

# Pacific regionalism in crisis: Forum and USP both weakened in a single day

by Stephen Howes and Sadhana Sen

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Flags were flying at half-mast at USP yesterday to protest the deportation of its Vice Chancellor.

*Photo Credit: USPSA*

It is hard to imagine a bleaker day for Pacific regionalism than Wednesday February 3, 2021. It saw the unfolding of two, apparently unconnected, dramatic events – a tight election battle for the position of Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General; and the deportation of the Vice Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific – both of which will cause division and discord, and significantly weaken both institutions involved.

## Election of PIF Secretary General

The long-delayed, much-anticipated, specially-convened virtual leaders' meeting to choose the successor to two-term PIF SG Meg Taylor defied all prior talk of Pacific leaders being unable to make decisions except in person and by consensus. The selection from the five candidates (backgrounded [here](#)) proceeded by elimination.

Discussions on the leadership began in the afternoon. According to inside sources, the first to withdraw its candidate was Fiji, which generally does not field a candidate due to the Forum Secretariat being located in its capital, Suva. Whether this was related to the USP developments on the same night (discussed below) remains a matter for speculation.

After that, the first vote was held. This time, we are told, Cook Islands' Henry Puna won with seven votes; second place went to the Micronesian countries' candidate Gerald Zackios with six; Solomon Islands' Jimmie Rodgers garnered three; and Tonga's Amelia Kinahoi-Siamomua (the sole female candidate) only one.

First Tonga withdrew its candidate, and then Solomon Islands. The final vote was not held till close to midnight. Puna again won, with nine votes to Zackios' eight.

Who voted for whom is unknown. We know that the five Micronesian states of FSM, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau and RMI were all committed to Zackios. Henry Puna, the

successful candidate, was the Cook Islands prime minister, and had resigned from that post to compete for the SG's job. So he clearly had some pretty good assurances of support as well. We know some PIF countries resented the threat of the Micronesian countries to leave if their candidate wasn't successful, and some might have thought that, as the only former PM running, Puna was the most experienced candidate for the job.

Whatever the reasons, and regardless of who was the better candidate, the decision looks like the wrong one for the Forum.

If Zackios had won, no country would have left the Forum. Now that he has lost, it is quite possible that at least some Micronesian countries will do just that. Palau's President Surgangal Whipp (while implying that Australia and New Zealand supported Puna) has already **said** as much, commenting post-election: "Clearly there is no need really for Micronesians to be part of them (PIF), they don't really consider us part of them." FSM President David Panuelo's response was to **indicate** that the Micronesian states will be meeting soon to discuss next steps, and remind everyone of their earlier threat to leave.

And can you blame them? It is hard to argue with the Micronesian claims that: (a) there has only been one Micronesian leader in the 50-year history of the Forum; and (b) there was a "gentlemen's agreement" when Meg Taylor was elected that a Micronesian candidate would get up next time.

The fact that these claims weren't respected shows that other countries either didn't think Micronesia would follow through or didn't care. Can the Forum survive without Micronesia? Melanesian and Polynesian countries in some ways have little in common, and might think they can do better on their own. Even with a departure of only one or a couple of Micronesian countries, the Forum will be weakened, and its attentions diverted for several years to come.

### **USP VC deported**

If the election of Puna was unexpected, how to describe last night's deportation of USP Vice Chancellor Professor Pal Ahluwalia and his partner Sandra Jane Price? Their **brutal** deportation was for violating Fiji's Immigration Act, **specifically** for conduct "prejudicial to the peace ... [etc] of Fiji". The back story to this (given **here**) is the long-running dispute between Fiji and VC Pal which began with his exposure of mismanagement by the previous VC, an ally of the Fijian government.

By deporting Pal, Fiji's has confirmed its reputation for having scant respect for the rule of the law, and for relying instead on strong-arm tactics. It has also ensured that the standoff between the Fijian government and the USP Council will only intensify

– Council meets tomorrow, and Pal has already **stated** his intention to continue to serve as VC from one of USP's off-Fiji campuses. Given Fiji's blatant infringement of academic freedom, and transparent attempt to bypass university governance institutions, Australia and New Zealand will have no choice but to stop their USP funding. Other countries may follow suit. The staff, already protesting, may begin a prolonged strike. International staff will be deterred from joining.

### **Conclusion**

Both events could have been so easily avoided, by greater transparency and agreement around SG selection rules, and by respect for university governance respectively. But what has happened cannot be undone. The twin dramas will, at a minimum, cause regional division and discord. That Fiji is the incoming Forum Chair and Nauru (currently chair of the Micronesian grouping) the USP Council Chair will only make everything more difficult.

They may not have spelled the end of the Pacific Island Forum and the crown jewel of Pacific regionalism, USP, but Wednesday's events have seriously weakened both.

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