

# Mid-year at the Melanesian Spearhead Group



by Tess Newton Cain

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This year, **as predicted**, is shaping up to be one of great significance for the **Melanesian Spearhead Group** (MSG) and its constituent members.

The silver jubilee celebrations have been continuing, and today (20 June) sees the annual leaders' summit in Noumea, at which point the chairmanship will transfer from Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama of Fiji to **Victor Tutugoro**, the spokesperson for the *Front de Libération et Socialiste* (FLNKS) of New Caledonia. In the lead-up to the meeting, there was keen anticipation within Melanesia in relation to the **application for membership** put forward by the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation. There was much lobbying by the WPNCL of Melanesian leaders with **numerous indications** of momentum building towards their desired result. However, at the foreign ministers' meeting on 17 June it was **decided** that consideration of the application would be deferred for six months, pending a ministerial mission to undertake an 'on the ground' assessment in Jakarta and Jayapura. Vanuatu's Foreign Minister, Edward Natapei Nipake, accepted that the majority had prevailed at this juncture but stressed that it would be raised at the leaders' meeting and took comfort from the fact that a timeline for progressing the issue had been established.

A few years ago, the MSG was discussed primarily in terms of economic activity, particularly with reference to its preferential trade agreement. The economic aspects of the MSG project continue to be of importance, as evidenced more recently with the development of its Skilled Migrants Scheme (SMS). In addition, **recent remarks** from PNG's Trade Minister, Richard Maru, indicate the focus is very much in the near neighbourhood rather than on the greater regional PACER Plus project.

However, more recent discussions and observations have focused on the political significance of the MSG. It has developed a political economy of its own that is something more than simply an aggregation of that of each of the member countries. The political nature of the MSG has already been highlighted in relation to the issue of membership for West Papua. Similarly, the significance of the MSG 'voice' has arisen in connection with Fiji, most notably in the recent **expressions of disappointment** by Mick Beddoes at the lack of protest from the MSG about the dislocation of the 're-democratisation' process in his country.

The rise and rise of the MSG has not gone unnoticed, both within the region and elsewhere. It is becoming increasingly apparent that in order to have a true sense of what is important to the leaders and peoples of the Pacific island region multiple conversations are required. This is not to say that one conversation is better or more significant than any or all of the others. But the political reality is (and has been for a while) that the concerns of Melanesian countries are not necessarily fully reflected in positions as put forward by the Pacific Islands Forum and/or its secretariat in Suva.

Of course, a significant factor in this regard is that whilst Fiji remains excluded from the Pacific Islands Forum, it is a very prominent member of the MSG. This prominence and its acceptance by other MSG members was evident most recently during a 'state' visit by the interim prime minister (and a 100-strong delegation) to Port Moresby. However, in a reflection of a very Melanesian approach, prominence should not be equated with pre-eminence. With the transfer of chairing arrangements it will be interesting to see if the dynamics change both internally and externally. For example, it may become easier for countries such as Australia and New Zealand to engage with the MSG once Fiji no longer holds the chairmanship. Certainly, from within Melanesia there are calls for the Australian approach to be modified in this arena.

There has been and will continue to be discussion about whether the growing significance of the MSG (and indeed the other sub-regional groupings) should be characterised as a threat to regionalism more generally. Recently, the current Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum and Prime Minister of Cook Islands, Henry Puna, commented that whilst the development of sub-regional groupings was to be acknowledged and respected, it was unlikely that the overall regional architecture would change. From within the MSG, Director-General of the Secretariat, Peter Forau, has noted that whilst the 'regional architecture' is unlikely to change, we can expect to see stronger linkages growing between the various sub-regional groupings. In the same interview, he identified a couple of key reasons as to why he thought the MSG was so successful as a sub-regional grouping. One is that it has a small membership, with close geographical proximity, allowing for ease of communication and good relationship building. A second is the absence of Australia and New Zealand from the MSG, reflecting an ongoing concern that these countries exercise a disproportionate amount of influence within the Pacific Islands Forum.

The MSG is now an established feature of the Pacific political landscape and we can expect its significance and role to continue to evolve and develop into the future.

*Tess Newton Cain is a Research Associate at the Development Policy Centre.*

*Based in Vanuatu, she specialises in developing knowledge connections to support policy-making in the Pacific island region.*

### **Author/s:**

#### **Tess Newton Cain**

Dr Tess Newton Cain is an Associate of the Development Policy Centre and an adjunct Associate Professor at the Griffith Asia Institute.

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