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Domestic Sources Of Instability In The South Pacific Region

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In the post-Cold War era, the external powers' involvement as a threat to the South Pacific region has become out of date. However, it would be a misjudgement to consign the South Pacific once more to the status of an international backwater as it was in the early decades after World War II. Several critical threats to the stability, the way of life and democratic practice of the region continue to exist. These threats emerge mainly from within the South Pacific region in the form of the following trigger points.

SESESSIONIST THREATS: The most important threat to the region emerging from the domestic sources is that of secession. The first secessionist threat appeared before Vanuatu at the time of that country's move to independence in 1980. Ruled jointly by Britain and France as the condominium of the New Hebrides, it suffered a kind of colonial dualism of the traditional linguistic, cultural, and regional factionalism, which characterizes the South Pacific. France resisted the advent of independence and encouraged the secessionist Na-Griamel movement at Santo led by Jimmy Stevens, which escalated into a serious political crisis threatening Vanuatu's existence. In this situation, the country's youthful political leaders, headed by Father Walter Lini, an Anglican Priest, weathered the storm with the military help from Papua New Guinea, supported by Australia, and Vanuatu remained intact. However, the continuing political disruptions and uncertainties, emerging from the Anglophone-Francophone cultural and political divide make this country vulnerable to secessionism.

Papua New Guinea is another country, exposed to the secessionist threat where the resurgence of Bougainville problem since the late 1960s has placed a major challenge before the country's integrity. Papua New Guinea is a country with limited internal communications which embraces several diverse ethnic groupings that owe allegiance predominantly to a geographical area rather than the nation. This country has been able to hang together since its independence in 1975 only with a centralised authority in relation to its states. The problem of loyalty to the centre always existed with Bougainville, the copper-rich island from the North Solomon province. The situation blew up in April 1989, inspired by a mixture of dissatisfaction with the share of resources returned to the province from the Panguna copper mine, outrage at the environmental consequences of the open cast mining, growing tensions between the mainly black Bougainvilleans and the "red skins" from other parts of PNG who worked in the mine, and political ambitions of local island leaders, both in local government and at the grassroots. A Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) declared itself and launched attack on the mine and police stations. The PNG Defense Force was despatched to Bougainville to restore law and order, only to be drawn into a counter-insurgency campaign in which several abuses of human rights were perpetrated against the local population. The PNG government was as embarrassed by the bad publicity as it was paralysed by the loss of revenue from the Bougainville mine which had been shut down by rebellion. In April 1990, the government withdrew all its security forces from Bougainville in favour of a policy of blockading the rebel islands and its inhabitants. The BRA responded by declaring Bougainville's independence from PNG.

These developments raised the possibility of secession in other areas of the western province Enga and Southern Highlands also where major copper and gold mining enterprises existed. However, these fears did not take shape. The pressures of blockade and the absence of a leadership structure among the rebels led to the disintegration of secession. A series of negotiations took place between the government and the BRA representatives, the failure of which resulted in continued violence and allegation of atrocities and violation of human rights by both sides. In June 1994, talks were started in Honiara between government representatives and BRA representatives followed by primeminister Wingti's official visit next month and the recapture by government forces in August of Panguna copper mine which had been under the control of BRA rebels since 1990. In September 1994, the new prime minister Sir Julius Chan and Sam Kauona signed a ceasefire agreement under which a regional peace keeping force

was deployed which was composed of troops from Fiji, Vanuatu, and Tonga, with the governments of Australia and New Zealand in a supervisory role, and the economic blockade of the island was lifted.

MILITARISATION OF POLITICAL SYSTEM : The second important threat to the security and stability of the region comes from a tendency towards militarisation of the political systems of the Pacific island countries engendered not by external pressures or machinations but by internal instability and the incapacity of civilian political institutions to mediate conflicts successfully.

The South Pacific region has been experiencing new signs of political change for about a decade. David Hegarty, in a paper delivered in 1989, noted that the Cook Islands government had changed hands three times in the past four years. In Nauru, a parliamentary stand-off saw the president lose, then ultimately regain power. In Western Samoa, an evenly divided parliament led to difficulties in the formation of a government. In the Solomon Islands, a prime minister was toppled for accepting French cyclone-relief aid from his electorate and the next election saw his government out of power. Even in the kingdom of Tonga, there have been stirrings against monarchical rule. These developments reflected growing politicisation of traditional arrangements and cultures and were no threats to democracy but were parts of the democratic process. The danger lay only in the militaristic solutions to these political problems, the precedent of which had been set in Fiji.

The two military coups in Fiji, led by Colonel Rabuka in May and September 1987, put a question mark on the existence of democratic systems in the South Pacific island countries and Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu, with signs of apparent political unease began to be seen as forerunners of similar moves. Though nothing seemed inevitable about Fiji's collapse into militarisation, the 1987 coups came up as a racist reaction of the indigenous Fijian population threatened by the growing political power and economic domination by the migrant Indian community. Soon after April 1987 elections, in which the Fiji-Indian dominated coalition under Bavadra came to power, the Taukei movement was started by Fijian nationalists to protect Fiji's land, people and culture from the projected threat of Fiji-Indian domination which led to escalating violence, firebombings, and threats to life. The smooth operation of the coup could be possible with the support extended to Rabuka by the Fijian chiefly elite and the local business leaders which were prime movers in the former Alliance government and had a vested interest in ensuring that they maintained control of the system of patronage that came with political power in Fiji. Moreover, the senior members of the Alliance Party were threatened by the anti-corruption legislation that the coalition government planned to introduce in the first session of the parliament.

Despite the condemnation of the coup by Australia, New Zealand, and India and Fiji's expulsion from the Commonwealth by these countries' efforts, the military take-over to ensure the supremacy of the indigenous ethnic population in nation's affairs was supported by the island governments of the South Pacific and no criticism of the coup made at the South Pacific Forum meet in Apia, Western Samoa in May 1987. In the subsequent period, however, Rabuka chose to turn himself into a civilian politician emerging as the country's first prime minister under its controversial new constitution in elections held in May 1992. The constitution effectively ensures indigenous Fijian domination of the political system, yet Rabuka was backed in the post-election bargaining by the Fiji Labour Party whose government he overthrew in 1987. However, Fiji's return to a democratic system is still under cloud under a racially biased constitution. Following the February 1994 elections, Rabuka announced the formation of a new cabinet composed entirely of ethnic Fijians. In June 1994, Rabuka announced the setting up of a commission to review the constitution by 1997 but he was widely criticised by the opposition for choosing an ethnic Fijian to head that commission. In the same month, the opposition initiated a boycott of parliament following remarks by Rabuka concerning the possibility of another coup and of violence among disadvantaged urban Fijians, which were interpreted as a threat to Fiji-Indian community.

The successful military coups in Fiji provoked serious discussions on PNG's hovering on the brink of a coup. The PNG's political system has displayed a greater degree of stress in the last few years than ever before. Tony Siaguru, a former MP and deputy secretary-general of Commonwealth, talked in late 1988, of the country being "at the crossroads" and warned that if this slippery, sliding; situation was allowed to continue, there was very little hope for us to pull out of it: The reason is that the development process in Papua New Guinea, prompted of late by a mineral exploitation boom, has unleashed new social forces which are beginning to alter the traditional style and conventional rules of political conflict. There has been a growing gap between the rich, including many corrupt politicians, and the poor and the consequent emergence of new class tensions, the spread of crimes known as "rascalism", and most seriously, the renewed secessionist impulses focussed on Bougainville. The factors which raise the possibility of a military takeover also include wide discontentment in the PNG Defense Force, which has never been a passive bystander in PNG politics. In recent years, in addition to the Bougainville imbroglio, it has been involved, on and off, in exchange with the Indonesian army on the Irian Jaya border, rebelled against a cabinet decision to move some of its assets to a new base, rioted briefly in Port Moresby over poor pay and conditions, and has been drawn extensively into a general policing role in the face of growing crime and civil violence.

However, in spite of all the apparent threats and unusual activities explained above, no military coup has been carried out yet in PNG. The politics and society in PNG is characterised by a number of factors like the absence of a racial and cultural divide like those in Fiji, existence of multifaceted sub-regionalism with no single region enjoying dominance militarily, presence of regional loyalties within the military, absence of a hierarchical society affecting military's capacity to make its writ run throughout the society and difficult geographical terrains of PNG, unfavourable to the exercise of central authority which seriously inhibit the prospects of a military coup in PNG along the lines which occurred in Fiji. The only challenge to civilian politics in PNG came from within the police rather than the military when following the sudden withdrawal of central government forces from Bougainville after the escalation of the BRA's secessionist campaign in March 1990, the national commissioner of police, who was also the controller of the state emergency on Bougainville, reacting to this limitation, used police radio frequencies in an attempt to rally support for the overthrow of the government. Despite an initial panic reaction on the part of the political leadership and some limited support from elements in the police, the "Coups" ended in a farce with the arrest of inebriated commissioner Tohiyan by loyalist officers. Tohiyan's action following as it did a particularly convivial social function was quickly dubbed the "Bar-B-coup" in Port Moresby.

Nevertheless, it would be unwise to discuss the prospect of some kind of military intervention, merely on the basis of dissimilarities with Fijian situation. It is certainly conceivable that a combination of discontent with material conditions, the absence of a clear and achievable purpose and resentment at the misbehaviour of civilian politicians could lead to some kind of military intervention and even if such an attempt failed, its effect could be destabilizing to the already fragile civil institutions of the state.

Vanuatu constitutes a different situation from both Fiji and PNG. The Vanuaaku Pati (VP) dominated the country's politics in the period after independence and was opposed in parliament by a coalition of smaller parties, the Union of Moderate Parties (UMP). This essentially two party system reflected the historical cleavage between opposed British and French political traditions, the leaders of the VP influenced by the British and the UMP by the French. In 1988, Barak Sope, the general secretary of VP attempted to topple down Father Lini and take over as prime minister. He was sacked from the cabinet in May 1988 following anti-government protests led by him in Port Vila. In December that year, country's president and Sope's uncle, George Sokomanu illegally announced the dissolution of parliament and the appointment of Sope as prime minister, pending new elections. However, the action of president Sokomanu was declared illegal by the Vanuatu Supreme Court and both Sokomanu and Sope were arrested, rendering the coup attempt an embarrassing failure. Sope's bid for power was also seen as having ideological origins since he was the person most responsible for Libyan links with Vanuatu.

In spite of the fact that the Vanuatu paramilitary forces gave support to the elected civilian leaders at the time of the crisis, the government was unquestionably hard-pressed and had to request the Australian government for an emergency air lift of equipments for the Vanuatu Mobile Force for putting down Vila riots in May 1988. The events led Lini to question whether the Westminster system of parliamentary democracy was appropriate to Vanuatu's traditions and social structure, citing the Fijian precedent and the parliament convened a constitution review committee in 1990. The struggle for power also broke VP's unity. Lini was ousted from office at the end of a long period of internal faction fighting in September 1991 and by the time elections were held in December that year, three parties, VP, the Lini faction and the Melanesian Progressive Party led by Sope and Sokomanu stood against the UMP, the long standing opposition grouping. The VP lost power in the general election and the UMP formed a government led by Maxime Carlot as prime minister. However, the potential for political disruption remains with the factionalism of the government and opposition parties, the uncertainties of the constitutional revision, the disparity of income between subsistence villagers and government employees, and above all, the continued tensions between the Anglophone Protestants and Francophone Catholics and a period of instability seems like to follow in Vanuatu.

Though militarization of politics cannot be regarded as widespread or a firm trend in the South Pacific domestic politics, some measure of political instability can be expected in some island countries as traditional modes of politics, organised around local or regional rivalries, ethnic tensions and status differences come under pressure from an accelerating process of social and economic change characterised by urbanization, labour unrest and middle class discontent. For example, the Western Samoan government has recently been forced to concede universal suffrage following a referendum on the issue and even the "chiefly" Tongan government has been placed on the defensive by a demand for accountability led by the commoner member of parliament, Akilisi Pohiva. Despite continued resistance by the king to the development of a parliamentary democracy, the crown prince Tupoutofo, who is also the minister of foreign affairs and defense, stated that he favoured the formation of a formal political structure, including the formation of political parties, while at the same time, he remained critical of the confrontational stance adopted by the pro-democratic movement reformers. These processes do not constitute a threat to the democratic systems and are in reality, reflections of the growth of democratic trends in the region. The worrying feature however, is the increasing involvement of the defense and police forces in managing and repressing them.

BORDER DISPUTES BETWEEN PAPUA NEW GUINEA AND INDONESIA: Another source of threat to the region's stability comes from a situation of tension at the Indonesia-PNG border where the suppression of separatist Operasi Papua Merdeka (OPM) movement for a separate Melanesian state in Irian Jaya has led to frictions in the two countries' relations. The two countries share a poorly demarcated land boundary, 800-kilometer long, that arbitrarily divides highland clans. Indonesia's centralisation and its transmigration programme has led to pressures on Melanesian culture and deprivation of their land which is considered to be a serious violation of their rights in Melanesian societies. A natural sympathy has existed in PNG for the plight of indigenous population in Irian Jaya. Secondly, anti-OPM operations in Indonesia, leading to frequent border violations has been a major source of tension between the two countries. In 1984, the Indonesian troops and aircrafts crossed into PNG in hot-pursuit of OPM rebels and this operation sent 11,000 west Papuans fleeing across the border, placing financial and political burdens on the provincial and central governments. PNG took the issue to United Nations General Assembly and prime minister Wingti persuaded Indonesia to agree that the United Nations High Commission for Refugees should have a role in determining the status of border crossers and their final state.

In order to stop the situation from being aggravated, the two countries signed the Treaty of Mutual Respect, Friendship, and Co-operation in October 1986. In January 1988 Wingti visited Indonesia and asserted that the PNG always regarded Irian Jaya as an inseparable part of Indonesia. As relations warmed, PNG, sponsored by Indonesia, became an observer at meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and acceded to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Co-operation in 1987.

In October 1988, a series of Indonesian military incursions in pursuit of West Papuan Guerillas again caused great unease in the two countries' relations. The continued incursions were viewed by some PNG leaders to be orchestrated with the aim of irritating PNG into doing something rash. However, with skilful diplomatic efforts on the part of PNG foreign minister Michael Somare and Indonesia's home affairs minister kept the dispute from escalating.

The relations between the two countries, however, have taken a harmonious turn in recent years. Papua New Guinea has seen Indonesia as a potential bridge to the ASEAN region. On the other hand, Indonesia sees for itself an active role in the South Pacific and has expressed interest in the membership of the South Pacific Forum (SPF) which could be possible only with PNG's help. However, in spite of the compatibility of their mutual interests, as long as the alienation among the Melanesians in Irian Jaya, resulting from Indonesia's policy of centralisation continues, the possibility of violation of PNG's border by Indonesia is also to continue. This also remains a major factor in the strategic thinking of Australia which is reluctant to antagonise Indonesia but is obliged to assist PNG under the special relations with the latter.

RISING CRIMES AND DRUGS IN THE REGION: Another source of threat to stability in the South Pacific region is the growing crime and drug trade in the region. The fear has been raised that criminal syndicates operating variously from Australia, Hong Kong, Japan or the west coast of the USA could actually gain control of a particular state and use it as a base for their activities. This is strengthened by the fact that several island countries- Cook Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, the Marshall Islands and Nauru-operate as tax havens with extensive offshore banking facilities of a type which inevitably attract criminal money. The geographical location of the islands and the links which some of them have with the USA constitute further temptation especially to drug traders. In the last few years Guam and Belau have both witnessed the breaking of major drug rings which were importing heroin and marijuana from Thailand and the Philippines and shipping it to the US. Heroin was also seized for the first time in Vanuatu in May 1989 en route to Sydney from Hong Kong. When the case came to a court of law, it was revealed that the shipment had been organized by a triad gang in Hong Kong and that Vanuatu had been chosen as the transshipment point because the accused already had some legitimate business interests in Port Vila which were thought likely to provide the required cover. The dangers of the drugs connection for South Pacific states are thus being fully exposed all the time, but it can still be expected to grow, given the scale of the profits that can be made, the emergence of the highland regions of PNG as a source marijuana production, and the sheer number of tiny islands and atolls which can be used as staging points for trans shipment.

with the other countries outside the region. Some of the important issues which have led to increasing tensions between the South Pacific countries and the dominant outside powers in the region may be explained as follows.

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