

No imported control: Pacific sovereignty demands legal and cultural grounding

by Celsus Talifilu

8 October 2025



Officers of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force in Tigoa police station, Renbel Province, completed training with the China Police Liaison Team in 2024

Photo Credit: [Facebook/ChineseEmbSI](#)

The [13 September editorial](#) in the newspaper *The Australian*, provocatively titled “China’s Cultural Revolution forced on to the Solomons”, framed Solomon Islands’ adoption of aspects of China’s “Fengqiao Experience” as a lurch towards authoritarianism. It raised legitimate concerns about surveillance, policing experiments and the erosion of freedom. Yet, in concentrating almost entirely on Beijing’s role, the editorial left unexamined the responsibility of Pacific governments themselves and the long history of Western structural influence in the region. A balanced assessment must situate the current debate within Pacific traditions of governance, law and external intervention.

Dr Transform Aqorau, Vice Chancellor of Solomon Islands National University, has argued in response to the editorial that [the Pacific must reclaim](#) its “development soul” by blending indigenous wisdom with modern partnerships. This vision highlights sovereignty and cultural resilience. However, discussion of external influence cannot overlook the accountability of Pacific leaders. Desperation often drives these governments — facing rising youth unrest, fragile economies and poverty — to embrace imported models of policing. That vulnerability creates an opening for authoritarian states, including China, to export their tools of social control under the cover of “community policing”.

Pacific leaders cannot outsource responsibility. Citizens should hold them to account for the choices they make and those choices must be judged not only by the ends they promise but also by whether they conform to law and cultural principles.

The origins of the Fengqiao Experience are not found in China’s policing culture. Rather, it is a method used by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) — [a social control model](#) from the Mao Zedong era. It originated in the 1960s in Fengqiao, Zhejiang Province, when local CCP cadres mobilised residents to transform the thinking and behaviour of so-called class enemies through grassroots monitoring

and re-education, rather than escalating cases to central authorities. In the Xi era, the Public Security Bureau, which is closer to the Gestapo or the Stasi than a traditional police force, has [adopted this model](#).

The legal dimension is crucial. The central issue is not whether the Fengqiao Experience is “Chinese” but whether it complies with Solomon Islands’ own legal order. The country’s *Police Act 2013*, for instance, contains no authority for mass data collection, biometric registration or neighbourhood surveillance.

Without clear statutory authority, such activities may breach the constitution and violate rights to privacy, due process and free expression. Any externally-derived policing program must therefore clear the first hurdle of legality. Without this, policing risks shattering public trust and undermining the rule of law.

Equally important is the test of cultural fit. Solomon Islands’ social order rests on kinship networks, customary norms and communal accountability. Imported models should strengthen those traditions, not hollow them out. Programs rooted in coercion, public shaming or surveillance jar against the Melanesian ethos of reconciliation, dialogue and restorative justice. When policing techniques ignore cultural foundations, they risk alienating communities and destabilising governance.

What makes the Fengqiao style of policing distinct is its focus on everyday life. Unlike Western forms of influence, which have shaped institutions and particularly the bureaucracy, Fengqiao drills directly into families, villages and neighbourhoods. Fingerprinting, household registration, surveillance patrols and sessions of collective humiliation amount to a system that turns citizens into both subjects and instruments of control. Western paternalism damaged Pacific agency, but it did not attempt to weaponise citizens against each other. This difference explains why the risks attached to the Fengqiao Experience in Solomon Islands are so acute.

All the while, a driving factor of instability receives little scrutiny in the debate: logging. For decades logging — much of it tied to Chinese markets — has fuelled corruption in Solomon Islands politics. It has disrupted indigenous governance, undermined customary land tenure, and entrenched rent-seeking. To focus exclusively on aid dependency, while ignoring how extraction corrodes sovereignty, produces an incomplete and evasive analysis. Pacific poverty and dependency come not only from Western aid but also from resource exploitation sanctioned by domestic elites.

The ultimate question, however, is not whether China or Australia deserves more blame for the situation in Solomon Islands and the wider Pacific. It is whether Pacific peoples will choose to remain passive actors in a strategic tug-of-war.

DEVPOLICYBLOG

Sovereignty requires more than rejecting one hegemon in order to fall into the arms of another. It demands systems of governance that rest on three pillars. They must be legally defensible, respecting constitutional protections; culturally resonant, aligning with indigenous norms and values; and politically accountable, with leaders answerable for the long-term impact of their decisions on fundamental freedoms.

The Australian editorial rightly draws attention to the authoritarianism implicit in Fengqiao. But the Pacific deserves more than a binary choice between Chinese control and Western paternalism. Sovereignty for the Pacific means telling its own story, deciding on its own models and taking responsibility for the consequences.

To claim the right to choose is one thing. To exercise that choice without legality, accountability or cultural grounding is no choice at all.

Disclosures:

The author is currently employed by the Office of the Solomon Islands Leader of the Opposition. The views expressed are those of the author only.

Author/s:

Celsus Talifilu

Celsus Talifilu is a public policy and governance professional with over 20 years' experience in the Solomon Islands' government, parliament and provincial politics.

Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/no-imported-control-pacific-sovereignty-demands-legal-and-cultural-grounding-20251008/>