

## **Independence, interdependence and flexible sovereignty in the small states of the Pacific**

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**ABSTRACT:** The Pacific Islands region is home to many of the world's smallest states, most of which emerged as part of the global trend towards decolonisation in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet for sparsely populated, isolated island states facing particular developmental challenges, independence can, in some ways, be a constraint. In the Pacific, innovative flexible sovereignty arrangements – and calls for metropolitan powers to re-engage, or remain closely engaged, with the region – have emerged as a response to this. In this way, the idea of a sovereign small state is expanded and challenged. The concept of independence, however, remains powerful, as seen in the enduring pro-independence movements throughout the Pacific. In recent years, various referendums on self-determination have been held; and more are planned, or have been proposed. Inspired by the 2020 publication of a handbook on the politics of small states, this essay explores how sovereignty and independence are conceptualised in the contemporary Pacific, and the significance for the future of the small state.

**Keywords:** sovereignty, independence, interdependence, Pacific Islands, small states

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### **Introduction**

Sovereignty is the right to choose partners; independence is the power to manage all the needs that colonisation, the present system, has created. ... Sovereignty gives us the right and the power to negotiate interdependencies. For a small country like ours, independence is choosing our interdependencies skilfully (Jean-Marie Tjibaou, 2005, p. 152).

Sovereignty is perhaps the ideal starting point in understanding the politics of small states. Of course, as Baldacchino and Wivel (2020a, p. 6) highlight, there is a crucial difference between sovereignty and autonomy. For small states in the international system, autonomy might be enhanced by *not* pursuing full sovereignty, and by maintaining a legal attachment to a larger state (Prinsen, 2020). Most island subnational jurisdictions have not sought out, or have actively rejected, legal sovereignty (Prinsen, 2020; Prinsen & Blaise, 2017).

The Pacific provides an interesting environment in which to observe these dynamics. Home to some of the world's smallest states, the region's transitions to independence and self-government were processes that occurred later and were more peaceful than in other parts of the world (Davidson, 1971). This is perhaps attributable to the relatively "thin veneer of colonialism" in the region (Corbett & Connell, 2020, p. 343). With colonial powers actively seeking to move their remaining territories towards independence, independence in the region was a largely exogenously-driven process, creating many of the world's smallest, and most isolated and poorly resourced, states. Moreover, the non-sovereign territories of the Pacific

Islands tend to be economically advantaged compared to the independent states (Firth, 1989; MacDonald, 1982; McElroy & Parry, 2012).

In this light, the prevalence of ‘flexible sovereignty’ arrangements in the Pacific, not paralleled in any other region of the world, reflects the complex nature of the relationship with full independence in the region: a relationship that requires major trade-offs, and a thorough reflection of the nature of interdependencies in the international system. Arrangements include the free association agreements that exchange aspects of sovereignty for closer ties with metropolitan states. The term ‘islandian sovereignty’ (Prinsen & Blaise, 2017) has been coined to refer to such arrangements, with island populations seeking to redefine sovereignty on their own terms.

Yet, we continue to see enduring independence claims throughout the Pacific region. Between 2018 and 2020, there were three referendums on self-determination held in the region: two in New Caledonia and one in Bougainville (Connell, 2020, 2021). In 2019, the United Liberation Movement for West Papua presented a petition with almost two million signatures to the UN demanding a referendum (Blades, 2020). A referendum on self-determination is planned for 2022 – after several delays – in Chuuk, part of the Federated States of Micronesia (RNZ, 2020). In 2020, controversy over the Solomon Islands government’s decision to switch diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China led to Malaita province’s premier calling for independence (Connell, 2021).

Two things are clear: first, independence remains a powerful idea for many communities in the Pacific; and second, independence is not seen as a strictly binary choice, with flexible sovereignty arrangements considered a useful middle ground. This article explores how the concepts of independence and sovereignty have been imagined in the region. First, it looks at how – and why – Pacific countries negotiated independence or flexible sovereignty arrangements in the post-colonial era. Then, it examines the concept of interdependence and its centrality in Pacific debates on sovereignty. It concludes with some reflections on the importance of the study of small states for our understanding of sovereignty. It draws at least some inspiration from the recent publication of a handbook on the politics of small states (Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020b).

### **The road to independence in the Pacific**

Transitions to independence in the Pacific were primarily driven by colonial powers. Independence was the only option presented to many Pacific countries, as colonial powers sought to reinvent themselves in the changing international context. In a debate in the Australian Parliament on the Papua New Guinea Independence Bill, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam (quoted in Nelson, 1997, p. 112) argued:

it is either misleading or meaningless to assert that the decision for independence is one for the people of New Guinea alone. The form of independence is certainly for them to decide for themselves. The fact of independence has already been decided.

This dynamic meant that nation building took on a very different character than in other post-colonial regions; Bernard Narokobi (1983, p. 71) argued that the hasty transition to independence in Papua New Guinea “has given us no chance to master national consciousness.” Solomon Mamaloni (1992, p. 14), the first chief minister of Solomon Islands,

described it as “a nation conceived but never born”. This dynamic has been a key factor in secessionist claims in the post-independence Pacific.

Within the region, independence was sought by some, but opposed by others. While a strong anticolonial movement formed in what was then Western Samoa and agitated for independence, leaders in jurisdictions such as the Cook Islands and Fiji initially rejected colonial overtures on the subject (Lawson, 1996; MacDonald, 1982). The first prime minister of Fiji, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara (quoted in Johnstone & Powles, 2012, p. 95), reflected that there were few signs in the 1950s that the territory would move towards independence: “We heard about the winds of change overseas ... but we thought it was a remote hurricane warning, that would never come to Fiji.”

Nauru’s successful campaign for independence in 1968 – despite seemingly being “an improbable candidate for independent statehood” (Davidson, 1971, p. 136) – provided a model for independence for very small Pacific states. Where independence was sought, it was not necessarily with consideration of economic viability:

Independence was wanted by the people of Tuvalu ... But economics and sustainability, in terms of adequate finances and infrastructure, were not considered at all. The wish was just to get out and be on our own, to run our own affairs (Bikenibeu Paeniu quoted in Johnstone & Powles, 2012, p. 170)

Yet for others, “the security of continuing economic relationships with their former colonial power” in the form of flexible sovereignty arrangements was pursued (MacDonald, 1986, p. 120).

There are two established forms of free association in the contemporary Pacific. Under the New Zealand model, the Cook Islands and Niue have the right of self-government, with New Zealand responsible for defence and some aspects of international relations, and Cook Islanders and Niueans retaining New Zealand citizenship. The governments of Cook Islands and Niue have the power to accede to full sovereignty through amending their constitutions; no negotiations with New Zealand are necessary (Firth, 1989). Under the US model, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and Palau are recognised as independent states in the international system, but have entered into compacts of free association, renegotiated after set terms, which provide migration pathways into the US, access to some federal services, and budgetary support. The US retains in perpetuity the right of strategic denial, which acts to “foreclose the region to the military forces of other nations and permit US forces to range at will in its waters, lands and airspace” (Firth, 2020).

### **Independence, interdependence and flexible sovereignty**

As the opening quote from Kanak pro-independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou indicates, the question of interdependence is at the heart of independence debates in the region. Bensa and Wittersheim (1998, p. 370) argue that “nationalist demands in Oceania have always relied on expanding interinsular relationships.” A key goal for the emerging pro-independence movement of New Caledonia led by Tjibaou in the 1970s and 1980s was to align with its newly independent neighbours. This “geopolitical, economic and ideological reorientation of New Caledonia’s position toward its neighbouring states” (*ibid.*) helped Indigenous communities to reclaim and celebrate a Melanesian identity, core to nationalist efforts. Indeed, interdependence in terms of family and community as a concept has been celebrated as a core Melanesian value

(Narokobi, 1983, p. 38). It was also pragmatic: as Tjibaou (quoted in Fraser, 1990, p. 203) acknowledged, “The balance of power is such that if we didn’t have international support the colonial power could wipe us out here.”

The regional project in the Pacific has been an interesting example of the management of these interdependencies: it allows the pooling of resources, such as the establishment of a regional university and joint fisheries agency, and it allows a collective voice in international diplomacy. Decolonisation has been central to the regional agenda, yet restrictions on membership of regional bodies have at times “created a tension between those accepted as belonging to a Pacific regional identity and those accepted as having the right to participate in regional diplomacy” (Fry, 2019, pp. 102-3). These boundaries, like statehood as a concept in the region, have proven to be fluid. Unable to accede to full membership of the UN, the international status of the freely associated countries of Niue and Cook Islands was legitimised by full membership in the South Pacific Forum (now the Pacific Islands Forum, PIF). PIF has since expanded to include the French territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia.

Tjibaou’s interpretation of sovereignty was “postmodern in that it anticipated coexistence and cohabitation rather than supreme authority” (Edo, 2003, p. 140). In this was a novel conceptualisation of the idea of a “rooted independence”, one that did not automatically necessitate a complete severing of ties with France (Clifford, 2000, p. 106). Yet independence is still a powerful construct, as evidenced by the active pro-independence movements across the region, including in New Caledonia, that endure into the twenty-first century.

Of course, the notion of interdependence persists in the relationships between independent Pacific states and ex-colonial, metropolitan states, and is rarely framed as at odds with sovereignty. Indeed, it was often deemed central to the prospects of independence in the region. The Pacific is the most aid-dependent region in the world; much of this aid comes from former colonial powers, creating relational continuity.

In this context, flexible sovereignty arrangements can be seen as an admission of the practical realities of small statehood and interdependence. Free association is not without drawbacks. Free movement between freely associated and metropolitan states has prompted concerns of brain drain; all freely associated states have large diasporas in either the US or New Zealand, sometimes exceeding the population at home. In the US, there have been attempts to restrict access to services, including Medicaid and drivers’ licences, for citizens of compact states. The government of Cook Islands has seen its attempts to gain full membership of the United Nations discouraged by New Zealand, raising questions about the true limits of flexible sovereignty (Marsters, 2016).

Yet, such arrangements are increasing attractive options for solving complicated secessionist disputes within the region. A potential free association-type arrangement has long been mooted in the case of New Caledonia by academics, public officials and politicians (Courtial & Mélin-Soucramanien, 2014; Mrgudovic, 2012; Souche & Peltier, 2017), taking on a new relevance after two tight referendum results on the issue of independence, reflecting a deeply polarised electorate. On Bougainville, Papua New Guinea’s Prime Minister James Marape has consistently pushed for a ‘middle’ option, a political status that provides ‘economic independence’ but not necessarily political independence (McKenna, 2020). The alternate option on the ballot in the 2019 referendum, greater autonomy, was interpreted by some as equivalent to a free association arrangement (Connell, 2020). The result, however, was a complete rejection of this option, demonstrating near-universal support for independence.

## **Reconceptualising sovereignty**

Sovereignty is a tricky concept for small states. The right to sovereignty has not been applied uniformly to small jurisdictions, and has always been dependent on external interests (Maass, 2020). Yet, sovereignty is also more malleable than one might expect. “Small polities – whether subnational jurisdictions or small sovereign states – seem to be actively seeking to blur the boundaries of what constitutes sovereignty” (Prinsen, 2020, p. 365). Across the Pacific, the diversity of sovereign statuses, and the emergence of flexible sovereignty regimes, reflects how small states continue to widen and challenge conventional ideas of sovereignty.

Nevertheless, the question of sovereign status in small states remains fraught. Enduring secessionist movements, even in very small states, remind us that independence is still a highly salient goal. There are, however, new models being imagined and established: different forms of free association, ‘economic independence’, and various flexible sovereignty arrangements.

This blurring of boundaries highlights what is most exciting, and necessary, about the study of small states. In the Pacific, and in small states and territories beyond, we see innovation in sovereignty arrangements and a re-interrogation of what sovereignty and independence might mean today. Understanding the varied meanings and nuanced conceptualisations of sovereignty and independence requires renewed focus on the politics of small states.

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