Political Instability, ‘Failed States’ and Regional Intervention in the Pacific

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The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) has generated much discussion about ‘state failure’ in the Pacific. The claim that the Solomon Islands was a ‘failed state’ played a key role in Canberra’s 2003 justification for intervention in the Solomon Islands. That bleak depiction originated from the Solomons civil society movement, but was picked up by The Economist, by Australian think-tanks and, eventually, by Australia’s Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. Some even resorted to the more threatening idea of Pacific ‘rogue states’. And even those who preferred the milder term also emphasised potential regional security threats (the ‘petri-dish’ scenarios). Critics have responded by pointing to the insignificance of the Melanesian central state for predominantly rural populations (a variant on the ‘weak states, strong societies’ argument), or emphasising the feebleness also of the colonial state or by claiming that, in the Solomon Islands, it was the government rather than the state itself that ‘failed’. None have claimed that the 2000-2003 Solomon Islands was a roaring success. Most have rejected the use of the phrase to describe the situation in PNG, Fiji or the other Pacific countries, with the occasional exception of Nauru.

I want to argue that, conceived in these black and white terms, the debate is not particularly helpful, either as a tool for understanding what happened in the past or as a guide for determining regional policy in the future. That the term ‘failed’ is so often used in the same breath as ‘failing’ is itself testimony to the frequent melodramatic confusion of irreversible collapse with what may turn out to be a temporary setback. In what sense do states ever fail? Does state failure, as with the pre-1919 Austro-Hungarian or Ottoman Empires, mean loss of national territorial jurisdiction? Or does it include situations where political deterioration or social conflict has gone so far that recovery can only occur under some new order or alternative constitutional

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2 Helen Hughes argued ‘the prospect not merely of a failed state, but a rogue state (like those of Amin, Mobutu, Bokassa and Mugabe in Africa)’ in Melanesia ‘cannot be lightly dismissed’ (Helen Hughes, ‘Aid has failed the Pacific’, Issue Analysis, 33, Centre for Independent Studies, p12, p3).
arrangement? Alternatively, does this mean that the police, judiciary, passport controls, and the rest of the paraphernalia of the state apparatus, effectively cease to exist or that, as in parts of Africa, ‘shadow states’ emerge? Viewed through those lenses, the term sheds little insight on Pacific conflict and instability, but the debate does perhaps provide a useful opportunity to look at what has happened to the post-colonial Pacific state, and to now, with the benefit of hindsight, revisit and reassess those claimed incidents of state failure in Fiji (2000-2001) and in the Solomon Islands (1998-2003).

That kind of discussion is also worthwhile first because there has so far been little detailed inquiry into emerging shape of the post-independence Pacific state, into new forms of relationship between political elites and their public service counterparts, into the spread of patronage systems or into the modification in the indigenous context of what were often initially imported institutions of governance. Second, I want to argue in this paper, examining the reasons for the absence of any conclusive case of state failure in the Pacific provides better guidance for regional or foreign policy responses than overplayed claims about state collapse and ‘petri-dish’-style breeding grounds for trans-national threats.

The notion of state ‘failure’ in the Pacific is far from original. Indeed, the colonisation of the Pacific in the last quarter of the 19th century has often been viewed as a response to the collapse of indigenous efforts at self-government. During the cotton boom of the 1860s, Fiji’s capital, Levuka had become a key port town on the Pacific frontier, filled with small traders, commercial agencies and depots for the outer-island trade, drinking bars and fugitives from justice. Fiji had previously experimented with five separate constitutional arrangements, all of which were unsuccessful. In 1871, a new settler-dominated government came into office, fronted by Bau Chief Ratu Seru Cakobau. But these were inauspicious times for a new administration. The collapse of the cotton boom in 1871 saw about half of the white settlers in Fiji depart. Those that remained, often the more unruly and bankrupt, confronted an already insolvent government which had to be propped up on several occasions by visiting British warships. At first, the British government recognised the 1871-74 Levuka administration as the de facto authority. When the New British Consul E.L. Layard and Commodore Goodenough were commissioned to inquire into Britain’s alternatives in dealing with the islands, they quickly came down in favour of

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4 This point is also raised in Fraenkel, J. ‘The Coming Anarchy in Oceania; A Critique of the “Africanisation of the South Pacific” thesis’, Commonwealth & Comparative Studies, 42, (1), 2004.
5 Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of the Solomon Islands, p13.
6 The term became extensively used in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War, see Herr, R. ‘Implications of the “Failed States” Concept for the Pacific Islands’ Countries in the Post September 11th World’, The Eye of the Cyclone; Issues in Pacific Security, (ed) Molloy, PIPSA & University of the Sunshine Coast, 2004, p96; see also Terence Wesley Smith, this volume.
annexation, presenting the Disraeli government with a fait accompli.

Once Fiji had become a crown colony, Samoa’s Apia became the new ‘hell of the Pacific’, attracting many of the unruly ‘beach’ community of Fiji who were eager to escape the clutches of British law. Indigenous civil warfare during 1869-1873 had resulted in large tracts of land being sold to Germans and Americans in return for guns.

In the short-run, the stand off between rival powers improved the scope for the establishment of an independent Samoan government. But it was independence without autonomy. The collapse of the 1873-75 Malietoa Laupepa government led to renewed civil warfare and disorder in Samoa, repeatedly used by German and US Consuls to seize harbours and declare sovereignty, until control eventually passed to a Anglo-German-American tripartite condominium in 1889, and ultimately to Germany in 1899.

J.K. Fieldhouse, author of what remains the most authoritative survey of the reasons for the colonial carve up of the Pacific argues,

‘By 1880 conditions in several [Pacific] island groups were deteriorating rapidly, mainly as a result of the inability of indigenous governments to provide a stable and neutral basis for European activity. … This process led directly to the partition of the last twenty years of the century and at the same time provides classic examples of how the “crack up” of indigenous societies might (…) be a source of peripheral imperialism’

Back then, the perceived security threats were white planters, land speculators, and labour traders. As today, local consent was important for the colonists, as seen with the 1874 Deed of Cession in Fiji. Humanitarian considerations, in the form of efforts to ‘protect’ indigenous peoples and regulate ‘blackbirding’, played a significant role. There were no ‘exit strategies’. The colonists were there for the long haul. The perceptions of ‘failure’ were more absolute than today. Until at least the 1920s, most colonial administrators thought Pacific Islanders were dying out as a result of exposure to infectious diseases against which they had little immunity.

There were three important differences. First, there was no question of operating under an indigenous jurisdiction. Government was to become a colonial responsibility, although in Fiji a separate indigenous administration was encouraged.

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11 Britain established the headquarters of the Western Pacific High Commission in Fiji to control and regulate the indentured labour trade. Fiji’s first governor Arthur Gordon banned further sales of indigenous lands and restricted indigenous labour on plantations. Similarly, Governor Solf in Samoa sought to keep indigenous peoples in their villages and halt alienation of land (Firth, S. ‘Governors Versus Settlers; The Dispute Over Chinese Labour in German Samoa’, New Zealand Journal of History, (11), 2, 1977.
Even Tonga, which uniquely managed to retain its monarchy, witnessed creeping colonial control over the affairs of state during 1899-1914. Second, the newly formed governments received negligible metropolitan aid support. Colonies were expected to be self-financing, and therefore resorted to imports of indentured labour from the Indian sub-continent, China, Southeast Asia or Melanesia to work on revenue-delivering plantations and mining operations. The notions of trusteeship and aid-financed colonial development came much later. There was then no talk of ‘institutional strengthening’ or ‘capacity-building’. Third, and most importantly in the context of this conference, there was no question of seeking any regional endorsement for, or involvement in, overseas intervention.

The point of this comparison is not to equate contemporary with past events or to establish guilt by association, only to emphasise that state-failure is a highly frequent justification for foreign intervention in the affairs of troubled nations. Consider, for example, the policy consequences of an absolutist notion of state failure. The Australia Strategic Policy Institute pamphlet *Our Failing Neighbour; Australia and the Future of the Solomon Islands*, which was released into the midst of the Howard government’s mid-2003 deliberations concerning what to do about the Solomon Islands, contains the following claim.

‘Solomon Islands has always been weak. Recent events are in many respects the culmination of many years (sic). In the South Pacific, the introduced institutions of the modern nation-state have been overlaid on top of a multiplicity of indigenous political structures. The latter have proved remarkably adaptable and their resilience in the face of colonial and post-colonial transformations provides the broader basis for the continuing weakness of the state… The crisis in Solomon Islands is less about the collapse of a coherent functioning state, and more about the unravelling of the apparatus of colonial rule’.

The argument here is not that the Solomon Islands state failed as a result of the June 5th 2000 coup or due to the policies pursued under the post-coup governments. It is that the imported, super-imposed and colonially-bequeathed state had been failing ever since independence. It had never properly taken hold during the colonial era. The graft had failed. What are the policy options if this is accurate? Logically, it would be necessary either to deconstruct the central state and empower those supposedly crisis-engendering ‘indigenous power structures’, or revert to some form of perpetual overseas control (disavowal of ‘neo-colonial’ solutions notwithstanding). In other

12 Regional cooperation did occur, but this was rather aimed at avoiding colonisation. Hawaii’s Charles St Julian advised King George Tupou I on a new constitution designed to preserve the country’s independence.

13 Australian Strategic Policy Institute, *Our Failing Neighbour; Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, June 2003, p27. Our Failing Neighbour author Elsina Wainwright later made the same point more emphatically. ‘…the British colonial presence was not as engaged in Solomon Islands as it was elsewhere. As a result, the institutions of statehood in Solomon Islands never firmly took root, even after decolonisation on 7th July 1978. A question therefore exists as to whether Solomon Islands was ever a properly functioning state. There remained an ill-fitting overlay of state institutions with traditional structures, and the traditional structures proved to be enduring. This contributed to the weakness of the state’ (Elsina Wainwright, ‘Responding to State Failure – The Case of Australia and Solomon Islands’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 57, (3), 2003, p487-488).
words, the ‘failed state’ argument strongly suggests the need for a full-scale takeover. It does not suggest any route back to self-government.

This is too pessimistic an assessment, and entails a rather mechanical contrast between ‘imported’ institutions and unchanging ‘indigenous political structures’, as if the latter went into long term hibernation only to resurface to bring about a collapse of the post-colonial state. The reality was more multi-faceted, and involved a long-run process of indigenisation of imported institutions and repeated transitions in indigenous power structures (occasioned, for example, by colonial pacification, the spread of the system of village headmen and eventually the shift to self-government)\(^1\). True – there were tensions even at independence, due to autonomy demands from the western Solomons as well as Guadalcanal and the eastern islands\(^2\). Yet those demands were less radical than those at that time emanating from neighbouring Bougainville or Vanuatu (during the Santo rebellion). For most of the post-colonial period, regionalist pulls were chiefly used as bargaining counter for gaining better provincial access to central resources or representation in Honiara, or were responsive to weakening economic growth, poor national governance or Malaitan control over the premiership.

**Solomon Islands from Independence to Insurrection**

The first decade after Solomons independence (1978-1988) was reasonably stable, as compared with difficulties witnessed in neighbouring Vanuatu, New Caledonia or Fiji. Problems became more severe under the 1989-93 and 1994-97 Mamaloni governments due to reckless and unsustainable expansion of logging, increasing public sector deficits and consequently also a rising national debt, and the development of systems of personal patronage centred around the political elite and Asian logging companies. High levels of inter-island migration occurred, mainly involving Malaitan settlement in Honiara and on the north Guadalcanal plains. Slow economic growth, and poor education facilities, led to a build-up of under-employed youths in the peri-urban areas (the *masta lui* phenomenon). It was during these years that the state commenced paying out large sums in ‘customary’ compensation to settle street disturbances in Honiara, setting dangerous precedents. The round log export bonanza was brought to an end by the East Asian financial crash in 1997. Efforts at reform had been witnessed previously, during the short-lived 1993-94 Billy Hilly government, but in 1997 a new reformist coalition, led by Bartholomew Ulufa’alu secured office after the general elections. It was again to prove a short-lived administration.

From late 1998 through to June 1999, Guadalcanalese militants (the Isatabu Freedom Movement or IFM) evicted around 24,000 settlers from rural Guadalcanal. Most were

\(^{1}\) This interpretation is put forward in greater detail in Fraenkel, J. *The Manipulation of Custom; From Uprising to Intervention in the Solomon Islands*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2004 (forthcoming).

from the neighbouring island of Malaita. Displaced peoples either crowded into the capital, Honiara, or set sail back to Malaita. The Ulufa’alu government proved unable to halt the rural evictions. Nor was it able to stop the rise of the rival Malaita Eagle Forces (MEF). On June 5th 2000, the MEF in a ‘Joint Operation’ with the paramilitary wing of the Royal Solomon Islands Police overthrew the Ulufa’alu government. Instead of commencing a full-scale civil war, however, the MEF and IFM agreed a ceasefire in August 2000 and together signed a peace agreement at Townsville in October 2000. Yet most arms were not surrendered. Honiara became a Malaitan-dominated enclave where armed militants plundered the state for payments of compensation, while social service steadily deteriorated. In the Guadalcanal countryside, rival indigenous militias engaged in internecine fighting and banditry. That climate of lawlessness came to prevail also on Malaita and, to a lesser degree, in the country’s Western Province.

Had the state ‘failed”? By mid-2002, problems were unquestionably severe. GDP per capita had fallen by around one third, the gold mine and palm oil plantations on Guadalcanal had closed, Japanese investors had withdrawn from the Noro Fish Cannery in the Western Province and the country’s foreign currency reserves were nearly exhausted. From mid-2002, however, there was some recovery in exports and government finances largely due to a resumption in log and fish exports from the west. The security situation remained bleak. On Guadalcanal, the government’s jurisdiction halted at Henderson Airfield to the east of Honiara and Kakabona to the west, although police were engaged in a bloody operation to capture dissident Guadalcanalese leader Harold Keke on the remote Weather Coast. The police force had been deeply damaged by its role in the June 2000 coup, and young militants recruited as ‘special constables’ were terrorising the treasury and even cabinet meetings with demands for unpaid ‘allowances’.

Nevertheless, the damaged state remained largely intact. The June 2000 coup had dislodged the elected government, but not the 1978 constitution or the Governor General. Efforts were made, by indigenous lawyers who headed the MEF, to secure a nominally legal regime change by calling together parliament to elect a new Prime Minister. Although breakaway demands from the Western Province, Choiseul, Guadalcanal and Temotu threatened the integrity of the Solomon Islands state, none of these provinces actually severed ties or sought to secure international recognition as independent nations. The civil service kept functioning, after a fashion, even at the depths of the crisis. Senior public servants refused to answer telephones or worked in clandestine offices, fearing militant harassment. Despite being deeply compromised by links with the militant leaders, police officers clamped down on notorious MEF leader Jimmy “Rasta” Lusibaea in September 2002. A UNDP programme to de-commission ‘Special Constables’ (former militants who had been integrated into the police force) had some success by late 2002. A new British police commissioner, Bill Morrell, arrived in early 2003, and further efforts were made to restore discipline and

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16 As, for example, when staff at the Ministry of Natural resources re-routed fishing license fees to personal bank accounts to avoid these falling into the hands of militants who regularly raided the Finance Ministry. These were, reportedly, distributed fairly equitably amongst civil servants
confidentiality within police ranks. Lawlessness remained a major problem. Harold Keke’s fighters murdered their previously-backed MP Father Augustine Geve, six Melanesian brothers (who had played such a significant role as intermediaries in the conflict), villagers at Marasa on the Weather Coast, and many of their own fighters. Yet even at the nadir of the Solomon Islands crisis in December 2002, Graham Fletcher, then on the Pacific Desk at Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, could conclude,

‘Solomon Islands has come closest to national breakdown, but even there, key elements of national life – parliament, the judiciary, the electoral system, the media, the central bank and the financial system, the international airport and food and fuel supplies – have all continued to function to a greater or lesser extent. The figures show a very serious economic decline, lawlessness continues to be a huge problem, and there are real humanitarian considerations. Yet Solomon Islands is still a going concern, and may indeed have bottomed out’.

Whether or not the state had ‘failed’, it was certainly failing to clamp down decisively on the armed militants. From mid-2001 a US$25 million Taiwanese aid package had been used to finance hefty payments to militia leaders, generating often frenzied efforts at extortion accompanying the arrival of successive tranches. By December 2002, the funds had run out and the Central Bank had halted advances to the central government. Previously amicable relations with the gunmen, including police ‘special constables’, became increasingly strained.

As many argued, there was no ‘circuit breaker’ capable of breaking the stranglehold of the militants. The difficulty with the ‘circuit breaker’ analogy, as RAMSI quickly discovered, was that there were many circuits to break. It was straightforward enough to disarm and arrest many of the key militants, although substantial caches of weapons remained concealed. Yet many of the key leaders had cautiously remained behind the scenes, and had left no paper trail that might have eased their conviction. Yet arresting only the foot-soldiers in the militia groups bred cynicism and despair. Australian officials were sent into the Finance Ministry, the police force and the law and justice sector, again without an effective strategy for returning the country to self-government.

**Fiji’s 2000 crisis in historical perspective**

Fiji’s 2000 political crisis arose due to a breakdown in the popular legitimacy of the compact agreed in 1997. To appreciate this, some historical background is necessary. Fiji’s 1987 coup resulted in what remains the post-colonial Pacific’s only military regime, and even only belatedly (after the Deuba Accord) and for a short period, until a new interim government was formed. Nevertheless, it deeply split the population, and resulted in a new 1990 constitution aimed at institutionalising Fijian paramountcy. Yet that constitution did not last. By the mid-1990s, the political

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climate had radically changed. 1987 coup leader turned civilian PM Sitiveni Rabuka brokered a power-sharing deal Indo-Fijian opposition leader Jai Ram Reddy.

According to the new 1997 constitution, the distribution of parliamentary seats was brought closer to the 51% indigenous Fijian and 44% Indo-Fijian population shares, a multi-party cabinet provision was adopted and the alternative vote system was introduced in a deliberate effort to encourage centrist politicians. Yet at the first elections held under the new system, in May 1999, Rabuka and Reddy were badly defeated. Instead, the Fiji Labour Party unexpectedly emerged with an absolute majority, although it formed a coalition government with three smaller ethnic Fijian parties. Labour leader Mahendra Chaudhry’s decision to accept the premiership was, in the Fiji context, hugely controversial. This was the first time an Indo-Fijian had been Prime Minister. Under the 1990 constitution, both the premiership and the presidency had been “reserved” for ethnic Fijians. Chaudhry’s decision provoked a political controversy even amongst Labour’s Fijian allies, although that initial post-election crisis was staunched largely by the intervention of President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.

Precisely a year later, the People’s Coalition government was overthrown in a so-called ‘civilian coup’ led by George Speight. Speight’s short-lived Taukei civilian government sought to abrogate the 1997 constitution, remove the President and permanently dislodge the Chaudhry government. They held former government ministers hostage inside parliament for 56 days. During the associated political crisis, many commentators suggested that the country’s key state or quasi-state institutions, the military, the judiciary and the Great Council of Chiefs, had failed. Such a verdict seemed, at that time, reasonable. It was the commander of Fiji’s military forces who, on May 29th, abrogated the constitution, and removed the President from Office. Sections of the military were implicated in the May 2000 coup, and some staged a mutiny at the army’s Queen Elizabeth Barracks in November of that year. The judiciary, including the Chief Justice and other senior judges, rendered assistance to the illegal government established a day after the coup by assisting with drafting its decrees. The Great Council of Chiefs was likewise weak and divided, with senior indigenous leaders demonstrating sympathies with George Speight.

Whatever the weaknesses, the institutions remained intact. Indeed, the military and the law courts, to a greater degree than the interim government, succeeded in restoring constitutional rule in Fiji. It was the military who ultimately arrested and imprisoned George Speight in July 2000. Lieutenant-Colonel Viliame Seruvakula led his 3RFI to suppress the Queen Elizabeth Barracks mutiny of November 2nd. And it was the military who, much later in 2003-4, resisted pressure from the Qarase government to

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19 During that initial post-election crisis, a succession of small bombs were exploded around Suva, cane field in the west were set alight and nationalist banners appeared at Flagstaff in Suva calling for the overthrow of the new government.

soften its approach to court martials for rebel soldiers. It was the judiciary who removed an amnesty agreed between George Speight and the military, paving the way to his conviction on charges of high treason. In March 2001, Fiji’s Court of Appeal restored the 1997 constitution in a landmark case, paving the way for the 2001 elections. The Great Council of Chiefs, under new Chairman Ratu Epeli Ganilau, emerged as a champion of the 1997 constitution, and an opponent of social and ethnic inequality. Institutions deemed to have ‘failed’ in 2000 were suddenly extolled as critical guardians of democracy and constitutionalism.

**Collapse of Border Controls**

What is a ‘failed state’? How closely did the Solomon Islands and Fiji fit that bill? Robert Rotberg argues in the *Washington Quarterly* that ‘failed states cannot control their borders. They lose authority over chunks of territory. Often, the expression of official power is limited to a capital city and one or more ethnically specified zones’²¹. The point of reference here is countries like Sierra Leone and Angola, where substantial un-policied areas became havens for warlords and militia groups, or even so-called ‘shadow states’, that defied central authority²². In the Pacific, vast Exclusive Economic Zones, stretching 200 miles off the coasts pose formidable problems of control. But these relate mainly to difficulties faced by Pacific states in capturing revenues from offshore foreign fishing vessels. Piracy, fortunately, is still not (or no longer, if one thinks back only as far as the early 19th century, when captured ‘prize’ vessels still occasionally figured in the New South Wales import statistics) a problem in the Pacific. In western parts of Melanesia, mountainous terrain, poor roads and other communications infrastructure pose formidable internal land-based problems for the extension of state control. In this sense, even the colonial state was weak. PNG state authority remains highly restricted in scope, for example, in dealing with tribal fighting in the highlands, or controlling movements across the land border with West Papua.

During the 1988-1997 Bougainville conflict, that island briefly became a no-go zone for the Papua New Guinea Defence Forces until splits among Bougainvilleans permitted a PNGDF return. The Shortland Islands and Choiseul, only a quick speedboat ride away from Bougainville, and with strong kinship and cultural linkages, proved a point of refuge and source of supplies for the BRA fighters. PNGDF efforts to blockade the island were aimed at restricting access to medical supplies, guns and ammunition from the neighbouring Solomon Islands.

In the Solomon Islands, difficulties in establishing control over land borders posed a long-run difficulty, one that was reinforced by demands for regional autonomy. After conflict broke out on Guadalcanal in late 1998, the Solomons Western Provincial Council (like the Guadalcanal Provincial Executive) expressed concern about the

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influx of Malaitan settlers\textsuperscript{23}. When the Malaita Eagle Forces in a ‘Joint Operation’ with the heavily-Malaitan Police Field Force overthrew the government in Honiara in June 2000, the Western Province responded by engaging Bougainvillean fighters to provide ‘protective services’. Six of the Solomon Islands nine provinces threatened to secede after the June 5\textsuperscript{th} 2000 coup. Even after the Townsville Peace Agreement of October 2000, rural Guadalcanal proved a ‘no-go’ area for the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force. Most towns-dwellers dared not set foot beyond Henderson Airfield to the east or Kakabona to the west. The Guadalcanal guerrillas always relied on redoubts on the inaccessible ‘Weather Coast’ on the southern part of the island. Even today, a year after the arrival of RAMSI, alleged killer Edmund Sae has so far managed to evade troops and police in Malaita’s interior.

In Fiji, by contrast, even the forested interior of Viti Levu, around the Monasavu dam, could not provide a haven for rebel CRW soldiers and allied criminals who were on the run in the aftermath of the November 2000 mutiny.

**State Repression and Warlordism**

Secondly, Rotberg argues,

‘another indicator of state failure is the growth of criminal violence. As state authority weakens and fails, and as the state becomes criminal in its oppression of its citizens, so general lawlessness becomes more apparent … For protection, citizens naturally turn to warlords and other strong figures who express ethnic or clan solidarity, thus projecting strength at a time when all else, including the state itself, is crumbling’.

Again, here is an indicator that, to some extent, fits the Solomon Islands, but poorly describes the situation in Fiji. After the June 2000 Solomon Islands coup, the RSIP – which had been deeply compromised by its role in bringing about that coup, proved unable to control urban lawlessness. Rank-and-file MEF members engaged in plunder and extortion, both directed against citizens and, more unusually, against the government itself. State coffers were pillaged to secure Taiwanese aid in compensation, eventually leading to such disorder that the government called for Australian, Indonesian and UN intervention. There lies a contrast with Rotberg’s ‘failed states’. It was not the state itself that became ‘criminal in the oppression of its citizens’. It was the militia groups that did this. The state became too weak to do so, and simultaneously too weak to suppress the militia groups. Citizens turned to their wantok militia leaders for protection, even amongst the Malaitans themselves.

In Fiji, criminal attacks on Indian property, including the burning of sugar cane fields, increased after the May 2000 coup, as they had done after the May 1987 coup. Yet there was no resort to ‘warlord’ type figures, either in the Fijian or Indian communities. Instead, after the first coup, Indo-Fijian outward migration rose, with

around 20% of Indians leaving the country over 1987-1996. Similarly, after the 2000 coup\textsuperscript{24}, criminal attacks on Indo-Fijian homesteads, particularly in George Speight’s home region of northern Tailevu did not trigger Indian retaliation. Overwhelming Fijian preponderance in the military made that an impossible option.

**Security Threats**

In the wake of US Vice President Al Gore’s 1994 ‘State Failure Task Force’, one Purdue University project defined failed states more simply as those that ‘threaten regional security’\textsuperscript{25}. No post-colonial Pacific state has ever posed such a regional threat. In the Solomon Islands, those at the helm of state had in fact lost control both of the economy and the security forces as well as of large tracts of territory. None of the militia groups showed much sign of wanting to seize state power, even after the coup when the Malaita Eagle Forces/Police Field Forces Joint Operation could easily have done so. Viewed in retrospect, the Solomon Islands 2000 coup was less about *capturing* state power, and more about *ransacking* the state. At no stage did a strong-arm dictatorship, mass domestic repression or the Solomon Islands embarking on overseas wars, or intentional regional destabilisation, appear remotely likely.

There was never any realistic threat that the post-coup Qarase regime would pose a threat to regional security. In the wake of 9/11, the new Fijian-dominated government showed itself to be a loyal stalwart in the ‘war against terror’. Muslim cleric Abdul Majid, who was alleged to have been at university with Al-Qaeda’s Osama Bin Laden, was expelled from Fiji in February 2003, after 18 years residence\textsuperscript{26}. But there is no evidence that Fiji’s dispersed Muslim population provides any easy target for Islamic fundamentalist militants.

**What are the lessons for third party intervention?**

First, we need to know a lot more about the post-colonial Pacific states. Uncertainty about the causes and context of Pacific crises often fuels foreign policy responses, partly because little except the horror stories ever gets reported overseas. There exist few detailed investigations of the state in the post-colonial Pacific, of the distribution of power between the public service and political elite, of the spread and extent of patronage systems or of the on-the-ground operation of post-colonial constitutions.

\textsuperscript{24} Some commentators, who enjoy terminological disputes, like to dispute the use of the term ‘coup’ to describe the May 2000 events, but without reference to the only interesting reason for doubting the usefulness of that term. In O.E.D. terms, coup means ‘illegal removal of government’, which is what occurred in May 2000. What is exceptional about Fiji is that this could be accomplished despite the failure, arrest and imprisonment of the coup architects. Elsewhere, the arrest (and probably execution) of failed putsch leaders would have entailed a restoration of the old order.


\textsuperscript{26} Michael Field, ‘South Pacific Security Authorities Quietly Close Down Possible Al-Qaeda Operation’, AFP, April; 28\textsuperscript{th} 2003.
Second, RAMSI and the Solomon Islands crisis are likely to provide few lessons for the future. Indigenous hostility to the settlers was particularly acute on Guadalcanal, and the police force was unusually unbalanced and incapable of responding to the danger. Conversely, other features of the Guadalcanal conflict – notably the build up of under-employed youths in peri-urban areas and the way poor governance at the centre fosters regional disquiet – are problems also elsewhere in Melanesia. Future crises in the Pacific are unlikely to result in an open invitation to foreign forces, and are more likely to raise thorny questions of territorial jurisdiction. No such invitation, for example, was forthcoming from Fiji and most knowledgeable Australian and New Zealand diplomats were well aware that sending troops into Fiji in May-June 2000 would have been a grave error.

Third, how should RAMSI be assessed? This is still too early to judge. Many guns have been surrendered and many militants arrested, but tensions still exist beneath the surface and a substantial number of weapons were concealed. Only a small number of those arrested have, as yet, been convicted and most of the senior politicians who led the militia groups remain at large. The critical question of how a domestic-based reform movement is to emerge remains to be addressed.

Fourth, as with state failure, intervention is often talked about in too black and white a way. In another sense, intervention is continual and ever-present, simply due to the considerable exposure of the small island states to external diplomatic, commercial and ideological influences. It would be worthwhile talking less about intervention and more about influence, less about hard power and more about soft power, more about ideas, persuasion and conviction. Too often foreign observers reach the conclusion that everything has to come from the outside – democracy itself is viewed as an entirely imported institution and reform as best practiced if the blueprint follows the IMF, World Bank or Asian Development Bank model. Little time is spent trying to identify and understand domestic, home-grown, forces for change. If all one can see is unmitigated failure, heavy-handed intervention seems the only plausible response. Where instead hard on-the-ground work identifies areas of success (which perhaps follow different models to those familiar overseas), the result is a considerable growth of options open for bottom-upwards rather than top-down overseas model-based approaches to reform.

End.