



Policy Brief Series

ISSN 1172-3416

MACMILLAN BROWN PACIFIC POLICY BRIEF 2016/3

Self-determination and security in the Pacific

By Nic Maclellan¹

Policy summary of paper presented at the regional conference on *Rethinking regional security: Nexus between research and policy*, November 25-26, 2015, University of Canterbury. A partnership between University of Canterbury, Australian National University, United Nations Development Programme and International Political Science Association



¹ Nic Maclellan is an Australian-based Pacific journalist, author and peace campaigner.

Introduction: Decolonisation was one of the United Nations' greatest achievements in the 20th Century, but the process of self-determination began late in the islands region and remains incomplete today. The legacies of colonialism still impact on Pacific regionalism. The issue of political independence was a central element in the establishment of the South Pacific Forum in 1971. Decolonisation was central to the Forum's collective diplomacy throughout the 1980s, but attention to the issue has waned.

Today, in the Third UN International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism, there are still sixteen territories remaining on the UN list of non-self-governing territories, including six in the Pacific: New Caledonia and French Polynesia (under French administration); Tokelau (New Zealand); Pitcairn (United Kingdom); Guam and American Samoa (United States). Other 'second order' self-determination struggles in post-colonial states – such as Bougainville (Papua New Guinea), Rapanui (Chile) or West Papua (Indonesia) – do not fall under the mandate of the UN Special Committee.

Regional organisations could play a crucial role in supporting Pacific colonies in their transition to a new political status. Over the last 15 years, leaders from the US, French and New Zealand territories have been drawn into activities of the Pacific Islands Forum as observers or associate members. Despite this, the policies of Australia and New Zealand – and on occasions other Forum members - have constrained a more active role for the Forum. For this reason, island leaders have increasingly used other mechanisms to take diplomatic initiatives on decolonisation, such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) ambassadors (for example, with the 2013 re-inscription of French Polynesia on the UN list of non-self-governing territories).

Diplomatic rhetoric in support of the right to self-determination is often constrained by the realities of power. There are many economic, demographic and strategic barriers to decolonisation for the remaining Pacific territories. The diversity and small size of some territories is a constraint on advancing the decolonisation agenda, and significant parts of some local populations welcome immigration rights, federal grants and other benefits of territorial status. In other cases (Guam, West Papua and New Caledonia),

indigenous peoples have been made a minority in their own country, constraining advances through elections or referenda.

Despite this, the issue of self-determination looms large on the regional agenda in coming years. There is scope for CROP members, UN agencies, universities and other research partners to be more proactive in a number of areas.

Assisting peaceful transitions: Over the next five years, there will be major political and constitutional changes in two Melanesian nations, as New Caledonia and Bougainville vote on a new political status. Under the 1998 Noumea Accord, New Caledonia is scheduled to hold three referenda between 2014 and 2022 to determine a new political status. In a similar period, Bougainville will come to the end of its 10-15 year transition after the 2005 election of the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG). The issue of self-determination in West Papua is forcing itself onto the regional agenda, through the Framework on Pacific Regionalism and the MSG's granting of observer status to the United Liberation Movement of West Papua and associate membership to Indonesia.

Given any change in New Caledonia will have implications for French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna; and a new transition in Bougainville will impact debate on West Papua, there is a need for better understanding of the regional context and the interplay of each territory's transition.

Research agenda: *How can the Forum, through the Framework for Pacific Regionalism or other mechanisms, develop a region-wide program to assist the peaceful transition to a referendum on self-determination in all non-self-governing territories (NSGTs) in the Pacific?*

How do the political transitions in different NSGTs impact on each other (for example, with the coincidence in timing of the Bougainville and New Caledonia referendums)? Are there lessons or models to be shared to create a regional synergy for peaceful political transition?

Forum membership: The governments of New Caledonia and French Polynesia are lobbying for their territories to become full members of the Forum, even before their final political status is determined. This significant policy shift – for an organisation of sovereign nations - was in part

alluded to in the 2013 Morauta Review of the “Pacific Plan for Strengthening Regional Co-operation and Integration.” This review argues that original Forum priorities such as decolonisation and a nuclear-free Pacific “have either been resolved or moved to other platforms for debate and determination.”

In 2015, French Polynesia’s bid for full membership was deferred by Forum leaders, who asked whether the existing governance arrangements in Papeete would enable its government “to participate independently and effectively as a full member, in the full complement of political deliberation, decision making and commitments of the Forum.”

To make an informed decision on new criteria for Forum membership however, the region lacks an up-to-date, comparative database that documents the different capacities and powers (legal, constitutional, political, administrative) of freely associated states and non-self-governing territories.

Research agenda: *How can research partners conduct comparative research on the capacities of NSGTs and their ability to adopt key sovereign powers (judicial, policing, defence, foreign policy, currency)?*

Action by UN and CROP agencies to engage NSGTs: While the United Nations is an important institution for setting international norms on human rights, it has limited capacity to enforce them when the interests of greater powers are challenged. The UN has shown it can act on decolonisation with the support of the administering power, as shown by New Zealand’s extensive work with the UN Decolonisation Unit over Tokelau, but the international body is hamstrung when the colonial power resists international scrutiny.

In practice, decolonisation is driven by pragmatic developments on the ground rather than adherence to international law - but here again, Pacific governments, UN agencies and regional organisations have been slow to seize opportunities to assist a peaceful transition to a new political status. Pacific governments and CROP agencies should take a range of diplomatic and development initiatives to support peaceful self-determination processes around the region. Another crucial task for policymakers is to develop systematic programs of support for the territories, in areas such as training, scholarships, development funding and political education.

With increasing relations between the United Nations and the Pacific Islands Forum, there should be a formal dialogue on NSGTs between UN Resident Representatives, CROP agencies and Pacific governments, to extend and integrate work in the territories by UN specialised agencies.

Research and development agenda:

- *CROP and UN agencies, NGOs and universities could conduct participatory research programs in NSGTs, to identify areas that are crucial to a peaceful transition (such as voter registration, electoral reform, reconciliation and disarmament programs etc)*
- *PSIDS members could lobby for observer status for the NSGTs in relevant UN commissions such as the Commission on Sustainable Development and the Commission on Social Development;*
- *Pacific governments could fund and support participation of the NSGTs in world conferences and special sessions of the UN General Assembly in the economic, social, cultural and development sphere, including the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.*