

Pacific Predictions: A look ahead at 2024

by Tess Newton Cain

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Marshall Islands President Hilda Heine nominates cabinet ministers, 9 January 2024

Photo Credit: [Office of the President, Marshall Islands/Facebook](#)

As the new year gets underway, now is the time to look ahead to what will be significant in the Pacific islands region. Chances are this part of the world will continue to be a focus for the media and commentariat who will view what happens through their own lenses. However, more now than ever, it is imperative to see the events of the Pacific in their context, with the nuance that allows for them to be more fully understood.

The Pacific will play a small part in the year in which more than half of the global population will go to the polls. We have already seen Dr Hilda Heine [sworn in as the tenth President of Marshall Islands](#) following elections late last year. Next cab off the rank is Tuvalu, with voting to take place at the end of January. Of particular interest here is how, if at all, a change of government might affect the future of the [Falepili Union](#) with Australia that was signed in November 2023.

Perhaps most closely watched will be the elections in Solomon Islands, scheduled to take place in April. The Sogavare government is now in [caretaker mode](#), but a date for the polls is yet to be announced. These are the first general elections since the controversial “switch” in 2019 which saw diplomatic relations between Solomon Islands and Taiwan come to an end and China established as a leading development and security partner for Sogavare’s government. It is hard to know how significant this switch will be for voters more than three years down the track. Sogavare can point to last year’s Pacific Games as a stellar achievement for his government and one in which the support of China was key. But this is unlikely to have much resonance for those Solomon Islanders who live outside Honiara and for whom the games were largely irrelevant.

Other Pacific island countries holding elections this year are Palau (November) and Kiribati (date to be confirmed).

In addition, Vanuatu is expected to hold **its first-ever referendum** on proposed constitutional changes intended to address **chronic political instability**.

The issue of security will continue to be vexed in 2024 in the Pacific islands region. As we have seen in recent years, narratives around climate change and those centred on “traditional” security concerns will become increasingly enmeshed. The apparent acceptance of the significance of climate change as a security threat by partners such as the US is no doubt welcome. However, it is not enough to assuage concern among those who warn against the increased militarisation of the region. **Preliminary findings** from the Rules of Engagement project led by Associate Professor Anna Powles and I show that “defence diplomacy” has become an important aspect of international engagement with Pacific island countries. We can expect this to continue throughout this year. We need to understand better the extent to which these engagements add to feelings of security and safety in Pacific communities and how, if at all, they influence how Pacific people feel about the relationships between their countries and their international partners.

As we have seen already this year, **internal security threats** will be front of mind in Papua New Guinea, and likely elsewhere in the region. Given the mix of cost-of-living pressures, political instability, and a febrile (social) media environment fuelled by rumour and counter-rumour, maintaining social cohesion will become increasingly challenging.

With globalisation in retreat and geopolitical competition on the rise, there is every reason to expect that the high tempo of international strategic engagement with Pacific policymakers, businesses, civil society leaders, and communities will continue throughout 2024.

While this provides numerous opportunities to secure resources for development and other initiatives, it can also create a serious burden in terms of transaction costs, particularly for small resource-constrained administrations. Last year, the government of Solomon Islands announced that it would have a **“block out” period** during which senior officials are unavailable to meet with visiting delegations. This is an approach that could be beneficial for other countries to preserve valuable time for budget preparation or key policy work.

At the regional level, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) is still in the process of determining how best to manage the increased attention the organisation is receiving from countries that want to become dialogue partners. There are currently six applications awaiting consideration (Denmark, Ecuador, Israel, Portugal, Saudi Arabia and Ukraine). Last year at the PIF Leaders Meeting it was made clear that the ongoing review of regional architecture includes a refreshed framework for

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engagement with dialogue partners – one that is **led and driven by Pacific priorities**.

In conclusion, 2024 holds both challenges and opportunities for the Pacific islands region. With elections, security concerns, and regionalism on the agenda, policymakers, businesses, civil society leaders, and communities must work together to tackle these issues.

*The author's **Pacific Predictions** have been produced annually since 2012.*

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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