

Pacific Islands Development Forum launch in Fiji

by Matthew Dornan
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Fiji last week hosted the inaugural **Pacific Islands Development Forum** (PIDF) summit, a regional meeting of Pacific island leaders initiated by the Bainimarama government. The PIDF is widely **perceived** as a challenge to the Pacific Islands Forum, and builds on the “Engaging with the Pacific” process established in response to Fiji’s exclusion from the Forum and (for a time) role as MSG chair.

The PIDF’s stated focus is on the blue-green economy, or environmentally and socially sustainable economic development. However, politics was never far from the surface during the inaugural meeting. The forum highlighted Fiji’s importance to the region in various ways, such as through references to Fiji’s role as chair of the G77, an MSG trade show, and the ability to attract funding for the PIDF from China, Russia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Bainimarama **criticised** the Pacific Islands Forum in his **opening address**, arguing that the Forum is “dominated only by a few” and has achieved little for Pacific islanders. Fiji’s Foreign Minister argued that Australia and New Zealand should not be members of the Forum.

The other governments and organisations in attendance trod a fine line between supporting Fiji and not offending Australia or New Zealand. The leaders of Solomon Islands and Kiribati argued that the PIDF and Pacific Islands Forum should be seen as **complementary**, with each serving different purposes. Jimmie Rodgers, the head of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), pointed to the broader membership base of the PIDF, which includes the private sector and NGOs, as a notable difference between the two organisations.

Attendance from the region was mixed. Keynote speakers included Xanana Gusmao, the Prime Minister of Timor Leste, and Jimmie Rodgers. However a number of leaders were **absent** from the PIDF, highlighting the many divisions in the region, and leading to **claims** from Fiji’s Foreign Minister that Australia had lobbied governments not to attend. The absence of PNG’s Prime Minister was especially notable, given PNG’s previous support for the Fiji Government and O’Neill’s recent no-show at the MSG meeting. Polynesian states were also poorly represented, with the leaders of Tonga, Samoa, Niue, and Cook Island not present. The Samoan Prime Minister was characteristically critical of the Fiji military. He stated that he could “not see the need to attend” the conference, given the existence of the Pacific Islands Forum and other regional structures. Samoan PM Tuilaepa also rejected claims that the Forum is dominated by some members.

Pacific observers can look forward to more fireworks next year. The PIDF looks set to become a permanent feature, with the Fiji Government currently establishing a secretariat in Suva. With the MSG increasingly active and apparently open to broadening its membership, the Pacific regional architecture looks increasingly crowded.

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