

# 3. Melanesia's test: The political quandary of West Papua

## COMMENTARY

West Papuans often say that the conflict in their homeland, the self-determination struggle against Indonesian territorial control and the impact of a heavy military presence, are a regional issue. As a people, the West Papuans have historically identified as being Pacific Islanders and particularly as Melanesians. If a regional solution is required to address the political quandary of West Papua, it is informative to adopt a regional lens and explore the way the other Melanesian countries, especially the governments and media, respond to the situation there; also how they engage with Indonesia over West Papua. Events of the last few years within the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) have made it clear that some leverage is being applied on the issue in the geopolitical domain. At the same time, mainstream media coverage of events unfolding in West Papua, as well as the MSG's response, has been largely missing. However, a true internationalisation of the West Papua issue has arrived and deserves close inspection.

Keywords: decolonisation, Fiji, Indonesia, Melanesia, Melanesian Spearhead Group, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, West Papua

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**F**IRSTLY, let us consider the geographical region generally accepted as being Melanesia. It encompasses the island of New Guinea in its west and stretches out through an extensive archipelago of islands through Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Kanaky (New Caledonia) and across to Fiji in its far east. West Papua is the western half of the massive island of New Guinea. The island is divided straight down the middle, along the 141st meridian east: one of those rather awkward straight lines of colonialism that still exist.

Peoples of the Melanesia region have a cultural bond, despite the wide

diversity of tribal groups across the geography. It is common to hear people in these other countries, when referring to West Papuans, as calling them their Melanesian brothers and sisters. This extends also to the Kanaks of New Caledonia. There is a strong sense of the links between diverse communities and countries in the region due to their common Melanesian identity.

West Papuans have long considered themselves people of the Pacific region. They were considered part of the Pacific Islands regional community before being absorbed by Indonesia. Dutch New Guinea was a member of the original regional organisation prior to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the South Pacific Commission—now the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC). Fast forward 50 years or so and the West Papuans are outside the tent. They have long called for re-admission to the Pacific fold through membership at the Forum. The calls have come to very little. However, the case for them to join the regional grouping known as the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), also longstanding, has gained traction in recent years. At a time when the MSG has grown in cohesion, this is where the real movement on the internationalisation of the West Papua issue is happening.

The full members of the MSG are Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and the FLNKS, the representative group for the indigenous Kanaks of New Caledonia. Fostering support for Kanak moves towards independence was one of the galvanising factors in the inception of the MSG in the mid-1980s. The FLNKS became a member of the group quite early on. With this precedent, the group’s members have been hearing arguments for the inclusion of West Papuans in the MSG over many years without it gaining much traction. Until recently, that is. The West Papua issue has been a simmering political issue for decades in other parts of Melanesia and has only grown over the years. Among the public in the independent Melanesian countries or territories, there appears to be a clear sense of injustice about the self-determination situation and the military record in the Indonesian region. The solidarity movement, via increased international awareness on West Papua, has grown significantly in the last decade. It is almost totally non-government driven, and social media has played a central part in it. As telecommunications have opened up in Melanesian countries, it has been hard for a lid to be kept on West Papua.

### **Mainstream media indifference**

The growing awareness has occurred despite an indifference displayed by

regional mainstream media towards West Papua. Vanuatu's small media industry has been an exception to this, and journalists in other Melanesian countries are slowly doing more. However, notably, media outlets in Papua New Guinea have shown West Papua to be the country's ongoing blindspot (Matbob & Papoutsaki, 2006). It is a similar situation in Australia and New Zealand (Leadbeater, 2008; Perrottet & Robie, 2011; Robie, 2013). Those few media outlets which do cover West Papua are of course restricted in what they can report because journalists are banned by Indonesian authorities from travelling to the region. Those who go there to work undercover run a high risk of trouble, as with the recent example with the French journalists Valentine Bourrat and Thomas Dandois. The pair were arrested in August in Wamena, and remain detained in Jayapura by Indonesian police, accused of violating their tourist visas. Yet social media coverage of West Papua has largely put the Pacific region's mainstream media to shame. For instance, a Vanuatu-based West Papuan who goes under the handle @PurePapua has emerged as a prime source of news and views about current affairs back in his homeland. With some 78,500 tweets to his name and 4246 followers at time of writing, Pure Papua is a fervent critic of not just Indonesian rule in West Papua, but the lack of attention given to West Papua by foreign governments and mainstream media. Notwithstanding a steady stream of invective towards the aforementioned in his tweets, Pure Papua's Twitter feed is a comprehensive West Papua newswire and, deploying various historical perspectives, a useful educational tool.

Faced with funding cuts and staff shortages, mainstream media outlets in the region's metropolitan countries have struggled to keep up with social media for breaking news on various fronts. It is no surprise that these outlets are increasingly turning to social media, where the ground reports of citizen journalists, activists and advocacy networks lead the coverage, to get their news ideas across about West Papua. This introduces issues of journalistic standards which require another discussion altogether. However, the pattern is also a sad reflection of the priorities of many newsrooms. Meanwhile, echoing the West Papua trend, there is a lack of media coverage of Melanesia in general in both Australia and New Zealand. This is odd, considering that Melanesian countries and territories are regional neighbours. Still, as a result of the lack of interest, there has been scant coverage of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) as it tackled the West Papua issue in recent times.

Governments in Melanesia react to the West Papua self-determination issue in different ways, ranging from detached to extremely passionate. At one extreme is Vanuatu, whose deep and long-standing support for West Papuan self-determination aspirations is well documented.

Vanuatu’s founding father and first Prime Minister, Father Walter Lini, said right from when his country gained independence from joint British-French colonial rule in 1980 that Vanuatu would not be fully free until the whole of Melanesia had broken free from colonialism. This maxim was inherent in the establishment of the MSG. Initially the MSG’s focus was on New Caledonia. Vanuatu, which had just emerged as an independent nation, knew the non-peaceful track record of French decolonisation, and was sympathetic to the struggle in neighbouring Kanaky. This is recounted by David Robie in *Don’t Spoil My Beautiful Face* (2014) which describes how Lini’s Vanua’aku Pati, the country’s founding political force, was strongly active in pushing for decolonisation in New Caledonia. Lini lobbied the region to apply pressure for a hastening of the decolonisation process. The ruling Vanua’aku Pati was willing to let the FLNKS form a government in exile in Vanuatu if need be.

For many years, Vanuatu has been the home of various exiled West Papuans, including leading activists and pro-independence figures. It is the unofficial headquarters of the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation (WPNCL), one of the key players in the internationalisation of the West Papua issue. The last few years have seen a spike of action by local leaders. Two of the leading young politicians in Vanuatu, Moana Carcasses Kalosil and Ralph Regenvanu, were instrumental in establishing International Parliamentarians for West Papua, a global movement of legislators. Subsequently other Vanuatu MPs got on board. Their energy for the issue reflects the sentiment of Vanuatu’s young population. It has augmented the deep feeling for West Papua embodied in the old guard of national politics, especially the Vanua’aku Pati. In 2010, the Vanuatu Parliament unanimously resolved to seek an opinion from the International Court of Justice on the legality of the Act of Free Choice, the United Nations-sanctioned 1969 referendum under which West Papua was incorporated into Indonesia which is widely regarded as having been stage-managed. Pending the outcome of the ICJ move, Vanuatu would like the issue considered by the UN general assembly.

The ICJ move seemed to stall initially upon a change of government. Sato Kilman became Vanuatu’s Prime Minister for a couple of years and notably forged closer ties to Indonesia. Kilman may not have had a hugely different

stand on support for West Papua self-determination than other Prime Ministers, but he went where others before wouldn't venture by forging closer ties with Jakarta, welcoming a couple of Indonesian delegations with donations of agricultural equipment, computers, an ambulance and other packages. There was even discussion of police and paramilitary training from Indonesia (Ligo, 2014). In Vanuatu, this was deeply unpopular domestically given the Indonesian military record in West Papua. Vanuatu's chiefs and churches spoke out in opposition to closer links with Indonesia who, it is clear, is mistrusted by many ni-Vanuatu. The national Christian Council of Churches is especially vocal on West Papuan rights; this extends to the role of the Pacific regional Churches council and conferences. Similarly, Vanuatu's chiefly bodies, a pillar of local society, have been a consistent voice about rights abuses in West Papua. Still, Kilman argued that the West Papua issue could not be addressed without greater engagement with Jakarta.

The ICJ plan has not yet got off the ground because it requires more support from the Melanesian Spearhead Group, and of course would take much more lobbying at the United Nations to be advanced. Yet it is by no means a lost cause. The recent configurations of the Vanuatu government since Kilman's removal have approached the West Papua question with vigour. During his stint as Prime Minister, Moana Carcasses made an impression on West Papua, becoming the first leader of any state to be photographed holding the banned Papuan *Morning Star* flag, and giving the issue unprecedented exposure on the global stage. Carcasses called for international action to help West Papuans at the UN Rights Council in Geneva, spoke to the UN



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**Figure 1: Former Vanuatu Prime Minister Moana Carcasses made an impression on West Papua.**

General Assembly in New York about the ‘chronic human rights challenges’ facing West Papuans, and warned the MSG in the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia that leaders should not let financial inducements cloud their judgment on the struggle. This all happened within a year. Then the Vanuatu Parliament removed Carcasses as Prime Minister—domestic politics catching up with him being more of a factor than anything related to the West Papuan cause—and replaced him with a prime minister equally as committed on the issue: Joe Natuman, a founding member of the Vanua’aku Pati,

When talking about efforts to help facilitate the self-determination rights of West Papuans, Natuman has cited the example of the process which the indigenous Melanesians of New Caledonia are undergoing with the Noumea Accord provisions for a referendum on independence in the next few years. He noted that after a fraught period which included episodes of violence and French military repression, the Kanaks are on a more assured path to possible independence, and how this was something that could be applied to the indigenous people in Indonesia’s eastern-most region.

### **Melanesian Spearhead Group membership**

At the Melanesian Spearhead Group, Vanuatu had previously pushed for West Papuan membership but Papua New Guinea traditionally blocked the move. When the MSG in 2008 opened its secretariat, a new Chinese-built headquarters and formal administration in Port Vila, there were hopes that then Vanuatu Prime Minister Ham Lini, the younger brother of the late Walter Lini, would get West Papua membership on the agenda at that leaders’ summit.

But the long-time PNG Prime Minister, Sir Michael Somare, was not keen on the proposal. I recall the press conference following the conclusion of the summit. Somare dominated the press conference and fielded all the questions about West Papua. His mana as a regional leader enabled him to steer proceedings on the matter, even if it may have been uncomfortable for others beside him like Lini and Derek Sikua of Solomon Islands. Somare’s line was that West Papua was strictly a domestic matter for Indonesia and not something for the MSG to deliberate on. In a sense, the Grand Chief shut down questions around the issue.

The Somare stand on the issue of West Papua pretty much sums up Papua New Guinea’s stand on the issue over the decades: firmly at the other pole from Vanuatu within the MSG. It’s been about not questioning the territorial integrity

of Indonesia and its claim to West Papua. Papua New Guinea, as the country directly abutting Indonesia's Papua province, has an extensive and complex set of links with West Papua. The immensity of Indonesia is something that would heavily influence the neighbouring nation, given that it shares such a huge, porous land border. There is little doubt that fear of Indonesian invasion was at the back of the minds of Papua New Guinean governments in the early years following independence, and possibly still is. Papua New Guinea has long struggled to contain spillover effects from the pursuit of OPM by the Indonesian security forces as well as extensive cross-border criminality, such as the trafficking of guns, drugs and 'hot' goods.

Recent tensions around the main border crossing point at Wutung have highlighted how the artificial division of the huge island remains a problem for PNG as well. However, Papua New Guinea has usually been averse to questioning Jakarta about West Papua, even though it remains troubled with a major refugee problem because of West Papuans who have fled across into its territory from the TNI. From time to time, individual Papua New Guinean politicians speak strongly about their concerns for West Papuans and the border issues. However, a burgeoning economic relationship with Indonesia encourages Papua New Guinea's elite to stay quiet.

Solomon Islands, on the other hand, has a current leadership which spoke ardently about West Papua in the MSG arena in the last two years. At last year's MSG summit in New Caledonia, Gordon Darcy Lilo condemned the atrocities and highlighted the Papuan drive for self-determination.

'MSG can provide a platform or forum for dialogue between West Papua and Indonesia,' Lilo said, explaining how Solomon Islands would support an approach that considers consultations and dialogue with both the Indonesian government and West Papua as 'this will allow for responsible and managed progress towards self-determination'.

Part of the concern from Solomon Islanders is that they know how good Lilo is at talking. Sometimes the sentences are long, but the net outcome is underwhelming. Lilo has recently increased ties to Indonesia with Jakarta giving him the red carpet treatment on a state visit, a first for a Solomon Islands leader. After the trip, he stressed the need for close engagement with Jakarta to enable Papuans to participate in the region with which they have cultural links. Engagement with Indonesia over the Papua issue is very much the buzz phrase.

During the recent chairmanship of the MSG by the Fiji regime, a lot of movement was made on engagement with Jakarta over West Papua. Fiji's military-led regime, was headed by Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama who was until recently the commander of Fiji's military forces. On September 17, he emerged the winner of Fiji's first elections since 2006 but Bainimarama has ruled Fiji as a military strongman for most of that time.

The regime had an affinity with other countries whose military play a leading role in dictating political and civilian life. Suva has built a strong rapport with Jakarta in recent years. Indonesia is one of the Fiji government's new friends. These new allies included powerful Asian or non-aligned nations who applied different conditions on relationships compared to Fiji's traditional partners such as Australia and New Zealand, who ostracised Fiji following the 2006 coup when Bainimarama seized power. Fiji was increasing ties with the administration of Susilo Bambang Yudhono, president of Indonesia until this year. There was talk of the Indonesian military receiving training from Fiji counterparts in the type of terrain the TNI works in amid the West Papua jungle. It is unclear whether the Fiji military, internationally respected for its United Nations peacekeeping work in various international theatres, would be imparting training on the observance of human rights to Indonesian counterparts.

Indonesia had been on a charm offensive for some time, working hard to increase ties with Melanesian countries. The brief tenure of Sato Kilman as Vanuatu Prime Minister gave Indonesia a rare opening for more influence across Melanesia. Jakarta's strong desire to build links with each independent Melanesian state has been described by observers as being mainly about countering support for West Papuan self-determination aspirations or at least policies that raise attention to troubles in the Papua situation. But the SBY administration presented the view this time that Indonesia naturally sought inclusion in the MSG as a country with a significant Melanesian population. Indonesian officials had begun claiming that Melanesian stock was traced strongly through regions like Maluku and Nusa Tenggara. Following in this vein, Fiji's Foreign Minister, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, claimed in Pacific Islands media that Indonesia was home to the majority of the world's Melanesian population, around 11 million, more than the combined population of the MSG member states.

That question is best left to debate because ethnological definitions can be fluid. Yet I should add that this contentious claim has been linked to an old



diplomatic strategy by Jakarta. Richard Chauvel, an Indonesia specialist at Victoria University in Melbourne, said in a Radio New Zealand International interview that the first time he came across this was in the context of Indonesia's struggle with the Dutch in the 1950s and early 1960s about who 'owned' the former Dutch New Guinea (Questions over Indonesian claim, 2011) .

'The Indonesian counter argument to the Dutch one about cultural difference was to say that not only were the West Papuans Melanesians but there are also Melanesians in other parts of Indonesia and that Indonesia is not based on any assertion of cultural similarity.'

But, Chauvel pointed out, try that on in the Indonesian public and there would be a reaction: 'The use of the word "Melanesian" in the domestic sense and particularly by West Papuans to distinguish themselves from other Indonesians is something that's highly contested in Indonesia and one which the authorities in Jakarta view with—if not downright opposition—ambivalence' (Ibid.).

The Bainimarama regime was central to the case for Indonesia's inclusion in the Melanesian Spearhead Group. Having a prime minister in power in Vanuatu who endorsed stronger ties with Jakarta also helped. At the MSG summit in Suva in 2011, Indonesia was granted observer status (along with East Timor). It was an unpopular move among Melanesians. And it subsequently proved politically costly for Vanuatu's Sato Kilman domestically. Anyway, the fact was that Indonesia was now a member of the MSG. Commented the head of the Indonesian delegation at the Suva summit, Budiardman Bahar, a senior official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, about why Indonesia should belong to the MSG, 'because we feel that we belong to the Pacific region and secondly because there is no other issue now that can be handled alone' (MSG facing credibility test, 2011).

However, while this development was frustrating for those who had fought long and hard for representation by West Papuans as an individual entity in the MSG, Jakarta argued simply that as Indonesians, West Papuans could now rest assured that they were part of the grouping with observer status. Nonetheless, it was not long before the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation, whose leading representatives live in exile in Australia and Vanuatu, got together for a historic membership application. There have been numerous attempts by West Papuans to get a MSG membership bid together over the years but none were well-organised enough, until the WPNCL put forward its bid. And this is

no easy feat, considering the remoteness of the principal West Papuan groups.

Leading up to the 2013 MSG summit in Noumea, Fiji was talking to Indonesia with increasing frequency. The Fiji Foreign Minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola had a meeting with his Indonesian counterpart, Marty Natalegawa, in Bali. Bainimarama also met with a visiting minister or two and cooperation agreements were forged between the two countries. Furthermore, the idea of an MSG foreign ministers delegation visiting West Papua, ostensibly to foster greater understanding of the situation there on the ground, gained momentum in these discussions. Kubuabola was clear that it was an invitation from Jakarta, and he insisted that the Melanesian countries needed to recognise and work with Jakarta on anything about West Papua.

The 23rd Melanesian Spearhead Group leaders summit in Noumea was important because of its focus on self-determination of those Melanesians not yet independent. There was the FLNKS taking on the chairmanship, underlining the support the Kanaks had enjoyed throughout Melanesia for their bid to be independent. The timing of the Kanaks’ accession to the MSG’s two-year chairmanship was important as the Noumea Accord entered its final phase, providing for a referendum in New Caledonia on possible independence from France between 2014 and 2018.

But the big item on the Noumea summit was the West Papuan bid for membership, a formal bid by the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation for MSG membership. There was much anticipation leading up to the summit, with various Melanesian officials, from Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, indicating that it was time for the West Papuans to take their rightful place in the group. The Kanaks had always been supportive of West Papuan independence aims. Although it has the least international clout of any full MSG member, the FLNKS is still one of the five members at the group’s head table.

The Prime Minister of Vanuatu, Moana Carcasses, and his Solomon Islands counterpart, Gordon Darcy Lilo, both spoke eloquently at the summit on the need for real MSG action on helping bring change in West Papua. Referring to human rights abuses, denial of self-determination and an incomplete decolonisation process, ‘history will judge us for the decisions that we make here now and in the future,’ Carcasses told the MSG plenary. ‘Our failure today to take decisive action will be exposed by future generations. Our motive will be laid bare by our future generation.’

Present at the summit was a sizeable Indonesian delegation that included

a number of young interns taking notes around the fringes. Having observer status in the MSG group, Indonesia was not allowed in to the MSG Leaders retreat, but this did not stop the head of its delegation, Vice-Minister Wisnu Wardhana, from hitching a speedboat ride out to the small island where the leaders retreat was being held, stepping ashore and trying to join the conversation. He was politely asked to leave.

Although there has been little coverage in the mainstream media in either Australia or New Zealand, the mood for decolonisation in the region has been growing. Also at the Noumea summit was French Polynesia's Oscar Temaru, a staunch supporter of the decolonisation process. He had recently lost the presidency in Tahiti to the pro-France veteran Gaston Flosse but had also then scored a stunning victory in his long campaign for Maohi Nui independence by successfully lobbying to get French Polynesia re-inscribed on the UN decolonisation list. In this campaign, he enjoyed strong assistance from Gordon Darcy Lilo who mobilised support in the Melanesian bloc.

Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister Peter O'Neill opted to miss the Noumea MSG summit, instead travelling to Jakarta for a meeting with Indonesia's President. There they discussed big plans for developing their common border area through projects in roading, hydro power and LNG gas, among other sectors. O'Neill's government was endorsing an economic approach, jointly taken with Indonesia, to resolving not just ongoing border problems but also the development issues holding West Papuans back.

The WPNCL contributed at the summit. Its late vice-chairman, Dr John Ondawame, addressed the plenary with a call for West Papuans to be brought back into the Melanesian family. The WPNCL presented documents of support from more than 70 West Papuan representative organisations across West Papua and abroad. However, the outcome at the Noumea summit was that a decision on the membership bid by the WPNCL would be postponed, pending a report by a MSG Foreign Ministers, fact-finding mission to West Papua at the invitation of Indonesia. The proposed fact-finding was aimed not only at ascertaining the level of support for the WPNCL, it was also about observing the social conditions in Papua region and establishing a dialogue with genuine representatives of West Papuan grassroots communities.

Meanwhile, the coalition's secretary-general Rex Rumakiek said that although it was disappointing not to be granted membership then, the issue was crucially still alive and that the application for membership had been

successful in internationalising the issue. Furthermore, there was a process going forward with the mission proposal, and MSG membership was still a possibility. Fiji took ownership of this process, even though it was the FLNKS which was assuming the MSG chairmanship. It seemed the closeness of the Fiji regime to Indonesia was a factor.

In the ensuing half year, the process did not appear to advance. The MSG secretariat seemed unable to give us any idea of when the visit would go ahead. Hopes that media might be able to tag along were in vain. It seemed that no one in the member governments or the MSG secretariat knew what was going on. Then, in January 2014, at the end of the ‘silly season’ summer holiday period, the mission was suddenly on. Hastily organised in a matter of days with a programme curated by Jakarta, it left no room for delegates meeting with civil society groups, key Papuan figures and leaders of any of the components of the Papuan struggle for liberation or others who the MSG leaders had mandated the mission to meet with. Vanuatu’s government therefore decided to boycott the trip (Vanuatu defends boycott, 2014).

Foreign Ministers of the other MSG members proceeded with the trip, led by Ratu Inoke Kubuabola. They spent only several hours in Jayapura. They were permitted to meet Indonesian government and police officials, while an earlier plan to meet some members of the regional assembly and people’s council fell through. The mission was tightly monitored throughout by security. Police arrested four dozen Papuans for a peaceful protest which aimed to meet the delegation’s path in Jayapura. The MSG ministers’ vehicles briefly encountered them but it is uncertain whether they noticed the protesters, who at any rate were released by police once the mission had left Jayapura. To round out the schedule, the MSG had a meeting with the Governor of Papua province, Lucas Enembe, who encouraged them to join his administration in moving on from West Papua’s past and embracing special autonomy (Bobbi, 2014). Otherwise, they spent some time in other parts of Indonesia, including Jakarta where they met the SBY administration. Also, the Indonesians took the Foreign Ministers to Ambon, in nearby Maluku, where they had a glimpse of how some other Indonesian peoples of Melanesian descent were living.

Vanuatu’s stand over the trip was a clear indication that there was division in the MSG over West Papua. The FLNKS, naturally close to Vanuatu, is firmly supportive of the West Papuan right to self-determination. Yet these two are the smallest members of the MSG; individually they have relatively little

power at the global level to lobby on this issue. Somewhere in the middle is the Solomon Islands. At the other end of the MSG spectrum is Papua New Guinea, now joined by Fiji. Fiji's accession to the MSG chairmanship was a vehicle for Voreqe Bainimarama to gain legitimacy internationally and he grabbed it with both hands. But it almost did not happen. The MSG chairmanship rotates on a two-yearly basis and Vanuatu had the chair before Fiji. Yet, back in 2010, the Vanuatu Prime Minister, Edward Natapei, refused to hand over the chairmanship to Bainimarama on the grounds that it would breach the MSG's democratic principles to have an unelected government presiding over the group. Bainimarama naturally accused Natapei of being pressured into his stance by Canberra and Wellington. However, there is no evidence that this was the case. But an impasse over the matter lingered for months without Natapei showing any sign of budging, until his deputy at the time, Sato Kilman, mastered the numbers within Vanuatu's Parliament, moved a motion of no-confidence against the Prime Minister when he was out of the country and took over the top job himself. As Prime Minister, Kilman moved quickly to hand the MSG chairmanship to Fiji.

As a national leader who came to power by non-democratic means, Voreqe Bainimarama has craved legitimacy. Once Fiji had taken on the MSG chairmanship, the commodore was able to claim legitimacy and recognition as a regional leader. In this context, the West Papua issue was something he has leveraged for his own interests. There have been benefits from the regime's burgeoning relationship with Jakarta, for instance, funding for a new police academy in Suva, and support for Bainimarama's efforts to change the regional architecture. Lately, came the historic first ever visit of an Indonesian president to a Pacific Island country, with SBY's attendance in 2014 at the annual meeting of the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), a new regional body that Fiji has established as a rival to the Pacific Islands Forum from which it is suspended. Even though SBY was in the twilight of his Presidency, there were signs that his successor, President-elect Joko Widodo, would look to increase Jakarta's overtures to the Pacific community.

The outcome of the MSG Foreign Ministers mission to Indonesia at the start of 2014 became clear at the June annual MSG leaders' summit in Port Moresby. Based on the mission's report, the MSG leaders decided to reject the WPNCL's membership application. One of the visiting foreign ministers—Clay Forau of the Solomon Islands—said they saw that West Papuans were doing well, that



**Figure 2: West Papua's Paula Makabory with Fiji Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama at the MSG summit in Noumea in 2013.**

they were governing themselves and taking charge of their own development. It remains difficult to verify this because Indonesia prevents foreign journalists and researchers from travelling to West Papua. Yet commentators such as West Papuan journalist and editor Victor Mambor have dismissed Forau's claims as being way off the mark (West Papuan participation, 2014).

At the Port Moresby summit, PNG Prime Minister Peter O'Neill said the West Papuans would need to reapply for membership as a more 'representative, united group'. It's hard to know how much more representative they want the group to be, as the coalition had gained widespread support. There are divisions in the West Papuan political field, but there is also a consensus that West Papuans should be members of the MSG in their own right, like the Kanaks of New Caledonia.

According to current Vanuatu Prime Minister Joe Natuman, it is also hard to believe the veracity of the MSG foreign ministers mission report on the West Papua situation, given the short time they were in Papua province and the circumstances surrounding the trip. In Natuman, Vanuatu has a leader who places paramount importance on the decolonisation of Melanesian peoples,

and who appears unlikely to be swayed from this path by larger geopolitical forces. Notably, Voreqe Bainimarama was not present at the Port Moresby summit. Not all of the MSG leaders see eye-to-eye with him. It is possible that he is considered an impediment to progress on the West Papua issue. But his administration was certainly pivotal in getting Indonesia to engage more with the MSG.

The communiqué of the 24th MSG summit, which only briefly mentioned the WPNCL's membership bid, included several endorsements on West Papua, including for the group to work more proactively with Jakarta to address the development needs of the indigenous people of Papua region; and to conduct greater awareness on the situation in Papua and West Papua provinces with respect to the Special Autonomy Arrangements in place there (Melanesian Spearhead Group, 2014). Strangely, the communiqué stated that the leaders welcomed what it called a recent announcement by the President of Indonesia to withdraw the military from Papua region. It seems unlikely that the military presence there is about to be downsized.

While it is easy to jump to the conclusion that the rejection of the coalition's MSG membership bid is a defeat for West Papuan moves, the issue is still very much alive and Vanuatu in particular is working to make sure the MSG holds to its word about considering a more representative bid. Vanuatu's government, chiefs and churches have established a committee to organise a major conference of West Papuan representative groups in Port Vila later in 2014. This may include groups which are not necessarily supporting independence. There will be an emphasis on reconciliation in the tradition of Melanesian culture espoused by Vanuatu's *kastom* chiefs, and importantly, dialogue towards facilitating a more representative MSG membership application. The committee have said the conference will bring together the three main representative groups—the WPNCL, the West Papua National Committee (or KNPB), and the administration of the so-called Federal Republic of West Papua, whose leadership has been in jail in Papua province for the past few years, like dozens of other political prisoners.

## Conclusion

In the last few months there has been real momentum within Fiji civil society on raising awareness about the West Papua issue. Across the Pacific region,

there are workshops and conferences about West Papua being held. In cities around the world such as The Hague, Perth and Oxford, offices are being opened by West Papuan pro-independence groups to raise awareness. Films, graphic novels, music festivals are taking a look at this mysterious, troubled region in the South Western Pacific. The international network Anonymous recently mounted a hacking campaign targeting Indonesian state and corporate websites to bring attention to the West Papuans’ plight. Social media is abuzz with reports about various developments and atrocities filtering out from West Papua. More than ever, the issue of West Papua is regarded by many as a regional, international and media issue.

Briefly during May 1987, Fiji had a government led by the Fiji Labour Party’s Dr Timocoy Bavadra which was anti-nuclear. That was before it was overthrown in a coup by Fiji’s military commander. At that time, as Maire Leadbeater’s book *Peace, Power & Politics* (2013) explains, the anti-nuclear movement in New Zealand and the Pacific region was resonating strongly. It was driven by people power. But when island governments also got on board, historic change was affected towards the creation of an anti-nuclear zone. Vanuatu’s founding Prime Minister, Walter Lini, was outspoken on the anti-nuclear issue. Papua New Guinea’s leadership was also anti-nuclear and vocal about it. Solomon Islands leaders were not keen at all on nukes either. For a while, there was significant momentum from the Melanesian axis and it helped create an international turning point in the face of overwhelming large global forces. This is what can be achieved when the Melanesians stand together, independent.

The West Papuans know that their chances of integration into the region rest with the prospects for unity among Melanesian countries. A united Melanesia is a powerful bloc, and Indonesia knows this. The West Papua question is a great test of the MSG’s integrity. If the MSG members can be united on this, then there is a chance they can achieve more than just West Papuan membership in the group.

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