




Fault lines for unrest in the Pacific:  
Youth, livelihoods and land rights in driving and mitigating conflict

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## Fault lines for unrest in the Pacific: Youth, livelihoods and land rights in driving and mitigating conflict

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**Abstract:** *Instances of civil unrest and disorder have pockmarked the mainly peaceful functioning of multiple Pacific states in recent decades. This paper examines factors which can be seen as fault lines for predicting and mitigating such unrest, with a particular focus on Fiji and Solomon Islands. Drawing on data collected through interviews with youth advocates and activists, it becomes clear that the common justification of ‘ethnic tensions’ for past unrest and fears of future unrest being necessitated by a ‘youth bulge’ oversimplifies the complexity of factors that lead to disorder. Issues of land rights, uncertain livelihood futures and public perceptions of inequality provide more salient framings for understanding why citizens engage in unrest. Indeed, it is perceptions of injustice and inequality which may well prove to be the greater indicator of the likelihood of any future destabilisation.*

**Keywords:** *civil unrest, conflict, land rights, livelihoods, Pacific, youth*



Peace is the natural order of societies

The 'youth bulge' does not present an inherent future security risk

Just as 'ethnic tensions' offer a simplistic explanation of past civil conflicts

Real *and* perceived inequality are more appropriate lenses for understanding civil unrest

Policies and programs that address the livelihoods needs of citizens (particularly youth) should be a cornerstone of peacebuilding efforts



The 'youth bulge'

Youth bulge theory is often used to suggest that high youth populations increases risk of unrest

Roughly 1/3 of the populations of Fiji and Solomon Islands are aged 15-34

An ever-increasing number of these youth are overeducated, underemployed and recognise growing inequality



Unrest in Fiji and Solomon Islands

Political coups in Fiji

The Tension in Solomon Islands

Both notable for their disturbance of peace

Both explained through the lens of ethnic tensions



Actual causes of civil unrest

Land rights presents a more accurate starting point

These can be seen as an early symptom of unrest rather than a cause

The underlying cause appears to be real and/or perceived inequality



How the youth bulge may lead to unrest

Unless policies and programs are put in place to improve youth livelihoods, inequalities will grow

The structural minimisation of youth in Fiji and Solomon Islands hinders progressive action

Perceptions of young people as a risk compound actual risk levels and perpetuate their minimisation



What can be done?

Recognise that peace is the natural order of Fiji and Solomon Islands societies

Question simple explanations of unrest

Create policies and programs that support the livelihoods of youth (and other marginalised people) as a proactive measure towards peacebuilding