

Political Reviews

The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 2016

NIC MACLELLAN

Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 2016

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Debates over climate action, West Papua, fisheries, and trade continued as a feature of regional affairs in 2016, often dividing Pacific governments and their international partners. The election of Donald Trump as US president in November set the stage for these divisions to continue, given Trump's statements during the election campaign on climate change and America's new directions in foreign policy.

Other global events during the year—including the Brexit referendum in June, international movement of refugees and economic slowdown in China, Russia, and India—will have significant regional implications. Even as vibrant Pacific diplomacy saw advances on climate, oceans, and fisheries policy, the new era of international uncertainty creates problems for Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

Leadership changes in the United States and Europe are transforming relations between allies, creating clashes between European Union (EU) partners and sowing doubt about international treaty commitments on trade, climate, development funding, and security. That's bad news for smaller developing nations, as the proverb suggests: "When the elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers."

Although regional organizations found it hard to forge consensus on divisive issues, island nations still advanced the regional agenda in the United Nations. Countries like Fiji are increasingly striking their own path and seeking new alliances, which in

turn bring complex international conflicts into regional organizations. One example during 2016 was the debate over self-determination in West Papua, which has brought divisions to both the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) that consensus communiqués cannot paper over.

Beyond the human and economic cost, climate change and natural disasters are also contributing to broader strategic changes in the region. After Cyclone Winston in Fiji, Australia and New Zealand deployed warships and helicopters for post-cyclone relief, China and India provided funding, and Indonesian soldiers rebuilt schools, highlighting how environment issues are interconnected with wider geopolitical shifts.

Throughout the year, governments, regional organizations, and nongovernmental organizations addressed the diverse economic, environmental, and social impacts of climate change with research studies on agriculture and forestry (SPC 2016), coastal and oceanic fisheries (Fache and Pauwels 2016), natural disasters (World Bank 2016), and climate finance (MacLellan and Meads 2016). A United Nations Environment Program report in May estimated that the cost of adapting to climate change in developing countries could rise to between US\$280 billion and US\$500 billion per year by 2050, a figure that is four to five times greater than previous estimates (UNEP 2016, xii, 42).

As with Cyclone Pam in 2014,

Cyclone Winston in 2016 brought home the importance of disaster preparedness. Overnight on 19–20 February, the category five cyclone hit Fiji’s northern Lau Islands after causing extensive flooding in Tuvalu and other neighbors. While Fiji’s capital was largely spared the worst effects, there was significant damage in the north and west of the country.

In May, the Fiji government issued an official post-disaster needs assessment (Government of Fiji 2016). Nearly forty thousand people required immediate assistance following the cyclone, with 30,369 houses, 495 schools, and eighty-eight health clinics and medical facilities damaged or destroyed. In addition, the cyclone destroyed crops on a large scale, including economically vital sugarcane. Causing nearly F\$2 billion in damage, this one disaster compromised the livelihoods of nearly 540,400 people (62 percent of Fiji’s population).

At every possible opportunity during 2016, Pacific leaders stressed that industrialized nations need to move beyond the targets set by the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) President Hilda Heine told the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in September: “We need to do more to increase ambition, on mitigation, on adaptation and on finance. We must take every opportunity we can to stay below [the] 1.5 degree limit needed for our survival” (Heine 2016).

For years, Pacific governments have been urging donors to reduce the many barriers that limit access to financial resources to respond to climate change. This message was echoed

by Oxfam Pacific as it launched new research on “climate finance after Paris,” highlighting the need for predictability, coordination, access, and adequacy of funding (Maclellan and Meads 2016).

In September, Nauru’s President Baron Waqa highlighted ongoing funding problems for small island states: “Some international funding mechanisms exclude small countries like mine, or prove impossible to access because of our limited capacity. Private investment is unreliable, and rarely available to support basic services and critical infrastructure. Meanwhile, the most promising financing models for small developing countries, like direct access and direct budgetary support, are rarely available as an option. This needs to change, so that small countries fully benefit from the historic agreements we have reached” (Waqa 2016).

In one positive response, the new Green Climate Fund (GCF) held its board meeting in Apia in December. Sāmoa’s UN ambassador, Aliioaiga Feturi Elisaia, who represents Small Island Developing States on the board, said the meeting was “to provide GCF Board members with an opportunity to see and experience first-hand the realities that the Pacific region and island communities are already facing on a daily basis” (Elisaia 2016).

The GCF Board approved nearly US\$98 million for three projects in the Pacific, but the United States and France also blocked a push by developing countries to increase finance for the GCF’s Readiness and Preparatory Support program. Pacific representatives joined other Small Island Developing States to call for an increase

from US\$15 million to US\$100 million annually for this program, which helps with the costs of feasibility studies and preparing GCF applications. However, the GCF Board only allocated half that amount (Maclellan 2017).

Encouraged by the decision of the Obama administration to sign the Paris Agreement and contribute to the GCF, Pacific leaders watched the US presidential election with a wary eye. During the 2016 electoral campaign, Republican candidate Donald Trump pledged to “cancel the Paris Climate Agreement” and “stop all payments of US tax dollars to UN global warming programs.” Despite later denials and evasions, Trump has made statements describing climate change as a “hoax” and suggesting that “the concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make US manufacturing non-competitive” (Schulman 2016).

As the news that Donald Trump had won the US elections reached the November UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP22) in Morocco, Fiji Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama seized the moment for a gesture that captured worldwide media attention, inviting Trump to visit Fiji to see the damage of cyclone Winston: “I want to make a special appeal to the President-Elect of the United States, Donald Trump, for a personal change of heart and public change of policy on the issue of climate change. . . . I am especially alarmed by reports that you intend to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, which would be disastrous for every person on earth” (Bainimarama 2016).

Over time, changes to US policy on climate and development aid will flow through to regional institutions. In November, Director General of the Pacific Community (SPC) Colin Tukuitonga stated: “I think it’s important to point out that the USA is a founding member of SPC and has been with us since 1947 and we expect to continue the good work that has been done with the support of the US government both in climate change and other areas” (RNZI 2016a).

Coming to office in January 2017, the new US president made other decisions that raised uncertainty about US commitments in the Asia-Pacific region. Trump used executive orders to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA), a central pillar of the Obama administration’s “Pacific pivot.” Other illiberal actions by the Trump administration—on refugees, disdain for journalists, and judicial review of executive action—will give encouragement to more authoritarian elements in the region.

Changes within the European Union have also forced Pacific Island countries to maneuver, transforming long-standing partnerships.

Anglophone members of the Pacific Islands Forum have long relied on the United Kingdom to support their engagement with the European Union through British subsidies for sugar or Commonwealth Foundation support for civil society initiatives. Pacific leaders have valued the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) as an opportunity for face-to-face interaction with African Least Developed Countries and Caribbean Small Island Developing States

(CSIDS)—crucial partners during global climate negotiations.

The June 2016 Brexit referendum on UK membership in the European Union has created new uncertainty about Britain's contribution to the European Development Fund (EDF). Sensing this change, Forum countries have begun to reposition themselves with other European powers: at the PIF leaders meeting in Pohnpei in September, leaders granted Germany the status of Post-Forum Dialogue Partner (the German development agency GIZ already has an active role in Pacific climate adaptation and, in coming years, Germany may play a supportive role in international debates about financing for development).

The biggest change, however, comes with the Forum's transformed relationship with France. In a single sentence, item 30 of the Forum communiqué from Pohnpei stated: "Leaders accepted French Polynesia and New Caledonia as full members of the Pacific Islands Forum" (PIFS 2016b, 5). Both French dependencies gained Forum associate membership in 2006, but this new decision makes them full participants, ending the Forum as a body of independent and sovereign nations. President of New Caledonia Philippe Germain and French Polynesian President Édouard Fritch both welcomed the opportunity to give their territory a greater role in the Forum.

The decision, however, surprised many regional observers, as Forum leaders could not publicly explain what criteria were used to change the PIF membership rules. The decision was also taken despite calls by leading

Kanak and Maohi independence activists to defer a decision on membership (MacLellan 2016c, 2016f). In Pohnpei, Sāmoa Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi acknowledged that it was "a political decision" (MacLellan 2016e).

Under outgoing French President François Hollande, France has been an active partner on climate change, development programs, and EU relations. As a major contributor to the Green Climate Fund, Paris has also increased its bilateral climate programs in Pacific Island states. But the national interests of individual Forum member states had an impact on the regional decision to support the two territories' full membership.

Australia has been building closer security ties with France, with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announcing in April that the French shipbuilding corporation DCNS had won a contract for A\$50 billion to build the next generation of submarines for the Royal Australian Navy. The New Zealand government led by John Key was also a vocal supporter of the Forum membership change after a visit by French Prime Minister Manuel Valls in May (the first visit to Wellington by a French leader since 1991). The state visit to France by Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O'Neill in June was a first for a PNG leader, with O'Neill meeting French energy corporation Total to discuss expanded investment in Papua New Guinea's oil and liquid natural gas (LNG) industry (MacLellan 2016b).

The charm offensive from Paris may change, however, after the French presidential (April/May 2017) and legislative elections (June 2017).

Hollande, the unpopular leader of the French Socialist Party, announced in December that he would not run for a second term, opening the way for the election of a conservative government (some observers are fearful of a strong showing by Marine Le Pen, the charismatic leader of the extreme Right Front National). With the French state retaining control of key powers over defense, security, and currency, the Forum Secretariat may now find that conservative leaders in Paris will try to override island-focused policies advanced by Noumea and Papeete within the regional organization.

As a midsize global power, the French state has its own strategic interests in the region, including 7 million square kilometers of Exclusive Economic Zone surrounding its Pacific dependencies. During a flying visit to Tahiti in February, President Hollande reaffirmed his country's intention to remain a power in the region. "That's another reason for my visit here," he told the Assembly of French Polynesia, "to show that there are no far-off territories of the French Republic—there is only the Republic. . . . You are not far from France, because you are France, because I am here in France" (Hollande 2016).

The Forum expansion is part of a long-standing plan to better integrate the US, French, and New Zealand non-self-governing territories into regional institutions. Sāmoa Prime Minister Tuilaepa has encouraged American Sāmoa to seek full Forum membership when he hosts the next leaders' meeting in Apia in 2017. In contrast, the Ulu o Tokelau (titular head of government), Aliko Faipule Afega Gaulofa, said his country is

not yet ready to seek full membership: "This is a matter that is under consideration, but I do not see the need any time soon for Tokelau to be a full member. We want to focus on progressing issues for institutional strengthening before we can consider membership and the responsibilities that come with it" (RNZI 2016b).

Tuna politics dominated regional economic activity throughout the year, with the signing of key treaties and the transition to a new chief executive, Ludwig Kumoru, at the helm of the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA).

In February, the long-running renegotiation of the 1988 US–South Pacific Multilateral Treaty on Fisheries collapsed when the US government formally notified its intention to withdraw from the treaty. The Pacific didn't blink. After further talks in June, a new deal was struck, with Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) Director-General James Movick stating: "The Pacific should be incredibly pleased with the outcome of the session. . . . We have struck a six year deal that should provide for a secure yet flexible future for the US industry, stability in the delivery of US economic assistance and excellent financial returns to the Pacific islands" (FFA 2016).

The revised seven-year treaty, signed in December, gives regional access to the US purse-seiner fleet, with an industry payment of US\$45 million per annum, government fisheries aid of US\$21 million, and other positive features.

Meanwhile, at the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, Island countries resisted proposals that would have weakened the vessel

day scheme (VDS), a crucial element of fisheries management that has seen PNA licensing revenues increase from US\$64 million in 2010 to nearly US\$400 million today. In July, outgoing PNA CEO Transform Aqorau criticized Asian Development Bank (ADB) proposals for reform of the vessel day scheme: “The harsh truth for the ADB and other major regional donors is that the VDS—probably the most successful single development instrument in the region—succeeds in part because the donors, and the major regional organizations that they support, are excluded and are not directly involved” (PNA 2016).

To cap off a positive year for fisheries, a UNGA resolution in December endorsed a PNA initiative to establish 2 May as World Tuna Day. With the first of three UN Oceans conferences scheduled for June 2017, Pacific diplomacy will continue to highlight sustainability of fisheries and the ocean environment.

Apart from climate and oceans policy, the Smaller Island States (SIS) are less engaged in international geopolitics than larger Forum members. Even so, the SIS group met in Palau in June to adopt a new strategy that recognizes their particular needs on climate change, mobility, health, the marine environment, and air and sea transportation. At the Pohnpei Forum in September, host nation Federated States of Micronesia formally joined the SIS, although Niue’s Premier Toke Talagi boycotted the pre-Forum meeting. (After forty-two years of free association with New Zealand, Talagi wants Niue to join the United Nations, an ambitious agenda for an island nation with just 1,200 people.)

The Council of Regional Organizations in the Pacific (CROP) also met with UN agencies based in the region, as they develop a United Nations Pacific Strategy (UNPS) for 2018–2022.

For the first time, the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) summit was held outside Fiji. The July meeting in Honiara had the theme “Stewardship for Healthy Oceans and Healthy Nations,” with diverse representation from China, the United States, Kuwait, Pakistan, Indonesia, Pitcairn, and Wallis and Futuna. At the meeting, Timor-Leste formally joined existing PIDF members Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Tokelau, the Pacific Island Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (PIANGO), and the Pacific Island Private Sector Organisation (PIPSO). Papua New Guinea and Sāmoa have thus far refused to join PIDF.

Under Prime Minister Bainimarama, Fiji has used PIDF to mount successful diplomatic interventions on the international stage, such as the 2015 Suva Declaration on Climate Change. At the same time, Fiji’s regional relations—with Papua New Guinea, Australia, and the Forum Secretariat—have continued along a bumpy path. Fiji-Forum relations may continue to be unsettled, given that Sāmoa Prime Minister Tuilaepa—a frequent critic of his Fijian counterpart—will host the 2017 Forum meeting.

Despite this, Fiji’s international profile reached new heights in 2016 when its permanent representative to the United Nations, Peter Thomson, was elected president of the UN

General Assembly for 2016–17. As he took up the seat in October, it was the first time a Pacific Island country had been chosen to lead the world body. Thomson is a descendant of an old colonial family in Fiji, with “kava in the blood” (Thomson 1999). Since he took up the post as Fiji’s UN ambassador in 2010, Thomson has become a central player in expanding the international profile of both Fiji and the wider Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) grouping.

Thomson was UNGA vice president in 2011–2012, and in 2013 he chaired the Group of 77 (G-77) and China (the UN’s largest negotiating bloc of developing nations). He served as president of the Assembly of the International Seabed Authority (ISA) in 2011–2012 and was the president of the ISA Council in 2015–2016. These stepping-stones led to his nomination for the UNGA presidency, as the representative of the UN group of Asia and PSIDS (a bloc that links Island states to the emerging Asian powerhouses but excludes Australia and New Zealand).

The yearlong UNGA presidency will allow Fiji and other PSIDS to advance their regional agenda on climate change, oceans, and nuclear security. In June 2017, Fiji will cohost with Sweden the United Nations Conference on Oceans and Seas, the first of three international gatherings over the next fifteen years. In a major coup, Fiji was also chosen as cochair of the next UNFCCC COP23 in November 2017 (with the venue in Bonn rather than Suva).

University of the South Pacific academic Sandra Tarte noted that Bainimarama’s Fiji First Party has used these international achievements

to consolidate its standing in domestic politics: “Bainimarama was also able to bask in the reflected glory of the country’s first ever Olympic gold medal win—when its men’s rugby sevens team claimed victory in Rio. Bainimarama extolled the virtues of team discipline and unity—hallmarks of his government’s approach to nation building. But the corollary to this is a political space increasingly controlled and dominated by the government, with alternative political parties relegated to the margins” (Tarte 2016).

Fiji will also mount a campaign to win a seat on the UN Human Rights Council in 2018, again unprecedented for an Island nation. Fiji’s international reputation should guarantee this seat, despite domestic concerns about the 2016 detention of opposition members of Parliament and trade unionists, ongoing violence by police and corrections officers against prisoners, and other restrictions on public engagement and the media.

Even as Fijian diplomats carried the regional agenda into international institutions, the government’s regional relations had tense moments during 2016.

Bainimarama continued his dance with Australia and New Zealand, welcoming their support for post-cyclone reconstruction and hosting John Key in Suva in June (the first visit by a New Zealand Prime Minister since the 2006 coup). Bainimarama met with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull on the margins of the UN General Assembly in September and made a state visit to New Zealand in October, but he also engaged in sharp disputes with Key over the

New Zealand prime minister's criticism of the detention of Fijian opposition leaders.

Bainimarama did not attend the annual Forum leaders' meeting in Pohnpei. Indeed, he announced a cabinet reshuffle in the middle of the meeting, taking the position of foreign minister from Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, who was representing Fiji at the Forum. Kubuabola, now defense minister, was only informed of his new role in a message sent days after the Forum had begun (Maclellan 2016a).

During the year, Fiji and Papua New Guinea entered into a war of words over inter-Melanesian trade policy. The two largest island economies also resisted a push by Australia and New Zealand to complete Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER)-Plus negotiations by year's end, despite Forum leaders agreeing in Pohnpei to finalize the regional trade agreement.

Forum trade negotiators have agreed on much of the legal text for PACER-Plus, but in August, PNG Trade Minister Richard Maru withdrew from the process, announcing: "I've made it clear that PNG is not interested and that I have directed all my officers not to entertain any negotiations" (Kisselpar 2016). By year's end, Fiji Trade Minister Faiyaz Koya said his country also continued to maintain reservations about the text, seeking further negotiation on Infant Industry Development and Most Favored Nation status (Maclellan 2016d, 20).

Community groups were critical of the lack of systematic social impact studies for PACER-Plus, with the Pacific Network on Globalization arguing that the "PACER-Plus [trade

agreement] is the latest in a long line of attempts by [Australia and New Zealand] to shape the Pacific Islands in their interests; this time though they will be able to do so with legally binding and enforceable commitments" (PANG 2016, 4).

In the aftermath of Cyclone Winston, Fiji received extensive cyclone relief from the Australian and New Zealand defense forces, with the deployment of HMAS *Canberra*, HMNZS *Canterbury*, and HMNZS *Wellington*, as well as RNZAF and RAAF helicopters and P3 Orion aircraft to assist relief operations in the outer islands. Many grassroots Fijians and commentators noted that Australia and New Zealand were quicker to respond than other "nontraditional" partners: "Cyclone Winston provided Australia and New Zealand with the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to Fiji, irrespective of their political differences. It was also a timely reminder that geography and proximity do matter" (Powles and Sousa-Santos 2016, 7).

Despite these deployments, however, the strategic implications of global warming in Oceania are poorly covered in two Defence White Papers issued by Australia in February and New Zealand in June. Former Chief of the Australian Defence Force Admiral Chris Barrie has argued that "Australia continues to lag behind its military allies, taking comparatively little action on climate change and only fleetingly acknowledging climate change in public documents like Australia's Defence White Paper" (Barrie and Steffen 2015, 1).

Fiji used the post-cyclone period to strengthen ties with China, Indonesia,

and other partners. In Beijing in April, then Foreign Minister Kubuabola met with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi to seek further economic support (Foreign Affairs 2016). After President Xi Jinping's November 2014 state visit to Fiji and a return visit to China in July 2015 by Prime Minister Bainimarama, the two countries are working on a range of development agreements, including a feasibility study to create a China-Fiji Free Trade Agreement.

Seeking greater international support for infrastructure projects in the aftermath of recent disasters, Fiji is lobbying to obtain full membership in the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which began operations in January with fifty-seven founding members. The Fiji Development Bank is also seeking accreditation as a national entity with the Green Climate Fund, headquartered in Songdo, Korea.

China also used regional institutions to extend its support to other Pacific nations. Forum Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor stated: "During the past year we've had a number of high level visits from China and that, I think, sends a very strong signal to the region that China is very interested in our development and what we are trying to do" (PIFS 2016a). Beijing agreed to double the number of scholarships under the China-PIFS Regional Scholarship Scheme and contributed more than US\$1 million to the China-Pacific Island Forum Cooperative Fund.

On the fortieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between Papua New Guinea and the People's Republic, PNG Prime Minister Peter O'Neill

visited China in July, meeting with Premier Li Keqiang and President Xi Jinping. During the visit, O'Neill signed seven agreements on development cooperation, civil aviation, and a feasibility study for a free-trade agreement between the two countries, as well as three framework deals on concessional loans for infrastructure.

As with Western donors, this Chinese support comes with strings. Following an International Court of Justice ruling in favor of the Philippines over maritime boundaries in the South China Sea, Papua New Guinea reiterated its support for the "one China" policy and China's position on the maritime dispute. In contrast, analysts in Beijing and Western capitals were surprised when Fiji called on all parties to adhere to international law (though this should hardly be a surprise, given Fiji's historic role in negotiating the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and establishing the International Seabed Authority).

Global diplomacy by Canberra, Suva, and Port Moresby is built on good relations with Jakarta, given Indonesia's central role in the Non-Aligned Movement, G-77, and UN Asia-Pacific bloc. This has complicated regional policy making in both the Forum and Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG).

In early 2016, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi visited Melanesian countries to reiterate Jakarta's opposition to any support for the West Papuan nationalist movement. In April, Papua New Guinea signed eleven memoranda of understanding with Indonesia on economic cooperation and political relations. Improved relations between Fiji and Indonesia

were also symbolized by the deployment of one hundred Indonesian armed forces (TNI) soldiers to rebuild the elite Queen Victoria School, badly damaged during Cyclone Winston (*Jakarta Post* 2016). This cooperation has spurred dialogue on a possible Fiji-Indonesia Defense Cooperation agreement, discussed by Defense Minister Kubuabola and TNI chief General Gatot Nurmantyo in November.

The ongoing bid for MSG membership on the part of the United Liberation Movement of West Papua (ULMWP)—fiercely opposed by Jakarta—has divided the subregional organization, pitting the two largest members against Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS).

After a Special MSG Leaders' Summit in July deferred consideration of the ULMWP bid, Vanuatu Deputy Prime Minister Joe Natuman stated: "It appears other people are trying to use the MSG to drive their own agendas and I am sorry but I will insist that MSG is being bought by others. It is just like Jesus Christ who was bought for 30 pieces of silver. . . . If our friends in Fiji and Papua New Guinea have a different agenda, we need to sit down and talk very seriously about what is happening within the organization" (McGarry 2016).

Throughout 2016, Pacific civil society continued to mobilize in solidarity with West Papua. A range of groups raised the issue through the Framework for Pacific Regionalism (FPR), the new policy mechanism created to put forward submissions for regional action by Forum leaders. In both 2015 and 2016, the largest number of submissions through the FPR called

for action on West Papua, causing anxiety among some members of the Forum Officials Committee. (In 2017, the Forum will not call for new FPR submissions before the next leaders meeting in Sāmoa.)

Extensive public debate over West Papua angered Indonesian diplomats and complicated life for Pacific governments. Most Forum members are willing to talk about human rights but reluctant to publicly acknowledge the right to self-determination. In contrast, MSG chair and Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare argued: "Human rights violations in West Papua and the pursuit for self-determination of West Papua are two sides of the same coin" (Sogavare 2016).

To strengthen its support of the West Papuan nationalist movement, the Solomon Islands government appointed former diplomat Rex Horoi as the country's special envoy on West Papua. Sogavare toured other MSG countries in late 2016, trying unsuccessfully to forge a new consensus in support of MSG membership for the ULMWP.

Within the wider Forum, Australia, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji continued to back Indonesia's sovereignty over West Papua (Macleod, Moiwend, and Pilbrow 2016). At the 2016 Forum meeting in Pohnpei, leaders could not agree on strong action, with the final communiqué simply stating that "leaders recognized the political sensitivities of the issue of West Papua (Papua) and agreed the issue of alleged human rights violations in West Papua should remain on their agenda. Leaders also agreed on the importance of an open and construc-

tive dialogue with Indonesia on the issue” (PIFS 2016a).

PIANGO Executive Director Emele Duituturaga said: “We also know that the draft text reflected their intention to take West Papua to the UN but when the final communiqué was released, it had been watered down. . . . We know that a couple of members had hoped the issue of West Papua would be removed altogether. . . . It is obvious that geo politics were at play which brings to question whether in fact our leaders can be bold and courageous in the presence of neighbouring powers like Australia and New Zealand” (PIANGO 2016).

Even so, Forum Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor acknowledged the issue must continue to be debated: “It’s an issue that needs to be pursued and it’s not going to go away. Our bigger countries in the region like Australia and New Zealand realise that this issue is just not going to go to sleep—and it shouldn’t go to sleep, because it is very important for our region” (Maclellan 2016g).

With the MSG and PIF paralyzed on West Papua, individual countries worked through the Pacific Coalition on West Papua (PCWP) to lobby at the United Nations. Just weeks after the Forum, seven governments individually raised the question during their annual intervention at the UN General Assembly. It was noticeable that long-standing West Papua supporters like Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were joined by Micronesia and Polynesian nations: Nauru, Marshall Islands, Palau, Tonga, and Tuvalu.

Tuvalu’s Enele Sopoaga told UN members: “The principle of self-determination must be respected and

honoured. The violation of human rights in West Papua and their desire to achieve self-determination is a reality. This great body cannot and must not ignore these deplorable situations, it must not hide behind the guise of the principles of non-interference and sovereignty” (Sopoaga 2016).

Indonesia reacted angrily. Visiting Australia in November, Defense Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu told Australia to “please tell Solomon Island and those six nations (from the MSG) never to interfere or encourage West Papua to join them. Those countries better keep their mouths shut and mind their own business. It is better that (Australia) speaks to them gently. If it was left up to me, I would twist their ears” (Hodge and Rayda 2016).

The region needs more courageous voices on human rights, but sadly during 2016 we lost too many people who were willing to address international as well as domestic rights. In New Caledonia, Jean-Pierre Deteix, a long-standing supporter of Kanak self-determination, was murdered in June. Kanak feminist Susanna Ounei, cofounder of the Groupe de femmes Kanak et exploitées en lutte (GFKEL), died in New Zealand in September. Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi also died on 29 September. A former vice president of Fiji, Madraiwiwi served as a jurist and human rights advocate across the region, as chief justice of Nauru, and with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Solomon Islands (Madraiwiwi 2008).

On Christmas Day, the Pacific Islands lost a leading scholar, religious leader, and antinuclear activist with the death of John Taroanui Doom in Tahiti. Fortunately, John’s memoirs

were published in October 2016. They document his regional and international ecumenical work through the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) and World Council of Churches (WCC), as well as his leadership of *Moruroa e Tatou*, the association of Maohi workers who staffed the French nuclear test sites (Doom 2016).

Pacific feminism had important advances, including the election in January of RMI President Hilda Heine as the first woman to lead an independent island nation. In November, the University of the South Pacific hosted the inaugural Pacific Feminist Forum, which “acknowledged those who came before us, recognised our diversities, identified our challenges, celebrated our achievements, rearticulated a shared vision, shared strategies, built new and strengthened old alliances, and further defined our shared politics” (Pacific Feminist Forum 2016).

Human rights and the rule of law faced another tough year, with debate over the detention of opposition members of Parliament in Fiji and Nauru and ongoing legal challenges following the 2015 jailing of fourteen members of Vanuatu’s Parliament for corruption. Researchers highlighted that organized crime in the Pacific is often a nexus between political elites and seemingly legal actors (Walton and Dinnen 2016).

The Nauru government under President Baron Waqa was returned to office in July, despite widespread international criticism of infringement of democratic rights and uncertainty over the futures of asylum seekers detained in two offshore processing centers. Justice Minister David Adeang condemned Australian media that

he claimed “unethically attempted to influence our domestic politics by spreading lies, promoting Opposition MPs and refusing to report the huge progress Nauru has made over the past three years under the Waqa Government” (Government of the Republic of Nauru 2016).

Canberra’s leverage with Nauru is undercut by its reliance on the Waqa government to coordinate over refugee policy. Per capita, Nauru is the largest recipient of Australian aid in the region, at an astonishing A\$2,000 per person—more than ten times larger than any other Pacific Island country. In 2016, the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) issued two scathing reports on the Australian government’s management of contracts for the offshore processing centers in Nauru and Manus Island: “Substantial contract variations totaling over A\$1 billion were made without a documented assessment of value for money” (ANAO 2016a, 83; see also ANAO 2016b).

Other commentators were more critical of Australia’s refugee policy, with one NZ Labour politician calling for New Zealand to resettle the remaining refugees: “It’s almost like Australia has lost its moral compass in terms of where it’s going” (McIlroy 2016). Human rights groups documented evidence that asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus have swallowed insect repellent, bashed their heads on walls, and doused their bodies with boiling water in a culture of self-harm. Cases include detainees swallowing poisons, stuffing tea bags down their throats, and hanging by bedsheets or other makeshift nooses (Amnesty International/Human Rights Watch 2016).

An internal review by Australia's Immigration Department exonerated nine workers from Save the Children Australia (SCA), who were deported from Nauru in October 2014 after being falsely accused of encouraging self-harm of detainees. Three reviews have now exonerated the SCA staff, who have received a confidential financial settlement (Moss 2015; Doogan 2016; Ronalds 2016).

Australia's offshore warehousing of asylum seekers and refugees was dealt a blow in April, when the full bench of the PNG Supreme Court ruled that detention on Manus breached the right to personal liberty in the PNG Constitution (PNG Supreme Court 2016). With refugees being released into the general community on Manus, Australia and Papua New Guinea held closed-door discussions throughout the year trying to find a resettlement solution.

Before the US elections, Australia had negotiated a refugee swap with the Obama administration, but the arrangement was criticized as a "dumb deal" by incoming President Trump in a testy phone call with Prime Minister Turnbull (Miller and Rucker 2017). The sharp insult to a long-standing ally is a sign of things to come.

Even though it is still the largest aid donor to the region, the Australian government has decreased its overseas aid to the lowest level in recent history, with another A\$224 million cut from the Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget in the 2016–17 Budget. This follows last year's unprecedented cut of A\$1 billion, which reduced the aid budget by 20 percent in one year (DFAT 2016). Australia's aid program is increasingly used to fund the private

sector and economic diplomacy, with 20 percent of aid in 2016 used for "aid for trade."

Australia and New Zealand have joined the World Bank to push for public financial management (PFM) reforms, but often based on models that do not suit smaller island governments. A World Bank report in October noted: "Case studies suggest that PFM reforms are sometimes predicated on intervention logics that do not hold in Pacific countries" (Haque 2016, vi).

For the ANZUS allies, strategic relations are complicated by increasing Chinese economic and trade cooperation and the involvement of other "nontraditional" partners in the islands. The New Zealand Defence White Paper, released in June, recognized that Forum Island countries are "seeking to broaden their potential support bases by forming links with countries beyond their existing traditional partners" (NZ Ministry of Defence 2016, 34).

The Defence White Paper promotes New Zealand's maritime strategic interests in the South Pacific and the southern oceans, noting: "Given its strong connections with South Pacific countries, New Zealand has an enduring interest in regional stability." One of the principle roles for the NZ Defence Force is to "contribute to, and where necessary lead, operations in the South Pacific" (NZ Ministry of Defence 2016, 11).

After the primary interest of creating "a secure, resilient Australia," Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper also notes: "Our second Strategic Defence Interest is in a secure nearer region. Australia cannot be secure if our immediate neighborhood includ-

ing Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Pacific Island Countries becomes a source of threat to Australia. . . . Australia will continue to seek to be the principal security partner for Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Pacific Island Countries” (Australian Ministry of Defence 2016, 69, 74).

Western strategists are also seeking to draw India into the Asia-Pacific region to assist with the containment of China. Australia and the United States are trying to extend security ties with India, including through the sale of uranium through the Nuclear Suppliers Group, a potential breach of Australia’s commitments under the Rarotonga Treaty for a South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (SPNFZ).

Indian President Pranab Mukherjee visited New Zealand in late April and told a business lunch: “The Pacific Island countries are small but are doing their best to promote the welfare of their people, apart from growing their economies. Poverty and poor quality education are two areas in which we would like to work closely with the respective governments and peoples” (Rahman 2016).

The visit by USS *William P Lawrence* to Suva in February was the first by a US warship in a decade, while Special Forces from the United States and New Zealand cohosted a Pacific Area Security Sector Working Group meeting in Wellington in July. Guam, Hawai‘i, and other Pacific Islands will take on greater strategic importance as incoming President Trump pledges to build up the US Navy to its former glory.

Even as the navy deploys hard power, American soft power had its moment in 2016, as the Disney

Corporation unleashed the animated feature film *Moana* on screens across the world. Disney’s vision of a courageous Polynesian girl exploring the Pacific, accompanied by the demigod Maui, was welcomed by critics as a delightful children’s movie but critiqued by many Islanders for its plastic vision of Pacific culture (Diaz 2016; Teaiwa 2016).

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