

Commentators Critical Over Relevance of Forum

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Issues such as growing foreign ownership of Vanuatu land, funding cuts to Pacific campaigns against domestic violence and specifics on inter-island trade all remain “unvoiced”. **Media Commentators Critical Over Relevance Of ‘Straitjacket’ Forum**

Issues such as growing foreign ownership of Vanuatu land, funding cuts to Pacific campaigns against domestic violence and specifics on inter-island trade all remain “unvoiced”. The biggest issue left unaddressed was allegations of human rights abuses against West Papuans. Hamish Fletcher reports

AUCKLAND (*Pacific Scoop/Pacific Media Watch*): Australasian dominance and stress on formalities continue to straitjacket the Pacific Islands Forum, say many regional commentators.

Leaders from around the Pacific met in Port Vila, Vanuatu, last week for annual discussions that try to find solutions to issues plaguing the Pacific.

Despite the PIF’s long history, some were openly sceptical about what the meeting would actually achieve.

Russell Hunter of the *Samoa Observer* remarked as the PIF started: “This week the 41st Pacific Islands Forum leaders’ meeting convenes and for probably the 41st time, those whom they lead are left to wonder just how relevant it is to their daily lives.”

Others commented that countries such as Australia and Papua New Guinea sending representatives rather than their prime ministers undermined the credibility of the conference.

Despite hopes to the contrary, many felt it suffered from the same yearly pitfalls.

Television New Zealand’s Pacific correspondent Barbara Dreaver says that while leaders of small countries are beginning to speak their minds, the larger economic strength of Australia and New Zealand continues to let them to set the agenda.

“There is still a feeling that countries that put in more money should have more say,” she says.

‘Law of the jungle’

Radio New Zealand International reporter Johnny Blades agrees.

“It’s just a matter of who’s got the money right? That’s the way of the world – the law of the jungle,” he says.

“Even though they’ll talk about the ‘Pacific spirit’ and sitting at the table and working out their problems, ultimately on certainly key issues Australia and New Zealand do lay the law down and you see that from year to year.”

Head of journalism at the University of the South Pacific Shailendra Singh says this is how the PIF operates, with larger economies using aid to get their way.

“When there is disagreement, the fact that Australia and New Zealand are the major aid donors to PIF member countries can become a crucial deciding factor – and they are not coy about using the ‘aid card’,” says Singh.

“They are not averse to a bit of island arm-twisting should it come to that and PIF member countries know not to bite the hand that feeds.”

However, Dreaver believes there is more involved in the power imbalance than Australian and New Zealand dollars.

Culture barriers

She says language and cultural barriers can often stop some leaders from speaking up.

“Around the table a lot of it has to do with the fact the discussion takes place in English and so some of the leaders don’t feel confident. It’s not the Pacific way to throw yourself forward, so Australia and New Zealand tend to dominate.”

Similarly, Singh says the PIF’s tradition of consensus means the two powers often get their way.

“Sometimes, you will find that there is major debate over an issue and PIF member countries will vow that they will not support Australia and NZ. But when they come out of the meeting to face the media, everyone is smiling. All is suddenly hunky dory,” says Singh.

Both Singh and Blades believe formalities and ceremony get in the way of discussions and hampered the leaders’ ability to make meaningful decisions.

Singh says the PIF communiqué’s “half-hearted statements” reflects the time put into it, with the rest of the conference filled with “island dancing, feasting, drinking and beach frolicking”.

Moreover, with Australia and New Zealand in control of discussions, and the PIF’s short length, Blades says the conference did not give attention to many important regional issues.

Foreign ownership

He argues concerns around the growing foreign ownership of Vanuatu land, funding cuts to Pacific campaigns against domestic violence and specifics on inter-island trade all remain unvoiced.

However, Blades says the biggest issue left unaddressed at this year's conference was over allegations that West Papuans are suffering abuse at the hands of the Indonesian military.

Although rights activists expected Vanuatu Prime Minister and Forum chair Edward Natapei would table this to other leaders, they were disappointed he did not bring it forward.

“For too long the West Papuan issue has been swept under the tapa mat of PIF meetings, but if the forum is to truly represent all Pacific peoples it must confront the occupation of West Papua,” said the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation in a statement.

Given the absence of Australian and Papua New Guinean leaders who are renowned for not wanting to upset Indonesia, Blades says the conference lost an excellent opportunity to address the plight of West Papuans.

“It shows how hamstrung the PIF is to say anything about it. It's a disgrace. This should be the body to work it out and have some guts to stand up and say something,” Blades says.

While some subjects were notably absent from discussions, Fiji remained a central focus both leading up to and during the conference.

Unity questioned

Voreqe Bainimarama's own forum last month, “Engaging Fiji”, which hosted some of last week's absent leaders, questioned whether PIF countries are united in their denunciation of the interim Prime Minister.

Speaking at the time, Fiji's Foreign Affairs Minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola said the presence of the other leaders demonstrates the support that Fiji has in the Pacific.

Singh agrees and says attempts to isolate Fiji have not been successful.

“Attendance at the ‘Engaging Fiji’ forum showed that the level of sympathy for Fiji among brother island leaders is reasonably strong. Some leaders supporting Fiji have had their own runs-ins with Australian and NZ, and harbour grudges. They cannot take on Australia and New Zealand, or speak their mind and they like the fact that Bainimarama is able to,” he says.

Indeed, if the PIF hopes to achieve this year's resolution of engaging in a "genuine, inclusive dialogue" with Fiji, Blades says New Zealand and Australia need to stop isolating Bainimarama with their "bully-boy" tactics.

Dev Nadkarni's column in *Islands Business* argues that if relations are going to improve, the ANZAC administrations must soften their stance towards Fiji.

Nadkarni says that by refusing to send a delegate to Bainimarama's conference, New Zealand passed up a real chance to begin repairing the countries' relationship.

"Attending that meeting would have been a great opportunity to restart dialogue and work with Fiji towards an outcome that is best for its people and for the region as a whole."

Nadkarni, though, says both Australasia and Fiji must come to the table willing to compromise, instead of flexing their political muscles.

For as it stands, there is little reason to expect much out of next year's PIF unless it engages properly with Fiji and ANZAC leaders debate with words rather than their banks accounts.

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