Peace building in the Pacific Islands: Lessons from Bougainville, Solomon Islands and Fiji

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Introduction

This paper examines lessons about efforts to build peace from three very different conflicts – Bougainville, in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands and Fiji. These three island states share characteristics common to the states of the southwest Pacific region known as Melanesia. They have small populations (PNG 5.5 million, Fiji 850,000, Solomon Islands 400,000), possess remarkable cultural and linguistic diversity, experienced a late imposition of colonial rule, emerged recently from colonialism – Fiji in 1970, PNG in 1975, and Solomon Islands in 1978 - and share weak economies and states inherited from reluctant colonial powers.

In such circumstances, the problems of building national identity and unity, developing state capacity, and managing development without conflict is understandably difficult. Yet until the late 1980s, the three countries experienced little significant political instability or conflict. However, commencing with a 1987 coup in Fiji, serious, but different, conflicts developed in all three. Complex peace processes have since resolved violent conflict in each case, but questions remain about the sustainability of these outcomes.

Whilst little known outside the Pacific region, these peace-building experiences are relevant to actors engaged in peace processes outside the region. They highlight the importance, where possible, of international peace-building interventions involving a 'light touch', and supporting locally instigated peace processes. They also illuminate the capacities in the Pacific region for peace-building, and the roles of constitution-making processes and outcomes (including autonomy arrangements) in the management of conflict.

Following a brief examination of the three Pacific cases, the paper offers some lessons learned.

Bougainville

The conflict fought from 1988 to 1997 in the island group of Bougainville had complex causes related to the politicisation of a Bougainvillean identity as distinct from the rest of PNG. Disagreements over the distribution of revenues from a giant copper and gold mine operating in the mountains of Bougainville were the drivers of this politicisation. Inept responses by the national PNG government in relation to both mining policy and to the initial stages of violence complicated the situation.

The conflict initially involved the secessionist Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) that engaged the PNG Police and Defence Force (PNGDF) in a guerrilla struggle. The mine had contributed a major proportion of PNG's GDP and export earnings and its closure in 1989 caused PNG major fiscal problems in the 1990s.

When PNG forces withdrew from Bougainville in 1990, BRA leader, Francis Ona, made a unilateral declaration of independence (never recognized by any other country). Local differences amongst Bougainvilleans generated armed opposition to the BRA by groups known as the Bougainville Resistance Forces (BRF). From September 1990, PNG forces began returning to various parts of Bougainville, usually at the request of groups threatened by localized conflict. The two main dimensions of conflict (PNG versus BRA, and intra Bougainville) caused or contributed to several thousand deaths, many more injuries and traumas, massive levels of destruction of infrastructure and dramatic decline of economic activity.

A peace process began in mid-1997 largely on the initiative of the opposing Bougainville factions, which agreed to negotiate jointly with PNG starting in October 1997. The peace process involved three main phases: first, establishing the process, June 1997 to June 1999; second, negotiating a political settlement, June 1999 to August 2001; and third, implementing the political settlement, August 2001 to 2006.

While the process remained largely under the control of the Bougainville parties and PNG, there was significant international support, including:

- Facilitation and some mediation on the part of New Zealand and Australia from mid-1997;
- An unarmed regional truce (later cease-fire) monitoring group, led initially by New Zealand and from May 1998 by Australia, comprising personnel from both countries and also from Fiji and Vanuatu, from December 1997 to June 2003. This group monitored the truce and cease-fire, undertook some mediation, and assisted in implementation of the agreed weapons disposal process;
- A small United Nations monitoring office – the UN Political Office on Bougainville (UNPOB) from August 1998 to December 2003 and the

UN Mission on Bougainville (UNOMB) January 2004 to June 2005 – which monitored the process, chaired most forms of official engagement between the parties, undertook important mediation work, and supervised weapons disposal;

- Financial support from Australia, New Zealand, the UNDP and the European Union, directed to facilitation of the process, provision of technical advisers to parties in negotiations, and provision of humanitarian and development assistance;
- Capacity-building support for the Bougainville Administration from Australia, New Zealand and the UNDP, through advisors and special funding arrangements to provide incentives for improved budgeting and planning.

The August 2001 political settlement Agreement comprised three main elements: a constitutionally guaranteed referendum on Bougainville's independence, deferred for 10 to 15 years; a constitutionally guaranteed high level of autonomy for Bougainville; and demilitarization of Bougainville through not only withdrawal of the PNGDF and Police 'riot squads', but also a multi-stage process for disarming Bougainvillean combatants (in Bougainville referred to as disposal of weapons).

Implementation of the settlement (2001 to present) has proceeded more slowly than expected, but has involved a high level of cooperation between Bougainville groups and the PNG government. Constitutional laws to implement the Agreement were developed jointly and then passed by the PNG Parliament early in 2002. PNG forces withdrew from Bougainville starting in 2001 and the multi-stage weapons disposal process was implemented, with a reasonably high level of success, ending in 2005.

The autonomy arrangements were established through, first, a participatory process for the making of a Constitution for an Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) from September 2002 to August 2004, and then the conduct of elections for the ABG in mid-2005. The ABG has been operating since June 2005.

The process has been successful in ending both dimensions of the armed conflict (PNG versus Bougainville and intra Bougainville). The factions involved in the process see the settlement of 2001 as just and as responding to the causes of the conflict and many of the major problems arising from it. A small Bougainvillean minority remains outside the peace process, including former combatant elements supporting secession, and there are many other tensions some predating the conflict, others arising from the conflict and peace process. While such pressures are difficult to manage, and although expectations of autonomy are high, the capacity of the local state in Bougainville, including the law and justice administration, is weak.

Key reasons for the success of the peace process to date have included:

- the commitment of moderate leadership from all factions;
- the fact that the process was locally initiated and controlled, with the international intervention playing a mainly supportive role;
- the extended time frames involved, which allowed time for resolving tensions and differences;
- the active involvement in most stages of the negotiation processes of representatives of localised elements of Bougainville factions as well as of a wide range of elements of the PNG government;
- a complex mix of incentives involving both arrangements developed by the local actors through linkages and phasing of implementation of aspects of the peace settlement (below) as well as development and other assistance provided by donors, for example through development projects intended to provide income generating opportunities for former combatants.

Solomon Islands

The internal conflict of 1998-2003 in Solomon Islands (population 400,000) caused several hundred deaths, displaced up to 40,000 people, overthrew an elected government, and severely damaged the country's economy and polity. Although labelled an 'ethnic' conflict between militant groups from the major islands of Guadalcanal and Malaita, the root causes of the conflict involved socio-economic disparities arising from uneven economic development, regionalist sentiment, differential access to state resources, factional politics, declining state effectiveness, and resentment of elite groups over loss of access to wealth due to structural reform.

The conflict (and attempts to deal with it) can be separated into four over-lapping phases.

Phase I dated from late 1998 when gangs of young armed militants from Guadalcanal Island harassed settlers from Malaita Island on agricultural lands outside the capital, Honiara, killing a number and forcing most others to flee. In early 2000, Malaitan leaders based in Honiara (by this time a Malaitan stronghold) encouraged retaliation through a rival militant group – the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF). In mid-2000 the MEF, with the support of elements of the Solomon Islands police (itself predominantly Malaitan), led a bloodless 'coup' and installed a new Prime Minister. Fighting around Honiara continued.

Mediation efforts, led initially by a Commonwealth envoy and, after the coup, with more haste and resources by the Australian and New Zealand governments, resulted in agreement by all parties to a peace accord - the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) – in October 2000. Open conflict between the militants ended.

Phase II began with the TPA which, created only a partial framework for a peace process and consisted of two main elements. One of these elements was the indigenous Peace Monitoring Council (PMC) consisting of eminent Solomon Islanders with a mandate to oversee the peace process and pursue the demilita-

rization, development and restructuring recommendations made in the TPA. The other was the International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT) comprising 50 unarmed civilian officials, police and defence personnel from Australia, New Zealand, Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands, which was responsible for disarmament, confidence building, and monitoring breaches of the TPA.

Both the PMC and IPMT were explicitly 'monitoring' agencies; unarmed and possessing no enforcement authority. Both depended on the good will of the former combatants to disarm and on an elected government (over which the MEF had commanding influence) that was interested neither in a comprehensive peace process nor national economic development. No effective process was established to involve the militants and parties in dialogue and negotiation in order to resolve grievances and concerns that caused, or arose from, the conflict.

Although many home-made weapons were handed in, most military-style weaponry remained in the hands of the ex-militants, police and politicians who essentially ignored the efforts of the peace makers. The IPMT was withdrawn in mid-2002 and the PMC – although transformed into the National Peace Council – remained under-resourced and with little ability to build the peace. The political elites had quickly reverted to the main game of politicking for control over the resources of the state

Phase III, from late 2002 to mid 2003, witnessed the virtual collapse of state services, institutions and authority as well as the near bankruptcy of the country. In the absence of an impartial and effective police force, criminality became rife. What had been at the outset largely an ethnic conflict had transformed into a situation in which ex-militants and their elite allies had captured and criminalized the state, the capacity of which was rapidly evaporating.

Phase IV began in mid-2003 when the increasingly desperate situation resulted in a consensus in the government and Parliament on the need to invite an Australian led regional intervention - the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) – supported by New Zealand and 14 Pacific Island countries. RAMSI is a police-led operation with a military contingent providing security support numbering in its initial stages 300 and 1800 personnel respectively. RAMSI's mandate is to restore law and order and assist the rebuilding of state and economy. The intervention was legitimated by a formal request by the Solomon Prime Minister and by reference to the 'Biketawa Declaration' of the main Pacific regional body (the Pacific Islands Forum) that provides for a collective regional response to a request from a member in crisis. It was endorsed by the United Nations.

RAMSI enjoyed considerable early success in capturing and prosecuting ex-militants and criminals and in weapons disposal. With the help of a large multinational aid package and the insertion of expatriate public servants/consultants, state services resumed and economic growth picked up (although GDP was not expected to return to pre-crisis levels for 20 years). By early 2006, however, the dilemmas of an intervention of this kind had become obvious. A national elec-

tion held in April 2006 resulted in the return of the ruling coalition government, at which point mobs – fomented in part by disgruntled political factions - rioted, looted and burned sections of the commercial area of 'Chinatown' in Honiara. RAMSI was caught largely unawares and reinforcements were flown in. Within parliament a new coalition was promptly elected to office, but the prospects for continued instability remain.

These most recent ructions, while only partly related to the initial conflict, indicate that:

- political and social tensions remain unresolved;
- a peace process involving dialogue and reconciliation had not been effectively established;
- many of those believed to have been engaged in violence and/or corruption had not been brought to court, and that;
- the root causes of the conflict have not yet been adequately addressed.

In the context of a weak state, fragmented society and opportunistic government, the lack of balance in peace agreements and the under-resourcing of internal peace builders, coupled with a lack of vigour in the initial phases of peace building by external mediators and donors (later described by a senior Australian official as "well-intentioned half measures"), the Solomon case provides important lessons for the management of conflicts in Melanesia.

The manner in which RAMSI since mid-2003 has restored a degree of order and administrative and economic functionality to the Solomon via a more rigorous intervention also offers useful guidance. However, at this stage the apparent inability of RAMSI – or of the government – to open up processes for popular engagement in peace building (including especially reconciliation) and policy dialogue does not point confidently to a sustainable outcome.

Fiji Islands

The three coups in Fiji have been related to concerns amongst indigenous Fijians about who controls political and economic power in Fiji.

By the time of the first of the 1987 coups, Fijians of Indian descent (Indo-Fijians) comprised over 50 per cent of the population of more than 800,000, exacerbating tensions in the indigenous Fijian community. Under British colonial rule, Fijian dominance had been protected and until 1987 it had been assumed that the racially weighted electoral system provided for in the independence Constitution would ensure that situation would continue. However, general elections that year ousted a long-reigning political party dominated by elite indigenous Fijians, installing an Indo-Fijian dominated party led by an indigenous Fijian. Weeks later a coup by a senior officer in the almost 100% indigenous Fijian national army ousted the government in a bloodless coup, installing a military regime and then an interim civilian government.

Delicate constitutional negotiations between political party leaders to resolve the tense situation were derailed by a second military coup later in 1987. The military again handed over to an interim civilian government, but remained involved in politics. Indo-Fijian dominated political parties continued to operate and to provide political opposition. In 1990 a constitution discriminating heavily in favour of indigenous Fijians was promulgated, in the face of bitter and ongoing criticism from opposition parties.

The 1987 coups were deeply divisive, opened the structures of government to corruption and mismanagement in the guise of affirmative action in favour of indigenous Fijians (especially in the civil service and para-statal bodies) and undermined investor confidence. They also caused out-migration of about 70,000 people, mostly Indo-Fijians and brought severe criticism from the international community. A severe economic downturn was one outcome of these factors.

These same factors also contributed to pressure for a review of the 1990 constitution undertaken in the mid-1990s. Conducted by an independent three person commission that consulted widely, the review took the view that a multi-racial society needed a multi-racial constitution. The Commission argued for limited numbers of racially reserved seats in Parliament (to exist only for an interim period) and for a majority of seats to be elected non-racially. The Commission proposed that the country adopt the alternative vote (AV) electoral system in order to encourage pre-election coalitions that were expected to cross ethnic divides.[1] While constitutionally enforced power-sharing in the executive was opposed, a range of other power sharing arrangements were included, and also a number of arrangements intended to ensure indigenous Fijian control of some key institutions.

Parliamentary consideration of the Commission's report saw a large proportion of its recommendations adopted in the form of the 1997 Constitution. But changes were also made in key areas. In particular, the number of racially segregated seats was doubled and their long-term existence guaranteed, the number of open seats halved, and a requirement for executive power sharing inserted.

In the first elections under the 1997 Constitution, in 1999, the AV system did not work as expected. An Indo-Fijian party won power. A coup was mounted, the constitution was abolished the constitution and an interim administration was installed.

The Fijian High Court, however, ruled that the 1997 constitution was still extant and fresh elections were held under the 1997 Constitution in 2001. After a closely fought election a party led by an indigenous Fijian succeeded in forming a government, with the Indo-Fijian former prime minister ousted by the 2000 coup coming close to gaining power again. However, the Prime Minister refused to

1 Under the AV system voters indicate preferences amongst candidates, and preferences are allocated until a candidate has an absolute majority of votes. By encouraging parties and candidates to seek preferences, in an ethnically divided situation it was expected to encourage moderate parties and candidates to make preference deals across ethnic 'divides'.

abide by the provisions on power-sharing in the executive until required to do so by yet another court decision, upon which he appointed ministers from the Indo-Fijian party to minor positions, but without their leader's approval.

Constitutional processes played an important part in bringing an uneasy resolution to the struggle for control of the state. The Parliament has provided a significant forum for expression of interests of both the indigenous Fijian interests and those of Indo-Fijians. The Constitutional Commission and the consultative constitution-making process that produced the 1997 Constitution helped to illuminate concerns and educate people about moderate options and approaches. Some important multi-racial NGOs and church bodies have played important roles in keeping dialogue open.

The international community has played important roles, mainly through application of pressure (including some sanctions) and behind the scenes diplomacy. After the 1987 coups, Fiji's membership of the Commonwealth of Nations was suspended, something felt keenly by many in Fiji. Sanctions included suspension of bilateral defence cooperation arrangements with Australia and some other countries. After the 2000 coups, 'smart' sanctions were applied to prevent visas for foreign travel to be issued to alleged coup leaders. Much of the pressure in support of these actions originated from countries in the region, notably Australia and New Zealand. But, for some other countries in the region the case for pressure in response to the coups was less clear, some being sympathetic to the coups as a justified indigenous uprising against an economically and (to 1987?) numerically dominant migrant population.

Lessons learned

These three cases from the South Pacific are so different from each other – as they are from many conflicts in the broader Asia-Pacific – that general lessons are difficult to draw from them. But some aspects of the peace-building effort on the part of both local and international actors that have worked well (or not so well) may have resonance elsewhere.

Regional involvement

The Pacific region has demonstrated a considerable capacity for peace-building. In most cases it has been the *regional nature of the engagement* in conflict and post-conflict situations that has worked well. In Bougainville , the lead countries involved in mediation were New Zealand and Australia. In Solomon Islands, Australia was the lead external actor. In both cases, the lead country sought to act with a regional coalition involving themselves and a number of the smaller Pacific Island countries.

Regionalising these interventions had the advantages firstly of importing both localised 'islander' knowledge of the Pacific context, secondly of engaging Islander officials a number of whom had had personal contact with Bougainville

and thirdly of legitimating the role of the two larger, developed, predominantly Anglo-Saxon lead states.

Fiji has managed its conflicts largely through internal processes including utilising constitutional and legal institutions such as the court system: *not* through regional involvement on the ground. But, diplomatic pressure from international agencies (in particular the Commonwealth) and from Australia and New Zealand, together with technical support from foreign individuals and NGOs were also influential in conflict resolution there.

International agencies have played a much lesser role in Pacific conflict mediation, although in some circumstances their work has been useful and welcome. The small UN Observer Mission in Bougainville played a helpful role on issues such as disarmament and as Chair of a ceasefire violations committee. A relative lack of understanding of local conditions and needs on the part of international agencies (as was sometimes the case in Solomon Islands) as well as the small size of the Pacific states has limited the appeal of their involvement.

The importance of understanding context

For any state or agency of the international community seeking to intervene in a conflict situation, it is critically important to understand the local context – the socio-cultural, political and economic situation in which the conflict occurs.

- Culture is a particularly important aspect of context. Most peace-building literature either ignores culture, or pays lip-service to it, or emphasises just the need for cultural sensitivity on the part of interveners. In these small fragmented Melanesian societies, local culture can be critically important to people's comprehension of and reactions to both conflict and peace-making.
- The local context will largely determine what instruments will be useful in shaping and delivering peaceful outcomes. In Fiji, for example, some aspects of respect for the rule of law, the role of the courts and constitutional amendment are well established. In Bougainville, the fact that PNG had a reasonably strong record of respect for constitutional limits facilitated acceptance by the BRA of constitutionalisation of a radical political settlement (deferred referendum and autonomy). In Solomon Islands there was less scope for reliance on law and legal institutions.
- Understanding context also helps interveners (a) to set realistic timeframes for exit; but also (b) to appreciate that an intervention is never neutral – by its timing and by its often overly cautious respect for those in office - it is likely to favour those groups in the ascendancy at the point of intervention.

'Light-touch' international interventions supporting locally-initiated peace processes

The international community is increasingly focused on what it can do through major interventions to build peace from conflict and to rebuild the state. This approach tends to ignore the important roles that local actors engaged in locally-owned processes can play. It consequently reduces the potential for the international community to achieve more through playing a lesser role by providing support to local processes. Of course, there are cases where there really is no effective local process to be supported, and where there is a pressing need for international intervention (as was the case in Solomon Islands) and for the intervener to initiate dialogue, engagement and process. In contrast, the Bougainville and Fiji cases - where there was evidence of a desire for local ownership and a commitment to peace - highlight the advantages of supporting local processes and assisting in the building of constituencies for peace. Such an approach allows for:

- Outcomes designed by local actors to meet local needs and conditions rather than reflecting foreign models.
- Locally generated incentives for taking positive steps in a peace process to be embedded in peace agreements, as for example in Bougainville, where disarmament milestones were linked to the implementation of autonomy arrangements;
- Stronger prospects for the resolution of political tensions involved in conflict than if the international community controls the process
- Greater likelihood of sustainability of the peace process, and
- Enhanced legitimacy for the international intervention.

But interveners considering light interventions need to assess carefully the capacity of the conflicted state and parties in negotiation to, in fact, reach a sustainable agreement and to be able to (re)build a viable governing apparatus. They should ask questions about the basic integrity of the state. Are the structures of state capable of self-regeneration? Do the drivers of change possess sufficient capacity to steer in the right direction? How strong are those forces who want to capture the state apparatus and access to the rewards it affords? Is there an evident national interest? And to what extent is the state seen as legitimate?

The utility of constitutional processes and autonomy arrangements

As noted already, the extent to which constitutional processes can contribute to peace-building depends very much on context. The same is true of autonomy arrangements, in particular. Clearly, however, autonomy can be an important means of dealing with secessionist disputes, as in Bougainville. On the other hand, autonomy may need to be part of a broader constitutional package, as in Bougainville and other peace settlements in the past ten years – notably those in New Caledonia and southern Sudan. In those cases, where secessionist groups had not suffered a military defeat, autonomy was accepted only if the possibili-

ty of secession was kept alive by constitutional guarantees and by arrangements for a deferred referendum on independence.

By contrast, in Solomon Islands, where secession was not a central issue, debate on autonomy has played quite a different role. Because the formal peace process ended with the 2000 TPA, without resolving the underlying tensions, demands for constitutionalised autonomy through federal arrangements are currently being advanced by other parts of the country as a defence against the perceived expansion of the Malaitans who number about 40% of the population.

Autonomy has not yet become an issue in the Fiji peace process, but as it becomes increasingly clear that power struggles between various localized leadership groups amongst indigenous Fijians are a significant contributing factor to conflict about control of the state, arrangements guaranteeing local autonomy may well be seen as able to contribute to peace-building.

Secessionist demands most often arise in identity conflicts. It is also true that parties in such conflicts can find difficulty to develop and articulate clear political positions and demands. In the Bougainville process, provision of technical advisers to all parties interested in receiving such assistance and ample time for the development of positions made important contributions to achieving a negotiated settlement. In particular, such advice was critical in facilitating the development by the Bougainvillean parties of coherent autonomy and referendum proposals that largely set the agenda for the lengthy negotiations that generated the Bougainville Peace Agreement of August 2001. By contrast in the Solomon Islands, parties did not develop clear positions and were offered neither sufficient resources nor time to allow them to do so.