalism on a stronger footing than it was before 2006. Though the Bainimarama Government did not manage to undercut the PIF, its multilateral policies since 2006 should still be viewed as a success. If the hurdle of re-engagement can be taken properly then it will leave the regional architecture of the Pacific Islands on a stronger footing than it was in 2006.

## References

- ABC 2009, 'Melanesian's criticise Samoan PM's comments on Fiji', Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Canberra.
- Australia Network News 2014, 'Vanuatu defends boycott of Melanesian Spearhead Group delegation to Indonesia's Papua Province', [Online]. Viewed 10 April 2014 at [www.abc.net.au/news/2014-01-16/Vanuatu-defends-boycott-of-Melanesian-Spearhead-Group-delegation-to-Indonesia's-Papua-Province](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-01-16/Vanuatu-defends-boycott-of-Melanesian-Spearhead-Group-delegation-to-Indonesia's-Papua-Province).
- Bainimarama, V 2013, Address at the inaugural Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) Meeting—PM Bainimarama, [Online]. Viewed 14 April 2014 at [www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Center/Speeches/ADDRESS-AT-THE-INAUGURAL-PACIFIC-ISLANDS-DEVELOPME.aspx](http://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Center/Speeches/ADDRESS-AT-THE-INAUGURAL-PACIFIC-ISLANDS-DEVELOPME.aspx).
- Bohane, B 2010, 'Islands dreaming: A fresh look at Pacific Regionalism', *Pacific Institute for Public Policy Discussion Papers*, vol. 15, pp. 1–4.
- Bolatiki, M 2013, 'Fiji again stresses PIF call over Australia, NZ', *Fiji Sun*, 15 September.

- Bolatiki, M 2014a, 'Fiji PM sets conditions for return to Pacific islands Forum', *Fiji Sun*, 25 October.
- Bolatiki, M 2014b, 'Fiji, Australia in defence talks', [Online]. Viewed 8 January 2015 at [fijisun.com.fj/2014/12/09/fiji-australia-in-defence-talks/](http://fijisun.com.fj/2014/12/09/fiji-australia-in-defence-talks/).
- Bolatiki, M 2014c, 'PACIFIC AFFAIRS – High level Middle East delegate for PIDF meet'. *Fiji Sun*, 3 June.
- Dobell, G 2008, 'The Pacific Way wanes', *The Interpreter*, 26 August.
- Dobell, G 2014, 'Status quo Australia versus revisionist Fiji', *ASPI Strategist*, 25 February.
- Dorney, S 2013, 'Pacific Island leaders welcome the release of Fiji's new constitution', [Online]. Viewed 10 April 2014 at [www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radio/program/pacific-beat/pacific-island-leaders-welcome-the-release-of-fijis-new-constitution/1186459](http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/radio/program/pacific-beat/pacific-island-leaders-welcome-the-release-of-fijis-new-constitution/1186459).
- Fiji Sun* 2010, 'MSG leaders will sort out rift: Haomae', *Fiji Sun*, 15 July.
- Fraenkel, J 2013, 'How to respond to the impasse in Fiji?', [Online]. Viewed 17 April 2014 at [devpolicy.org/how-to-respond-to-the-impasse-in-fiji-20130815/](http://devpolicy.org/how-to-respond-to-the-impasse-in-fiji-20130815/).
- Hayward-Jones, J 2010, 'Undermining the Pacific Islands Forum', [Online]. Viewed 22 November 2014 at [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2010/07/30/Undermining-the-Pacific-Islands-Forum.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2010/07/30/Undermining-the-Pacific-Islands-Forum.aspx).
- Hayward-Jones, J 2013, Personal interview, [Interview] (10 March 2013).
- Huffer, E 2006, 'Regionalism and cultural identity: Putting the Pacific back into the plan', in *Globalisation and governance in the Pacific Islands*, ANU E Press, Canberra, pp. 43–55.
- Islands Business* 2014, 'PIDF invited to key regional meetings', *Islands Business*, 4 November.
- Komai, M 2013, 'Pacific Plan to become a regional framework on regional integration', *Islands Business*, 2 September.
- Kubuabola, I 2013, 'Fiji says Forum a success despite anti-Fiji campaigning', [Interview] (6 August 2013).

- Lal, B 2012, Personal interview, [Interview] (13 December 2012).
- Maclellan, N 2012, 'The region in review, issues and events 2011', *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 359–74.
- Manning, S 2010, 'Fiji moves to embrace a new Pacific brotherhood leaving Australia and New Zealand estranged', *Pacific Scoop*, 23 July.
- Melanesian Spearhead Group 2011, '18th Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Leaders' Summit Communique', Melanesian Spearhead Group, Suva.
- Morris, R 2014, 'Bainimarama claims victory', *Republika Magazine*, 14 September.
- Newton-Cain, T 2014, 'PIF: New Secretary-General will have a full agenda', [Online]. Viewed 22 November 2014 at [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/06/20/Changing-of-the-Guard-New-Secretary-General-to-be-appointed-by-the-Pacific-Islands-Forum-Secretariat.aspx?COLLCC=114165702&](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/06/20/Changing-of-the-Guard-New-Secretary-General-to-be-appointed-by-the-Pacific-Islands-Forum-Secretariat.aspx?COLLCC=114165702&).
- O'Keefe, M 2012, 'Pacific Islands Forum needs to reaffirm its relevance', *The Australian*, 27 August.
- Pacific Beat 2013, 'PIDF will never replace Forum: Tuilaepa Sailele', [Online]. Viewed 18 January 2015 at [www.abc.net.au/news/2013-08-06/pidf-will-never-replace-forum-tuilaepa-sailele/4869092](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-08-06/pidf-will-never-replace-forum-tuilaepa-sailele/4869092).
- PACNEWS 2012, "'Don't ignore West Papua" appeal from human rights advocate', [Online]. Viewed 20 January 2015 at [pacific.scoop.co.nz/2012/08/dont-ignore-west-papua-appeal-from-human-rights-advocate/](http://pacific.scoop.co.nz/2012/08/dont-ignore-west-papua-appeal-from-human-rights-advocate/).
- PIFS 2014, *The framework for Pacific regionalism*, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Suva.
- Pohnpei, P 2010, 'Discussion paper questions relevance of Pacific Islands Forum', [Online]. Viewed 13 April 2014 at [www.fsmpio.fm/RELEASES/2010/october/10\\_41\\_10.html](http://www.fsmpio.fm/RELEASES/2010/october/10_41_10.html).
- Pratibha, J 2013, 'Who needs Commonwealth, Pacific Islands Forum?', *Fiji Sun*, 20 November.

- Qiolevu, J 2013, Research interview, [Interview] (28 July 2013).
- Tarte, S 2011, 'Fiji's search for new friends', *East Asia Forum*, 13 January.
- Tarte, S 2014, 'A new regional Pacific voice? An observer's on the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) inaugural summit, Denarau, Fiji Aug 5–7 2013', *Pacific Islands Brief*, vol. 4, pp. 1–6.
- Tavita, TT 2011, "'Historical" Polynesian Leaders Group launched', [Online]. Viewed 15 April 2014 at [www.savalinews.com/2011/11/21/%E2%80%98historical%E2%80%99-polynesian-group-launched/](http://www.savalinews.com/2011/11/21/%E2%80%98historical%E2%80%99-polynesian-group-launched/).
- TVNZ 2009, 'Deadline looms for Fiji's Pacific suspension', [Online]. Viewed 12 April 2014 at [tvnz.co.nz/world-news/deadline-looms-fijis-pacific-suspension-2692046](http://tvnz.co.nz/world-news/deadline-looms-fijis-pacific-suspension-2692046).
- Walsh, C 2010, 'Melanesian Spearhead Group Plus ... minus, divided and multiplied', *Pacific Scoop*, 22 June.
- Williams, M 2013, 'PM Bainimarama takes swipe at Pacific Islands Forum', [Online]. Viewed 15 April 2014 at [fijione.tv/prime-minister-expresses-his-gratitude-to-spc/](http://fijione.tv/prime-minister-expresses-his-gratitude-to-spc/).

This text is taken from *The People Have Spoken: The 2014 Elections in Fiji*, edited by Steven Ratuva and Stephanie Lawson, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.