

## **Pacific Regionalism and the Polynesian Leaders Group**

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Bio: I am a senior lecturer in the Department of Politics at the University of Otago. My research interests are in good governance, land tenure reform, regionalism, and New Zealand foreign policy. My current projects focus on the last fifty years of New Zealand foreign policy, customary land reform in the Pacific, and Pacific regionalism. On the side, I like to examine issues of nationalism and the nation-state in the Pacific, and am currently working on a project that interrogates the myth of the Samoa-Tonga Wars.

*In November 2011, the Polynesian Leaders Group (PLG) was formed. The inclusion of Samoa, Tonga, and French Polynesia gives it enough political muscle to have some influence on Pacific regionalism, but exactly what this will be is uncertain. Notably, it was formed during a tense period for regionalism; Australia's and New Zealand's disproportionate influence in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) was increasingly being called into question, while Fiji was crowned the chair of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) even though it was then expelled from the PIF. To date, the PLGs most notable work has been done in relation to climate change, while it also promises to address decolonization, both of which are pressing issues on the regional agenda. These might be issue-areas where the PLG will make its mark. Another might be in counterbalancing the increasing regional influence of the MSG, which over the past ten years has been willing to act independently of the PIF and its traditional benefactors: Australia and New Zealand. An examination on when and why the PLG was formed, how its membership is determined, and its position on key regional issues might provide answers about its regional implications.*

Keywords: Polynesian Leaders Group; Regionalism; Pacific Islands Forum; Melanesian Spearhead Group.

## **Introduction**

In November 2011, eight Polynesian island groups ratified a Memorandum of Understanding establishing the Polynesian Leaders Group (PLG). The inclusion of Samoa and Tonga means it has enough political muscle to influence Pacific regionalism and in particular the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF - formerly known as the South Pacific Forum (SPF)). The regional impact of sub-regional organizations has

been a mixed; the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), formed in 1986, has had a significant impact on the PIF, exemplified in the regional response to the Fiji coups. The Micronesian countries have formed a number of organizations to represent their interests, but these have had little if any influence on the PIF and Pacific regionalism more generally. The PLG is the latest, but the first Polynesian sub-regional organization. What impact it will have on regionalism is uncertain. An examination of three key issues: the reasons and goals for the PLG; the effects of a move from regional cooperation to regional integration; the apparent crises in the PIF and the PIFS, might provide clues as to what effect the PLG will have.

## **The Polynesian Leaders Group**

The PLG was formed on 17 November, 2011, when the Prime Ministers of the Cook Islands, Samoa and Tonga, the Governor of American Samoa, the Ulu o Tokelau and Special Envoys from the governments of Niue, Tuvalu, and Ma'ohi Nui-French Polynesia signed a Memorandum of Understanding establishing the group. (Ilalio, 2011)

### ***Identity***

The Polynesian identity provides an important foundation for the PLG; membership is not limited to nation-states, but open to any Polynesian society. According to the first inaugural Chair of the PLG, Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Malielegaoi,

There are Polynesian communities in Vanuatu and the Solomons as well as Papua New Guinea and the Torres Straits (Australia). There are also other Polynesian outliers in Micronesia. These Polynesian communities – at some point – are more than welcome to apply for

some status in the Polynesian Leaders Group. We are most ecstatic in promoting our extremely lively Polynesian heritage. (Tavita, 2011)

At the same time, the political boundaries and qualifications for the group are unclear. In cases where these societies are part of non-Polynesian nation-states, it is unclear whether the invitation is limited to Polynesian communities. In its 2012 meeting, the PLG hosted a Maori delegation from New Zealand whose application to join was submitted without any official representation from the New Zealand government. (Radio Australia, 2012) Tuilaepa has stated that Fiji is qualified to join, presumably through its Polynesian heritage; the Lau island group has strong Polynesian links. It is possible that representatives of places like Hawaii could also be part of the PLG, but doubtful that the invitation is extended to the United States. The emphasis on this sub-regional identity is unmatched by the other two sub-regional organizations; they have not extended similar invitations to groups with Melanesian and Micronesian heritage in the other sub-regions.

### ***Organization***

The PLG has agreed to hold annual meetings for the purpose of receiving reports on important issues, discussing operations, and reviewing membership. It has not established a permanent secretariat, opting instead for a floating secretariat to be provided by the Chair, which apparently each member country will assume at some stage. The Chair's/Secretariat's key functions are to facilitate the annual meeting, implement decisions, and facilitate the coordination of activities, which thus far has focused on information dissemination. (Ilalio, 2011) It is reasonable to assume that

the decision to have a floating instead of a permanent secretariat is based on necessity or the lack thereof. The nature of the PLG's work to date does not require a permanent secretariat, and other regional institutions could provide the services that a secretariat might otherwise perform, in extraordinary circumstances. The PLG has already enlisted the assistance of the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP) to facilitate input to its draft statement on Climate Change on Coral Reefs. (SPREP, 2012) A floating secretariat could mitigate the control of the PLG by one or some members, as has been the case with Australia's and New Zealand's control in the PIF. (Frazer & Bryant-Tokalau, 2006)

### ***Interests and Objectives***

According to the founders of the PLG, the overarching aim is to provide a 'systematic approach to cooperation amongst Polynesian countries to develop, promote, and protect common interests and objectives of the members and Polynesia.' (Ilalio, 2011) These common interests and objectives are quite diverse in nature, including but not limited to culture and tradition, education, transport, energy, environment conservation, climate change, health, agriculture and fisheries, tourism, trade and investment, governance, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and self-determination. (Ibid) The breadth of the PLG's mandate is impressive, but not surprising. According to the founders, all these issues are of central concern and common to Polynesian countries, territories, and societies. Furthermore, it is reasonable to expect that a new regional organization would give itself as much leeway to maneuver as possible; the mandate can always be restricted in the future.

The PLG has already taken visible steps in pursuit of two of its ‘interests and objectives’: climate change, and self-determination. In August, 2012, it produced a draft resolution urging members to

collaborate with local scientists, community members, educators, leaders and decision-makers in Polynesia to place climate change issues at the forefront of coral reef management through efforts to decrease global contributions to global emissions, through local policies, legislation and regulations, improved pollution management, assessment and monitoring of coral reefs and by building local ecosystem and community resilience. (Polynesian Leaders Group, 2012)

Following its first official meeting, held in the Cook Islands in 2012, the PLG called for ‘large greenhouse gas emission producing nations to curb contributions to climate change’ that impact on Polynesian communities.’ (Cook Islands News, 2012) In July 2015, in anticipation of the UN’s 2015 climate summit in Paris (COP21), the PLG issued the Taputapuatea Declaration, which demanded limiting global land temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius by the year 2100. (Bohane, 2015) In June 2016, the PLG held a special conference, focusing on climate change and in particular oceans, as a follow up to COP21 and in preparation for COP22. (Tauafiafi, 2016) The functionalist nature of these moves is notable in that it parallels the functionalist approach to regionalism that the PIF followed in its formative years. Whether these steps are of any practical policy value is uncertain, at least at this stage; 2100 is quite far into the future.

More importantly, whether these resolutions and statements are and/or will be an effective force in promoting the PLG's interests is uncertain. It is claimed that the Taputapuatea Declaration was 'pivotal' in incorporating the 1.5 degree Celsius margin into the Paris Agreement. (Ibid) It is uncertain whether this is true or not; the Agreement only 'aims to limit' the increase to 1.5°C. (European Commission, 2016)

Although some PLG members are among the most likely to be affected by the projected effects of climate change, in particular sea level rise, warmer temperatures, and the increased frequency of severe weather, they have relatively little policy influence in this issue-area. They could lobby the key decisions makers on climate change – the major countries, but the latter remain the final arbiters of policy.

Furthermore, a number of developed countries have and are already making significant commitments to helping Pacific island countries mitigate climate change problems. At the 2012 PIF meeting, a number of developed countries made significant commitments to address climate change issues in the Pacific. In 2012, United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, announced that the US would invest US\$25m over five years to help protect coastal communities in the Pacific from extreme weather and rising sea levels. Australia announced that it would invest AUS\$58m to improve weather and sea-level data. (Reeves, 2012; U.S. Department of State, 2012) Whether these countries could improve on their current promises and whether the PLG can obtain more assistance and concessions than they already have is questionable. The main regional organizations have already made climate change a key part of their agenda, and it is doubtful whether they can do any more. Although the PLG has made important achievements in the fight against climate change, its impact appears restricted to providing a moral compass on the issue rather than a tangible push in a particular direction. The moves by the PLG, especially its call to

make these changes through ‘local policies, legislation and regulations’ and so forth, indicates where it could be most influential, pushing for climate policies to be implemented domestically, among its own members.

The PLG’s stance on neo-colonialism is unclear, particularly in Polynesia, where it has been equivocal about its support for self-determination in French Polynesia.

During the PLG’s first official meeting, it unanimously endorsed the people of French Polynesia’s right to self-determination, in response to a plea from former French Polynesian president, Oscar Temaru, a long time advocate for independence. In relation to colonialism, Tuilaepa has stated, ‘Colonialism is a thing of the past.’ (Tavita, 2012) Since then, the PLG has not discriminated between pro-independence and anti-independence leaders. It has shown support for French Polynesia President, Gaston Flosse, who is a known opponent of independence, (Richardson, 2013) and in 2013, made him Chair of the PLG. (Radio New Zealand, 2013b) The PLG may find it difficult to promote self-determination for French Polynesia given its good relations with both pro and anti independence leaders. In 2016, leaders of the PIF unanimously agreed to grant French Polynesia, and New Caledonia, full memberships, making things more complicated. Neutrality appears to be the preferred option, at least for now.

At the regional level, there are no clear champions of self-determination and decolonization. The PIF, and in particular key countries like Australia do not advocate these to any extent. (MacLellan, 2012) The MSG has supported French Polynesia’s independence movement, (Radio New Zealand, 2012a) and is generally supportive of self-determination efforts. (Lowy Institute, 2014) This is not surprising; the Front de



Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS), a pro-independence coalition of political parties in New Caledonia, is a full member of the MSG and a strong advocate for West Papuan independence. (Radio New Zealand, 2013a; 2016; Pacific Islands Report, 2016) However, this has its limits. (Australia Network News, 2014; Radio New Zealand, 2014) Apparently, the MSG will only support self-determination where and when it is expedient. A few non-government organizations such as the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), (Pacific Conference of Churches, 2011) the World Council of Churches, (World Council of Churches, 2012; Bhagwan, 2012) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) (Fiji Government, 2012) support independence movements in the Pacific. With no clear champions for self-determination in the Pacific, the PLG has the opportunity to make it a priority.

Overall, the PLG's stated interests and objectives are quite reasonable and perhaps even realizable. There is scope for it to play an important role in at least one or perhaps two of these. The potential and space for the PLG to make an important contribution to climate change discussions, and perhaps the further decolonization of Polynesia is available.

### ***Relationship with regional organizations***

Apparently, the PLG wants a working relationship with the PIF. It plans to hold its annual meetings on the margins of the PIF, or at such a time and place as agreed to by the majority of its members. Its first official meeting was held on 25 August 2012, two days before the Pacific Islands Forum, which took place between 27-31 August 2012. According to the Cook Island's Prime Minister, Henry Puna, who was the second Chair of the PLG, the Group was not established to compete with other

groupings within the PIF and hopes that it will become a recognized sub-regional grouping within the PIF. (Pacific Islands Business, 2012)<sup>1</sup> The PLG's 2012 meeting focused on key areas of collaboration in compliance with the Pacific Plan, an agreement to give effect to the PIF leaders vision (included in the 2004 Auckland Declaration) for a Pacific region marked by peace, harmony, security and economic prosperity. Among the Plan's many goals, it promotes economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security, seeks to strengthen regional cooperation and integration, and reform the Forum and the regional institutional mechanism. Tuilaepa stated,

We have noted very carefully the major issues in the Pacific Plan and we will focus on areas that are of particular importance to the PLG. As you know in the Pacific Plan there are wider issues to deal with in the areas of climate change, fisheries, ICT and infrastructure development. (Pacific Islands Business, 2012)

The PLG is addressing issues in these areas, in particular climate change (Polynesian Leaders Group, 2012) and ICT. (Pacific Islands Business, 2012) However, these are broad categories within the Pacific Plan, and it is uncertain whether addressing issues pertaining to them equates with complying with the Plan. It is too early to tell whether the rhetoric is matched in practice and whether the long-term relationship between the PLG and the PIF will be complementary or conflicting.

It is also too early to tell what the relationship between the PLG and the other sub-regional organizations will be, particularly the MSG. The MSG was established to promote and consolidate Melanesian interests and goals (Agreement Establishing the Melanesian Spearhead Group), particularly in relation to the issue of self-

determination, where there had been growing frustration about the failure of some members of the PIF, in particular Australia, New Zealand and some Polynesian countries, to provide adequate support for Kanak independence demands in New Caledonia. (May, 2011) Furthermore, the MSG is the most powerful of the three sub-regional organizations; its members collectively account for over 80 percent of the Pacific islands' population and land area, (Finin, 2011) and are the wealthiest in terms of natural resources. Rhetorically at least, the PLG would like a harmonious relationship with the MSG; Tuilaepa has referred to the MSG and the Micronesian leaders as 'brothers', highlighting the need for them to work together in sync, particularly on issues such as climate change. (Tavita, 2012) Whether there are reciprocal sentiments in the MSG is uncertain.

Tuilaepa's rhetoric belies the often tension filled dialogue that has transpired between individual members of each group. In the aftermath of the 2006 Fiji coup, a regional cleavage became apparent. Tuilaepa was highly critical of Bainimarama, whereas the MSG leaders appeared to support him. In 2012, as Chair of the PLG, the Cook Islands Prime, Henry Puna, affirmed the official PIF position not to reinstate Fiji to the PIF until it held democratic elections. (Radio New Zealand, 2012b) Puna then publicly disputed the coup regime's accusation that Australia and New Zealand were dominating the PIF. (Radio New Zealand, 2012c) Although Tuilaepa and Puna did not express these opinions on behalf of the PLG, it is difficult to disassociate the PLG from them, especially as Tuilaepa was the first Chair of the PLG, and Puna the second. This may cause problems for any future collaboration between the PLG and the MSG, especially if both Tuilaepa and Bainimarama remain leading figures in these organizations. It is notable that at the PLG's inception, it indicated a willingness

to accept an application for membership from Fiji in due course. (Lawson, 2016, p.398) The door is open for a smoothing of relations, but whether anything will come of this is uncertain. Lawson notes, ‘Fiji may well join at some time in the future, depending on who is leading the country. It is less likely to occur under Bainimarama’s leadership.’ (Ibid) Although it might seem unlikely that smooth relations will develop while Tuilaepa and Bainimarama remain the Prime Ministers’ of their respective countries, reconciliation is a hallmark of Pacific politics.

### ***Timing***

Statements by Tuilaepa suggest there is nothing significant about the timing of PLG’s creation; it is the realization of an idea that has been around since the early years of colonialism. Tuilaepa has stated that the ‘idea of a Polynesian confederation dates back to the 1880s’, when King Kamehameha of Hawaii, King Pomare of Tahiti, Malietoa Laupepa of Samoa, and King George Tupou II of Tonga agreed to establish a confederation of Polynesian states. (Tavita, 2011) He noted that efforts were made at the time, in the form of inter-islands diplomatic visits and meetings, to develop the confederation. During the mid-1970s, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara of Fiji, His Highness Malietoa Tanumafili II of Samoa, the Maori Queen, and the King of Tonga mooted the idea of establishing a Polynesian sub-group that would operate on the margins of the PIF. (Ibid) Is it plausible to believe that there is nothing significant about the timing of the PLG’s creation? This would be highly doubtful; Tuilaepa’s selective politicization of history fails to account for the obvious lack of support for or momentum behind the idea of Polynesian regionalism in the supervening years.

## **Pacific Regionalism: Timing and Key Developments**

The PLG was formed at an interesting period in the development of Pacific regionalism in general, and the PIF in particular. Over the past decade, the PIF's relevance to the region has come under scrutiny.

### ***The PIF and PIFS in Crises***

The crisis within the PIF is manifest in two forms. First, Australia and New Zealand have arguably increased their power in relation to and at the expense of the Pacific island countries, defeating the PIF's original purpose of regional decolonization. (Frazer & Bryant-Tokalau, 2006, p.6) The initial plans for the PIF excluded New Zealand and Australia, who were included as founding members in 1971 after they petitioned. (Graham, 2010, p.27) Initially, the PIF, 'was to operate two caucuses – one caucus for the Pacific island leaders and one for ANZ', but this was changed in 1972.' (Tavola, 2016, p.1) Their membership has been important, financially, but what began as an awkward relationship has become a 'basis for deep seated tension over the shape and direction of cooperation, and the interests that it serves'. (Frazer & Bryant-Tokalau, 2006, p.2)

Second, the PIF is arguably a redundant organization, lacking the authority and power to address regional issues and advance the region's interests, and producing cleavages between itself and at least one key member, Fiji. The MSG has demonstrated that the PIF does not have the final say on regional matters. In contrast to and perhaps in defiance of the PIF, the MSG was generally supportive of the coup regime. In 2010, Fiji was made the MSG chair, amidst controversy. In anticipation of Bainimarama assuming the leadership, the then Chair, Vanuatu Prime Minister, Edward Natapei,

cancelled the biennial meeting of the MSG leaders, refusing to hand over the chairmanship. In December, Natapei was toppled as Prime Minister in a no-confidence motion, and was succeeded by Sato Kilman. In the same month, the Solomon Islands handed Fiji the MSG leadership. (Komai, 2015, p.112) In 2012, Fiji was excluded from the Pacific group of the European Union's Asia Caribbean Pacific (ACP) association. However, in 2012, a meeting of the Pacific group of the ACP reinstated Fiji's membership. As part of Fiji's reinstatement, the group agreed to shift the group's secretariat functions on trade negotiations from the PIF to Papua New Guinea. (Bolatiki, 2012) PNG offered to host and pay for the Pacific group of the European Union's ACP secretariat function on trade negotiations. This, according to long time researcher and consultant in the Pacific, Richard Herr, 'took the Forum Secretariat out of the regional game'. (Herr, 2012) More importantly, the move signaled a rise in the MSG's influence 'at the expense of the Forum'. (Ibid) This indicates that the PIF is not indispensable to Pacific island countries and geopolitics.

The PIF's apparent crisis is mirrored in the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), which has been criticized for being redundant and controlled by Australia and New Zealand. A 2012 draft report for a review of the PIFS strongly implied that the Pacific island country members of the PIF have relatively little ownership of the organization as compared to Australia and New Zealand. According to the report, 'the very low proportion of annual revenue contributed by member states reinforces a lack of ownership of the Secretariat by members.' (Winder et al, 2012) These 'members' are most likely the Pacific island country members, not Australia and New Zealand. (Ibid., pp.8, 20)

## **The PLG and Pacific Regionalism**

The PLG could impact these developments in a number of ways. First, sub-regionalism can be a source of further division within the PIF. This was exemplified by the tensions between the MSG and the PIF in relation to the 2006 Fiji coup, which ended when democratic elections were held in September 2014. In 2015, Bainimarama accused Australia of undermining the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), which Fiji had set up three years earlier to focus on issues of sustainable development, civil society, and business. (Radio New Zealand, 2015b) As elected Prime Minister, Bainimarama refuses to attend any PIF meeting until Australia's and New Zealand's memberships have been reviewed. (Callick, 2015) Australia has diplomatically welcomed the contribution of the PIDF to regional prosperity, (Radio New Zealand, 2015a) while New Zealand has dismissed Bainimarama's calls as 'mouthing off.' (Fox, 2015) Tensions between the key protagonists remain.

Second, the PLG could aggravate inter and intra-state cleavages in the region. This might occur when and where there are issues that it and the other sub-regional organizations are at odds over. Furthermore, the invitation to membership for 'Polynesian communities', regardless of where they are located, could be problematic, particularly for Melanesian countries that include Polynesian outliers. The resurrection of old Melanesian-Polynesian divisions, as in the rescue of Fijian Colonel, Ratu Tevita Kapaiwai Lutunauga Uluilakeba Mara, by the Tongan navy, could be repeated in the future.<sup>2</sup> Third, the PLG could help stabilize Pacific regionalism, by counterbalancing the influence of the MSG. The PLG could be an

important ally for Australia and New Zealand against an increasing assertive MSG, and belligerent MSG members.

## **Conclusion**

The PLG has the capacity to change regionalism. Its identity gives it a broad reach in terms of current and potential members. It poses interesting challenges to regional organizations such as the MSG and countries like New Zealand, where there are qualifying Polynesian societies that could obtain membership in the PLG. Its organizational structure does not pose any obvious issues to the key regional organization. However, its interests and objectives, a couple of which it has made notable strides on, gives it a visible presence on issues that regional organizations are already addressing. This could be an area where it might have significant impact on regionalism. Whether this is in terms of enhancing or challenging the regional position is uncertain. Its position on decolonization is particularly interesting; it has shown a willingness to support groups pursuing self-determination, but at the same time also engages those opposed. With members like Samoa and the realm countries involved in the PLG, all with strong links to New Zealand, which has formerly been a supporter of decolonization, what the PLG does in this issue area is worth monitoring. Notably, the PLG has signaled a willingness to work together with other regional and sub-regional organizations. However, whether this is just rhetoric or a real intention of the PLG will be tested by the sometimes rocky relationship between its leading countries, in particular Samoa, and leading countries from the MSG, such as Fiji. The signs are that the PLG will have important implications for Pacific regionalism.



The timing of the PLG's formation in relation to key developments in Pacific regionalism supports this perspective. The PIF and its secretariat are in crisis. Australia's and New Zealand's undoubted disproportionate power and influence in both organizations contradicts the primary reason the PIF was formed in the first place. This aside, the MSG has exposed the PIF's relevance and legitimacy in regionalism. This may or may not be limited to extraordinary issues, such as the Fiji coups. The fact that the Pacific Group of the European Union's ACT, which does not have the same regional might as the MSG, is willing to act contrary to PIF policy's clearly indicates the latter may not have the pre-eminence it once had, or at least was thought to have had. Within this context, the PLG could aggravate existing fault lines in Pacific regionalism, or provide a stabilizing force, balancing the power of the more powerful Pacific island countries like Fiji, in favour of Australia and New Zealand.

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<sup>1</sup> The only other recognized sub-regional group within the PIF is the Smaller Island States (SIS), made up of Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau and Tuvalu.

<sup>2</sup> Although the conflict was not appropriated according to sub-regional identities, it was difficult not to perceive it this way given the centrality of Fiji and Tonga to Melanesia and Polynesia respectively. When Samoa hosted Mara, the Melanesia-Polynesia divide became clearer. In 2013, in recognition of Mara's Tongan ancestry, the Tongan government gifted Mara one of the Kingdom's islands as well as a government position. Mara comes from a group of islands in Fiji that has strong socio-political connections with Tonga.