

# Pacific predictions: what will 2017 hold for the Pacific?

by Tess Newton Cain

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A voter marks her ballot during the 2012 elections in the PNG highlands (Trevi Braun/Commonwealth Secretariat/Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Pacific politics will continue to be a source of fascination and concern in 2017. There will be general elections in [Papua New Guinea](#) (polling will take place between June 24<sup>th</sup> and July 8<sup>th</sup>). In addition to the ever-present concerns about money politics, logistics, cost and security, the [economic crisis](#) that country is currently experiencing will also contribute to the prevailing environment. It is always a matter of concern if governments cannot pay their bills and these concerns are exacerbated in election years. Jitteriness was increased recently, when the O'Neill government 'delayed' release of the [IMF Article IV assessment](#), which has yet to appear. Another potential flashpoint is the failure (in both Waigani and Canberra) to appropriately resolve the situation in relation to the closure of the Manus refugee-processing centre. [Recent violence](#) should be seen as a serious warning as should the increasing frustration (seen most evidently on Twitter: @pontuna2run) of Ron Knight, the current MP for Manus province.

Fiji is scheduled to hold elections during 2018 but the pre-positioning that took place last year will continue during 2017. The major opposition party SODELPA has a 'back to the future' leader in former coup leader [Sitiveni Rabuka](#) and he has called for opposition parties to [work together in coalition](#) to unseat the Fiji First government. The electoral system in Fiji militates against independents and, in an attempt to counter this, Roshika Deo (who contested unsuccessfully in 2014) is expected to form a new party to contest.

Further afield, there will be [presidential elections in France](#). The results may have a ripple effect in our region in relation to the finalisation of the Noumea Accords process in New Caledonia and the participation of [France in the Pacific Islands Forum](#), the details of which are yet to become clear.

Constitutional reform is a hot topic in several Pacific island countries. Vanuatu's

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attempts to progress a whole raft of measures (largely designed to engender greater political stability) **faltered in late 2016**. This was because the Salwai government failed to secure the two-thirds majority needed to progress legislation further to constitutional reform committee process. Whilst there are certainly elements within the government who will want to progress this if the opportunity arises, it is possible that other issues will become and remain more pressing. Chief among them is Vanuatu's **impending relegation** to the Financial Action Task Force's 'black list'. The referendum on constitutional reform scheduled to take place concurrently with provincial elections in March is on indefinite hold.

To our north, the **Republic of the Marshall Islands** will hold its first Constitutional Convention once the 45-person membership has been established. The most significant item for consideration is a proposal to move from a parliamentary to a presidential system of government. Meanwhile, in Samoa, Prime Minister Tuilaepa Aiono Sailele Malielegaoi is seeking to have the Constitution amended to make the Samoan state Christian, a proposal that has **caused concern** within the wider society.

During 2016, I **suggested** that the new logo for the Melanesian Spearhead Group should be the Gordian knot. As we enter a new year, the internal tussles are becoming ever more entrenched. There are several strands to this knot with the issue of membership being the one that is proving the most stubborn to shift. Despite the fact that there was no leaders' meeting in December, **the foreign ministers met** in Port Vila to consider the text of membership regulations and guidelines prepared by the group's Subcommittee on Legal and Institutional Issues. In town at the same time was **a large delegation of West Papuans** including Benny Wenda and other key members of the United Liberation Movement of West Papua leadership. The MSG leaders' meeting is now pencilled in for January, to be held in Port Moresby, prompting **declarations of disappointment** from within the ULMWP. It is hard to see the disappointment lifting any time soon given the proposal to hold the meeting in Papua New Guinea (the ULMWP would prefer that the meeting be held in Port Vila, where they have the most support from government and civil society) and the continuing non-appearance of Fiji's prime minister at these gatherings – last month in Port Vila he was represented by Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, the former Foreign Minister and current Minister for Defence.

There are some indications that the current chair (Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare of Solomon Islands) is looking to use the current impasse over membership as an opportunity to **expand the grouping**. In relation to activism around the West Papua issue, this is likely to be taken forward at global levels by the **Pacific Coalition on West Papua**, with Sogavare as its head. Australia has had two indications recently that its 'nothing to do with us' stance is wearing thin in

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Jakarta: the 'request' made to Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Defence Minister Marise Payne to caution the leadership of Pacific island countries to stop interference in relation to the West Papua issue and, more recently, the **rupture in defence relationships**.

More generally, Australia will prepare and publish its first white paper on foreign policy in 14 years, which will complement a new 'Pacific strategy' promised by the Prime Minister. We hope to see a detailed and nuanced approach to relationships with the Pacific island region feature prominently in this document. It presents an important opportunity to rectify previous missteps, build on what is working well and send important messages about where our region features in Australian policy thinking on diplomacy, trade, development assistance and, critically for the Pacific, labour mobility.

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*Tess's past annual predictions can be found here: **2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 & 2016**.*

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