

DRAFT

MOST UNESCO-LIPI-UNDP Conference, Jakarta, October 2003
Conflict in Asia-Pacific:
State of the Field and the Search for Viable Solutions

WHY IS THE PACIFIC NOT PEACEFUL?
EXAMINING INTERNAL CONFLICTS IN MELANESIA.

R.J. May
Australian National University

In recent years, the Pacific has not been an ocean of peace. After a generally harmonious transition from European colonialism to independence, a number of the small Pacific island states have been plagued by internal conflict.

The largest of the Pacific island states, Papua New Guinea, having withstood the challenge of regional separatist groups in Papua and in Bougainville on the eve of independence, faced a rebellion on Bougainville from 1988 to 1997 (and is still in the process of implementing a peace agreement) and has seen an escalation of local-level inter-group fighting in the central highlands over the past two decades. Fiji became the first Pacific island state to have a military coup, in 1987, and continues to suffer the effects of racially-based tensions. In the Solomon Islands, ethnic divisions contributed to an outbreak of violence on the island of Guadalcanal in 1998, which culminated in the effective collapse of government two years later. Vanuatu's transition to independence was marred by a separatist rebellion on the island of Santo, and although it has enjoyed a relatively peaceful history since 1980 it has had to survive more than one constitutional crisis. In New Caledonia, independence demands by the indigenous *kanak* people resulted in violent confrontation between pro- and anti-independence groups in the 1980s, and New Caledonia remains a French dependency.

While each of these cases is, to some extent, a unique reflection of particular historical and other circumstances, there are some recurring features of the internal conflicts, which largely derive from the fragmented nature of the pre-colonial societies and/or ethnic divisions created by the influx of settler populations during the colonial period, and the absence, in all these cases, of a developed sense of national (as opposed to local) identity.

This paper will briefly describe the nature of the conflicts in each of the four states and one territory listed above, and the processes of conflict resolution in each. It will then attempt to identify what features are common and what are unique in the five cases, and to suggest some lessons from their experience, which might be relevant to conflict and peace-making elsewhere.

Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea is a complex political entity. Until 1942 it comprised the two territories of Papua (formerly British New Guinea) and New Guinea (formerly German New Guinea), both administered by Australia. Before the 1930s, the populous interior highlands of New Guinea was virtually unknown to outsiders and until the early 1960s many parts of the country still had little exposure to the colonial administration. With independence coming in

1975, for many Papua New Guineans the experience of colonial rule was a brief one. Moreover, at independence much of the public service and the private sector was still in the hands of foreigners. With some 850 separate languages, and a long history of endemic conflict between small, mostly 'acephalous' clan and tribal groups, it is not surprising that at independence a sense of nation was poorly developed and that local loyalties still tend to outweigh allegiance to the state.¹

In 1975 the future of the independent state was threatened by unilateral declarations of independence by both a Papuan separatist movement, Papua Besena, and a group in Bougainville, where a large gold and copper mine had begun operations, in the face of some local opposition, in the early 1970s. Papua New Guinea's leaders avoided confrontation with both groups, however, establishing a system of provincial government in part to meet the demands of Bougainvilleans, and the leaders of both groups became members of the national parliament.

In 1988 a younger generation of Bougainvilleans revived local opposition to the Bougainville mine, and as confrontation between landowners and the government escalated, the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) was brought in to assist police. Within two years, the 'Bougainville crisis' had developed into a full-scale rebellion, led by the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA), and Bougainvilleans were demanding secession.² Relations between the PNGDF and national politicians had also deteriorated as the army proved incapable of containing the conflict and elements within the army saw the government's attempts at negotiating a political settlement of the conflict as undermining the PNGDF's efforts at achieving a military solution. For a while, government forces withdrew from Bougainville and imposed a virtual blockade of the island but the subsequent breakdown of law and order across the island did nothing to ameliorate the conflict. Moreover, divisions also arose on Bougainville, where local opposition to the activities of the BRA prompted the emergence of a Resistance, which supported the return of government forces. Government security forces returned to Bougainville in 1990 but several attempts at peace-making broke down.

In 1997 an attempt by the then prime minister of Papua New Guinea to bring in foreign 'military consultants' Sandline International to take out the leadership of the BRA and recapture the area around the mine backfired when the commander of the PNGDF rebelled, publicly denouncing the Sandline contract, detaining and deporting Sandline personnel, and calling on the prime minister to resign.³ The prime minister relieved the offending general of his command but under popular pressure agreed to stand aside pending an enquiry into the Sandline affair. Although he declared that the enquiry had exonerated him of wrongdoing, the prime minister lost his parliamentary seat in national elections soon after. Ironically, this series of events gave a new momentum to the peace process, and over the next five years the

¹ For a more detailed background on Papua New Guinea see Sean Dorney, *Papua New Guinea. People, Politics and History Since 1975* (Sydney: Random House, 1990); R.J. May, *State and Society in Papua New Guinea: The First Twenty-Five Years* (Adelaide: Crawford House Publishing, 2001), and May, 'Turbulence and reform in Papua New Guinea', *Journal of Democracy* 14(1) (January 2003), pp.154-165.

² See R.J. May and Matthew Spriggs (eds), *The Bougainville Crisis* (Bathurst: Crawford House Press, 1990); A.J. Regan, 'Current developments in the Pacific: causes and course of the Bougainville conflict', *Journal of Pacific History* 33(3) (1998), pp.269-285, and A. Carl and L. Garasau (eds), *Weaving Consensus – The Bougainville Peace Process, Accord 12* (London: Conciliation Resources, 2002).

³ See Sinclair Dinnen, R.J. May and A.J. Regan (eds), *Challenging the State: The Sandline Affair in Papua New Guinea* (Canberra: National Centre for Development Studies and Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1997).

BRA, the Resistance forces and the national government engaged in a series of talks which culminated in the Bougainville Peace Agreement of 2001. The conduct of the peace negotiations was supported by the New Zealand and Australian governments and facilitated by the presence in Bougainville of a regional Peace Monitoring Group (PMG)), comprising unarmed military and civilian personnel from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Vanuatu.⁴ The agreement provides for a high degree of autonomy for Bougainville, conditional upon a successful programme of weapons disposal. There is also provision for a referendum on the future status of Bougainville, including independence, to be held within ten to fifteen years. The outcome of the referendum will be subject to consultation between the Bougainville autonomous government and the national government, with the ultimate decision-making power residing with the national parliament.⁵

There is still an element of fragility in the Bougainville peace process – particularly insofar as the leader of the hard core of the BRA, Francis Ona, has remained outside the process – but the constitutional amendments necessary to implement the agreement have been passed, the details of the autonomy arrangements are currently being worked out, a new constitution for the province is being completed, and reconciliation and reconstruction processes are under way. Indeed, the Bougainville peace process has been one of the most successful instances of conflict resolution, anywhere in the world, in recent decades.

But while the Bougainville peace process has enjoyed success, there has been an escalation of intergroup ('tribal') fighting at the local level, particularly in the populous highlands, where the colonial regime's attempts at pacification were, in historical terms, fleeting. It has been estimated that in the Southern Highlands and Enga provinces alone, deaths from intergroup fighting over the past five years number in the hundreds – not perhaps high by international standards, but nevertheless substantial. The causes of conflict are multifarious, a mix of traditional enmities, disputes over land, competition for state resources, and cycles of payback and compensation. Increased mobility of people and the impact of big resource projects, especially in the Southern Highlands, have exacerbated tensions, and the importation of modern weaponry – automatic weapons replacing bows and arrows and spears – has changed the nature of warfare, and there has been substantial destruction of public infrastructure. In the 2002 national elections, polling in six of the Southern Highlands' nine electorates had to be abandoned; police mobile squads sent to maintain order complained that they were outnumbered and outgunned.⁶

Fiji

Until 1987 the multiracial society of Fiji provided a good example of a successful transition from colony to independent democratic state.

In 1874 the Fiji islands were ceded to Britain. Under a deed of cession the British undertook to protect Fijians from European commercial interests and to preserve the Fijian way of life.

⁴ Accounts of the Australian role in the PMG are contained in Monica Wehner and Donald Denoon (eds), *Without a Gun. Australians' Experiences Monitoring Peace in Bougainville, 1997-2001* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2001).

⁵ See A.J. Regan, 'The *Bougainville Peace Agreement, 2001-2002: towards order and stability for Bougainville?*', in R.J. May *et al.*, 'Arc of Instability'? *Melanesia in the Early 2000s* (Christchurch: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University and Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury, 2003), pp.9-26.

⁶ A workshop on the ongoing conflicts in the Southern highlands was held at the Australian National University in May 2003. A preliminary report from the workshop, by Abby McLeod *et al.*, may be found at [Hhttp://rspas.anu.edu/melanesiaH](http://rspas.anu.edu/melanesiaH).

Fijians were governed indirectly through a Native Fijian Administration which recognized the customary Fijian chiefly structure. To provide labour for European plantations in Fiji, until 1916 indentured workers were brought from India. By 1945 Indians outnumbered indigenous Fijians. The colonial government, however, recognized the paramountcy of (indigenous) Fijian interests, safeguarding Fijian land rights, acknowledging a Great Council of Chiefs, and adopting an electoral system designed to maintain a balance of communal interests.

In the seventeen years between independence in 1970 and 1987, government was in the hands of the predominantly indigenous-Fijian Alliance Party headed by paramount chief Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. In 1987, however, the electoral victory of the recently-formed multiracial Fiji Labour Party (FLP) over the Alliance Party provoked a political crisis which culminated in the Pacific's first military coup.⁷

Various explanations have been offered for the coup of May 1987,⁸ but, essentially, the victory of the FLP, which was led by an indigenous Fijian, Timoci Bavadra, but in which Indo-Fijians were strongly represented, was seen by many indigenous Fijians as posing a threat to the principle of the paramountcy of Fijian interests.⁹ The coup, led by the third-in-command of the predominantly indigenous-Fijian Fiji Military Forces (FMF), Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, resulted in the detention of the elected government and the immediate creation of a 16-member Council of Ministers, which included eleven Alliance MPs (including former prime minister Ratu Mara), four members of the populist Fijian nationalist Taukei movement, and Rabuka. Rabuka's action was endorsed by the Great Council of Chiefs, the supreme chiefly body representing the interests of indigenous Fijians (though Rabuka himself was not a chief).

In the weeks that followed, however, the civilian politicians, led by Ratu Mara, entered into discussions which culminated in an agreement to establish a caretaker government, which would include MPs from both the Alliance and the deposed government, under the governor general, Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau. The effect of this was to partially marginalize Rabuka and the Taukei leaders. But before the caretaker government could be announced, Rabuka staged a second coup, abrogating the 1970 constitution and declaring himself head of a republican government. Subsequently, deferring to the chiefly elite, Rabuka resigned from the FMF and became deputy prime minister in an interim civilian government headed by Mara (as prime minister) and Ganilau (president). In 1992 elections were conducted under a new constitution, and Rabuka was elected prime minister.

Neither of the 1987 coups was particularly violent, but there were instances of physical harassment and looting, mostly directed against Indo-Fijians. A number of Indo-Fijians left the country, many of them migrating to Australia and New Zealand.

⁷ See, for example, Stephanie Lawson, *The Failure of Democratic Politics in Fiji* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

⁸ Various accounts of the coup are reviewed in Rory Ewins, *Colour, Class and Custom: The Literature of the 1987 Fiji Coup. Regime Change and Regime Maintenance in Asia and the Pacific Discussion Paper 9* (Canberra: Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, 1992). Rabuka's own version of the events of 1987 is contained in Eddie Dean and Stan Ritova, *Rabuka: No Other Way* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1988).

⁹ Another explanation offered for the first 1987 coup was in terms of eastern-western Fijian rivalry – early post-independence leadership having come from eastern chiefs and Bavadra being from the west.

As the political situation settled down again, the Rabuka government authorized the drafting of a new constitution. The Constitution Review Committee comprised a New Zealand judge, a Fijian clergyman and an Indo-Fijian academic resident in Australia. After a lengthy process of consultation, the new constitution was passed in 1997. It was widely acclaimed as an attempt to achieve reconciliation between the dominant ethnic groups, while acknowledging the paramount interests of the indigenous Fijians in matters such as land.

The first elections under the new constitution were held in 1997. In the event, Rabuka was not returned to parliament and electoral victory went to the FLP, which in 1997 was led by an Indo-Fijian, Mahendra Chaudhry. Within three years, the Chaudhry government was overthrown, this time in a civilian coup, led by Fijian businessman George Speight. Speight was backed by members of the Fijian elite and elements within the army and police. Again, the factors behind the coup were complex, but in 2000 appear to have had less to do with the indigenous Fijian/Indo-Fijian ethnic divide than was the case in 1987.¹⁰

After a period of unrest, Speight was arrested, and along with some members of the FMF sentenced on charges of sedition. New elections were held in 2001, this time returning a Fijian-led government headed by Laisenia Qarase. Under power-sharing arrangements introduced in the 1997 constitution in an effort to reduce racial divisions, Prime Minister Qarase was bound to offer posts in the cabinet to the defeated FLP (which won 28 seats in the 70-seat parliament); according to Qarase, an offer was made, but withdrawn when the FLP put forward unacceptable policy conditions. Early in 2003 the Fiji Supreme Court ruled that the Qarase government must include the FLP in its cabinet.

Fiji appears to have returned to some degree of political order, and there has been a turnover of senior officers within the FMF. The political landscape has significantly changed, however, and the (at least superficial) racial harmony which the country enjoyed before 1987 has been substantially undermined.

Solomon Islands.

Solomon Islands also enjoyed a smooth transition to independence under a Westminster-type democratic government, although around the time of independence there was a breakaway movement in the western islands. But in 1998, growing tensions between traditional landowners on the island of Guadalcanal, where the national capital Honiara is located, and immigrants (or the descendants of immigrants) from the neighbouring island of Malaita (many of whom were brought to Guadalcanal during the second world war) erupted into violence.¹¹ Militant groups of Guadalcanal people, initially calling themselves the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (and later the Isatabu Freedom Movement [IFM]) began harassing Malaitan settlers in rural Guadalcanal, forcing some 20,000 people to return to Malaita or seek refuge in Honiara (whose population is predominantly Malaitan). In mid 1999 a state of emergency was declared on Guadalcanal. A series of peace talks, mediated, somewhat

¹⁰ See Brij V. Lal and Michael Pretes (eds), *Coup. Reflections on the Political Crisis in Fiji* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2001), Brij V. Lal, "Chiefs and thieves and other people besides": the making of George Speight's coup', *Journal of Pacific History* 35(2) (2000), pp.281-293, and Robbie Robertson and William Sutherland, *Government By the Gun. The Unfinished Business of Fiji's 2000 Coup* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 2001).

¹¹ For a background to the Solomon Islands conflict and account of developments up to mid 2002, see Sinclair Dinnen, 'Guns, money and politics: disorder in the Solomon Islands', in R.J. May *et al.*, 'Arc of Instability?' (2003), pp.27-40, and Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, 'A Weak State and the Solomon Islands Peace Process', *East-West Center Working Papers, Pacific Islands Development Series No.14* (April 2002).

ironically, by Fiji's 1987 coup leader Rabuka, failed to ameliorate the situation, and the responses of the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP), which is heavily Malaitan, exacerbated the situation.

Early in 2000, Malaitans, who had effectively established a Malaitan enclave in Honiara and were retaliating against the Guadalcanal population in and around the capital, formed a rival militant group, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF). The MEF had close links to the RSIP, particularly its paramilitary police field force, giving them access to high-powered weapons. The situation deteriorated over the following months, with MEF members demanding substantial compensation payments for the loss of lives and property. A request from the Solomon Islands government of Bartholomew Ulufa'alu for assistance from Australia and New Zealand was declined.

In June 2000 MEF elements, supported by the police field force, staged a coup of sorts, seizing control of the police armoury and other installations and forcing Prime Minister Ulufa'alu (himself a Malaitan) to resign. Opposition leader Manasseh Sogavare was installed as head of government, though he was in effect the puppet of the MEF-field force 'joint operation'. Following the coup, violence, looting and destruction of property escalated and spread to other islands; in the western provinces there were reports that former members of the BRA were providing security against attacks by the MEF. Businesses closed down and many foreigners left the country, and an escalation of compensation claims – sometimes enforced at gunpoint – threatened to bankrupt the government.

In August a ceasefire agreement was mediated by the Australian government, and some 130 representatives of the militant groups and the national and provincial governments were flown to an Australian military base in Townsville, to negotiate a peace agreement between the combatants. The Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) was signed two months later. The ceasefire and TPA effectively brought an end to the fighting between the militant groups; provisions were made for the surrender of weapons, under the supervision of an International Peace Monitoring team (IPMT) (comprising military and civilian personnel from Australia, New Zealand, Tonga and the Cook Islands), and for the creation of a national Peace Monitoring Council, which later became the National Peace Council. But there were weaknesses in the TPA process and outcome. For one, it gave formal recognition to the MEF and IFM, and left the major responsibility for weapons surrender with them. By late 2002, however, there was intense factionalism within both groups, and little interest in implementing the provisions of the TPA. For another, the TPA provided for an amnesty for members of the militant groups (including police who had joined the militants), and institutionalized compensation payments. Further, it allowed for former militants to be integrated into the police force as 'special constables' (by the end of 2001 there were around 2000 special constables, most of them Malaitan.) The result of this was that a number of former combatants, often armed with stolen police weapons, became systematically involved in criminal activities, including raids on the national treasury and private banks to obtain large 'compensation' payments. Generous duty remissions and tax exemptions were also being granted to certain individuals. The RSIP, itself compromised and significantly partisan, was incapable of restoring law and order. Beyond Honiara, provincial administrations, starved of funding from the center, began pressing for greater autonomy.

In December 2001 Solomon Islands went to the polls. When votes were counted, only 18 members of the outgoing 50-member parliament retained their seats, and in the vote for prime minister, the former deputy prime minister, Sir Allan Kemakeza, was victorious. Kemakeza,

who had been dumped from the previous government over his handling of compensation payments, has links to the MEF and his choice of cabinet members was seen by many as favouring former Malaitan militants. To address the growing demands for autonomy or 'state government' a committee was established to consider and recommend on provisions for a federal-type political structure.

In early 2003, with the internal security situation still extremely fragile, and facing a fiscal and a broader economic crisis, the Solomon Islands government requested external assistance. With support from the Pacific Islands Forum, a Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was put together, under Australian leadership, and some 1200 police, military and administrative personnel from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Papua New Guinea were dispatched to Solomon Islands in July to restore law and order and rebuild the institutions of governance. In its first few weeks, RAMSI organized a surrender of weapons, moved against several active combatants, initiated a number of prosecutions (including actions against members of the RSIP), and sought to restore integrity to the government. RAMSI's presence has initially been well received by Solomon Islanders, but the longer-term problems of maintaining law and order and ensuring integrity of governance are considerable, especially while Honiara remains an essentially Malaitan enclave on traditional Guadalcanal land.

Vanuatu

Of the smaller Melanesian states, Vanuatu has perhaps maintained the best record of democratic government since its independence in 1980, notwithstanding its colonial history as a joint Anglo-French condominium, which divided the population into Anglophone and Francophone streams and contributed to the separatist Santo rebellion by Francophone ni-Vanuatu on the eve of independence. Its relatively short political history has not been without incident, however. In 1988 President Ati George Sokomanu dissolved a fractious parliament and swore in his nephew Barak Sope as interim prime minister. Sokomanu and Sope were subsequently charged with mutiny and seditious conspiracy, though the charges were overturned. Seven years later, Vanuatu's prime minister at independence, Fr Walter Lini, and his coalition party leader, Serge Vohor, staged what was described as an 'administrative coup' in an unsuccessful attempt to retain office.¹² The following year, members of the Vanuatu Mobile Force (VMF, the paramilitary arm of the police) briefly abducted the president, while pursuing their demands for outstanding pay.

In May 2001 Vanuatu suffered another constitutional crisis, prompting some commentators to suggest a flow-on of political instability from Fiji and Solomon Islands. In this instance, the triggering event was an attempted parliamentary vote of no confidence in Prime Minister Barak Sope, in the context of an impending financial crisis.¹³ It was reported that Sope had requested the acting police commissioner to declare a state of emergency and, given links between Sope's Melanesian Progressive Party (MPP) and the VMF (the deputy leader of the MPP at the time was a former commander of the VMF), there were some concerns about an imminent coup. But in the event, the constitutional order was maintained and Sope was unseated. Subsequently he was convicted of fraud and sentenced to three years' goal.

¹² See David Ambrose, 'A coup that failed? Recent political events in Vanuatu', *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 96/3* (Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian studies, Australian National University, 1996).

¹³ ¹³ See Michael Morgan, "Converging on the arc of instability? The fall of Barak Sope and the spectre of a coup in Vanuatu", in R.J. May *et al.*, 'Arc of Instability'? (2003), pp.41-54.

Shortly after this, in August 2002, a group of RSIP personnel, including the commander of the VMF, arrested the newly appointed police commissioner and fifteen members of the Public Services Commission (including the attorney general, secretary to the president and ombudsman), alleging seditious conspiracy in the appointment of the police commissioner. Although the judiciary overturned the police commissioner's appointment, a number of senior police officers were charged with mutiny and incitement to mutiny over their role in the detention of the PSC.

Vanuatu's parliamentary democracy thus remains intact. Ironically, however, explanations of its survival point to an essentially non-democratic feature of Vanuatu's society and politics, namely the continuing importance of traditional chiefs in maintaining law and order at the community level.

New Caledonia

New Caledonia, which became a French possession in 1853, remains one of the few non-independent entities in the island Pacific.

In the early 1980s, frustrated at the French government's failure to respond to the indigenous *Kanak* people's demands for independence, and indeed the effective withdrawal of regional autonomy measures granted in the mid 1950s, *Kanak* activists launched a series of protest actions prior to national elections. They were met with brutal repression by French *gendarmes* and anti-independence French settlers, and in 1985 *Kanak* leader Eloi Machoro was murdered by his opponents. In retaliation, *Kanak* activists took 27 *gendarmes* hostage on the island of Ouvéa, prompting a military assault in which several *Kanaks* were killed.

Following this violent episode, peace negotiations commenced, which culminated in the Matignon Accords of 1988 between the pro-independence Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS), the anti-independence Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République (RPCR) and the French government.

The Matignon Accords and associated statutes sought to 'restore the balance' between the *Kanak* communities, concentrated in the North and Loyalty Islands provinces, and the non-*Kanak* population, concentrated in the South Province and the capital, Noumea. This involved the creation of a federal-type political structure based on the three provinces, a fiscal redistribution in favour of the North and Islands provinces, a series of measures designed to promote development among the *Kanak* population, and the creation of (*Kanak*) Customary Advisory Council and an Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture. The Accords also provided for a referendum on self-determination to be held in 1998, and the French government agreed to restrict the voting rights of recent arrivals from metropolitan France.¹⁴ The implementing statute was ratified by a referendum of all French voters, though in New Caledonia there was a high rate of abstention and in the South a majority of voters opposed the statute. Many *Kanaks* saw the Matignon Accords as a betrayal of their demands, and in 1989 FLNKS leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou was assassinated by a hardline *Kanak indépendantiste*.

¹⁴ This had been a major point of contention in earlier negotiations, since by the 1970s indigenous *Kanaks* were a minority of the total population of New Caledonia, being outnumbered by French settlers of long standing (*caldoches*), Indochinese and other Pacific islanders brought in mainly as labourers by the French, and more recent arrivals from France (including, at one stage, the *gendarmes* brought in to counter *Kanak* unrest).

As 1998 approached it became increasingly evident that a referendum on self-determination would not resolve the competing demands of the pro- and anti-independence groups: even with some restriction on non-*Kanak* voting, a referendum was virtually certain to reject independence for New Caledonia and likely to initiate further violent conflict. Talks therefore began around 1995 between the FLNKS and the RPCR which concluded in 1998 with the Noumea Accord, which circumvented the proposed referendum. The necessary amendments to the French constitution were passed in 1998 and the Accord was embodied in an organic law the following year.¹⁵

A preamble to the Noumea Accord recognizes both the ‘long-lasting traumatic effect’ of colonization on the original people and the contribution of nineteenth and twentieth century arrivals (some of whom were sent to New Caledonia as convicts), but acknowledges the centrality of *Kanak* identity to New Caledonia as a political entity. A Customary Senate has been established, representing eight indigenous linguistic areas, which must be consulted on all issues relating to *Kanak* identity, and New Caledonian citizenship has been created for all who have settled there for at least ten years. Substantively, the Accord provided for a progressive devolution of powers to a New Caledonian Congress over a 15-20 year period (with financial assistance from France). Executive powers have passed from the French high commissioner to a collegial government elected by the Congress. In 2000 the former overseas territory acquired the status of an ‘Overseas Country’, with control of such functions as immigration, natural resource exploitation and foreign trade. Further powers will be devolved until by 2019 France will retain only minimal reserved powers. In that year (or earlier if Congress decides) there will be a referendum on the future status of the country, including the option of ‘complete emancipation’.

The Matignon Accords contributed substantially to defusing the conflict that broke out in the 1980s, and the Noumea Accord of 1998 has helped to maintain the peace between pro- and anti-independence forces. Nevertheless, the fundamental gap between the predominantly-*Kanak indépendantistes* and the mostly non-*Kanak* supporters of a continuing association with France remain, and even within the FLNKS and the RPCR there are sharp divisions of opinion about New Caledonia’s future. Recent years have also seen growing tensions between *Kanaks* and immigrant communities from the French Polynesian islands of Wallis and Futuna.

Comparing conflicts in Melanesia

Clearly, each of these five case studies of conflict in Melanesia displays some unique characteristics; equally, however, there are some common features.

In all five countries there are deep social divisions, legacies of the colonial experience, which have hindered the development of a sense of national unity, producing weak states, and provided fault lines along which competing groups have been defined.

¹⁵ Detailed accounts of the Matignon and Noumea accords may be found in Alaine Chanter, ‘The Matignon and Noumea Accords in New Caledonia’, in R.J. May (ed.), *Autonomy Arrangements as a Means of Dealing with Ethnic Conflict*, forthcoming, and Frédéric Angleviel, ‘“The bet on intelligence”: politics in New Caledonia, 1988-2002’, *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2003/4* (Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian studies, Australian National University, 2003).

Papua New Guinea never became a settler colony nor was there any significant importation of indentured labour to support the colonial economy; to this extent colonialism did not create an ethnic divide as it did in countries like Fiji, Malaysia or Sri Lanka. However, the effect of the colonial experience was to bring together a large number of historically fragmented societies and attempt, in a relatively short period of time, to mould them into a modern nation state. At best, there was never more than a poorly developed sense of national identity, largely confined to an urban elite, and as competition intensified for the scarce resources of the state (both goods and services and public offices which gave access to the state and its resources), local interests and loyalties tended to prevail over commitment to the state and so undermine the authority of the state itself. Thus, Bougainvilleans came together, at least temporarily, to support the Panguna landowners' in their demands against the Bougainville copper mine and a national government to which they felt no real allegiance – eventually not so much for a larger share of mine revenues but for the closure of the mine itself. And in the highlands, intergroup fighting perpetuates longstanding patterns of local political allegiance and enmity, though the ends of conflict may have been redefined by the conditions of access to the state and the impact of big resource projects.

Similarly, in Solomon Islands a sense of nationhood was weak, as evidenced by the Western Breakaway movement in the early years of independence and growing tensions between Malaitans and Guadalcanal people, exacerbated by disputes over land around Honiara, a legacy of the second world war and postwar colonial administration. So long as Malaitans outnumber Guadalcanal people in and around Honiara (and in the public service and police) problems are likely to continue.

Notwithstanding its relative stability to date, Vanuatu shares some characteristics with Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands: although the Anglophone-Francophone divide has lessened somewhat over the past two decades, identification with local communities continues to outweigh any sense of national identity, which tends to deprive the state of a perceived legitimacy, producing a series of minor, but disruptive, constitutional crises.

Fiji presents a different set of circumstances. The colonial administration in Fiji, while importing labourers from India who would eventually become settlers, recognized the paramountcy of indigenous Fijian interests and institutionalized a hierarchical Fijian chiefly structure. Initially this provided the basis for comparatively strong and stable Fijian-dominated state after independence, but one which rested on the implicit premise that, politically, Indo-Fijians were second-class citizens. When, in 1987, this premise was seen as being challenged, the Fijian state proved fragile. But the divide was not simply one between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians; events in 1987 and subsequently suggested that there were also significant differences amongst indigenous Fijian communities. Attempts to negotiate a new compact, through the constitution of 1997, generated some optimism, but in 2000 appear to have failed. In 2003, the divide between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians remains, but additionally there has been a breakdown of the apparent cohesion of Fijian chiefly society, which has resulted in a weakening of the state, inviting comparison with its Melanesian neighbours.

New Caledonia, as a non-independent country, is different again. There, the conflict has been between an indigenous Melanesian population seeking *Kanak* sovereignty, and a strong colonial state responsible to France and, at least until 1988, heavily influenced by a non-*Kanak* settler population. Indeed the only reason for including New Caledonia in this set of

case studies is that there may be something to learn from New Caledonia's experience of conflict resolution through the Matignon and Noumea accords.

Melanesian lessons for conflict resolution?

After about nine years of fighting and failed peace talks on Bougainville, the peace process which got under way in 1997 and culminated in the Bougainville Peace Agreement of 2001 was a drawn-out and sometimes fragile affair. But as Anthony Regan has argued¹⁶, the time taken to finalize the agreement in part accounts for its success. The measured pace of negotiations allowed the participants to gain trust in one another and in the process, to define what it was they wanted out of a settlement, and to consult with their constituents. The decision to tie the implementation of autonomy provisions to the surrender of weapons gave both sides an incentive to progress the process, and the provision for a postponed referendum on the future status of Bougainville provided a means of accommodating the more intractable demands of the two sides.

In a similar way, the Matignon and Noumea accords have provided a formula for postponing a decision on Kanak independence, on which there is an apparently intractable difference between *Kanaks* and non-*Kanaks*, creating space within which to redress the developmental imbalance between the two communities and seek creative solutions to the problem of achieving greater harmony between the major cultural groups.

In contrast, the Townsville Peace Agreement was negotiated under pressure to achieve a ceasefire and failed to address adequately the underlying causes of the Solomon Islands conflict. The RAMSI intervention seeks to do this through first re-establishing law and order and then rebuilding the institutions of democratic governance. But it is clear that simply re-establishing the political institutions which existed before the conflict will not be effective if the tensions which generated the conflict are not resolved, and there is no obvious formula for building a viable nation-state from the island entities which comprise Solomon Islands. The same problems of nation building and establishing a viable state face Papua New Guinea beyond Bougainville, and also Vanuatu.

In Fiji also there is a need to re-establish the perceived legitimacy of the state among indigenous Fijian communities as well as addressing the larger and more difficult problem of building a tolerant multi-racial society. The failure of the well-crafted constitution of 1997 shows just how difficult this will be.

If there are general lessons to be drawn from the Melanesian experiences, they would seem to be fourfold:

- 1) weak states with poor performance legitimacy (particularly states characterized by corruption, nepotism and mismanagement) are prone to internal conflict, and where their societies are divided along ethnic or regional lines, ethnic and separatist movements pose a constant threat to national security;
- 2) predominantly military responses to ethnic and regional unrest – especially when the military is seen to be aligned with a dominant ethnic or regional group – seldom produce a solution and more often exacerbate and prolong conflict;

¹⁶ 'The Bougainville Peace Agreement, 2001-2002'.

- 3) the best prospects for managing and perhaps eventually solving internal conflict lie in establishing a dialogue, defining the minimum demands of conflicting groups and the state, and exploring how the two sides might accommodate to one another's demands; external (and specifically, regional) peacekeeping/ peace monitoring forces may have a useful role to play in facilitating such dialogue and building confidence in the peace process;¹⁷
- 4) autonomy arrangements (which can cover a broad range of possibilities) can generally go a long way towards accommodating the demands of rebellious groups, especially where these groups are territorially defined, without necessarily compromising the sovereignty of the state (but only if the national government's commitment to autonomy is genuine).

¹⁷ For a specific analysis of peace interventions in Bougainville and Solomon Islands, see David Hegarty, 'Peace interventions in the South Pacific: lessons from Bougainville and Solomon Islands', paper presented to Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies Conference on Island State Security, Honolulu, Hawai'i, July 2003.