

Reflections on Pacific regionalism

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Farewell with Pacific Island Forum Secretariat staff, September 2024 (X/ForumSec)

The Pacific Islands Forum and its secretariat is a complex bureaucracy that will take any individual at least a year to understand. It is a political organisation that continually works to balance the interests of 18 member states to strengthen regional solidarity. It operates on a mix of rules and procedures and established forum practice – a set of unwritten rules and a “Pacific way of doing things” that colours the entire operation.

I have served in the Forum Secretariat in three different capacities, most recently, as the Director Governance and Engagement. My regionalism experience has been during a decade of highs and lows. While regionalism can have many meanings, to me, it is about getting Pacific countries to (better) work together, and at all levels.

I started at the Forum Secretariat at a time where relations with the Government of Fiji were strained following the country's suspension from the Forum in 2009. There was tension at the Leaders' level, which naturally cascaded down to the Forum Secretariat. There were even corridor whispers of the Forum Secretariat possibly relocating to Samoa. Increasingly, regional business was being actioned outside of the Forum Secretariat – diluting the agency and convening power of the organisation.

At the time, the Forum Secretariat was being criticised as having lost its way – it was considered aloof and out of touch with the people it purported to serve. The [2013 Review of the Pacific Plan](#) emphasised that while the Pacific needed regionalism, the Forum had “lost its politics”. I saw this as a call to strengthen the PIF Secretariat's focus on bringing Leaders together and to drive political conversations on difficult issues that were standing in the way of regional cooperation. This task is extremely difficult when you consider that Leaders only usually meet once a year, there are many changes in political leadership due to elections or frequent votes of no-confidence, and there is a proliferation of regional meetings.

While Secretary General Tuiloma Neroni Slade's tenure was marked in part by Fiji's suspension, he did his best to protect the Forum Secretariat at a difficult time. Dame Meg Taylor's tenure is remembered for her willingness to open the Forum's business to broader stakeholders, particularly, civil society. This was implemented in the early years through the public submission process under the [Framework for Pacific Regionalism](#). Within the Secretariat there was passionate debate about how the organisation needed to re-organise its work to best respond to the public critiques levelled at it.

For a while, this created clear internal divisions among staff. My own personal view, however, is that these conversations helped to lay the foundation for the initial conceptualisation of the [Blue Pacific narrative](#) which reframed Pacific regionalism from its focus on regional cooperation to one of strategic positioning drawing on the united strength of its members. The discussions on the Blue Pacific culminated in the [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#), which at its core highlights that Pacific regionalism cannot be left to chance but must have a clear blueprint.

Two political issues have remained constant throughout my entire time with the Forum Secretariat. The first is membership. Fiji's re-engagement with the Forum at the highest level following its suspension did not occur until 2019. The irony is that Fiji would play a significant role a couple of years later in trying to amend the internal rift that saw five Micronesian members of the Forum announce their withdrawal from the organisation following the appointment of Henry Puna as Secretary General. While the [Suva Agreement](#) has resolved this issue, perhaps little acknowledgement has been given to the man who stepped aside in the interests of the region.

Rightly or wrongly, the admission of New Caledonia and French Polynesia as full members of the Forum in 2016 stands as one of the most significant decisions made by the Forum in its 53-year existence as it was a complete departure from the foundation of

the Forum as a political grouping. In a way, it perhaps worked to reinforce the status of other groupings outside the Forum, particularly the Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) group that comprises the 14 sovereign Pacific states and excludes New Zealand, Australia and the two territories.

The second relates to the treatment and recognition of Taiwan within the Forum. The issue has come to a head in recent years, most famously in Nauru in 2017 and most recently in Tonga in 2024. With geopolitical competition intensifying in the region, this issue is likely to cause a lot more tension among the members in the coming years. Only three Forum members are now affiliated with Taiwan, and China will no doubt take every opportunity to push the Forum to reconsider its standard practice relating to Taiwan.

Looking ahead, one can already see that Secretary General Baron Waqa's tenure will have to navigate through potentially divisive issues that will test the unity of the Forum. He will need to work closely with the Forum Chair and the Troika who have taken on more prominent roles in recent years. The issues in question include deep-sea mining, self-determination movements, ongoing concerns related to nuclear contamination, and the ongoing challenges related to Taiwan and the broader Forum membership. How far Pacific states push climate-agenda boundaries within the Forum, and how Pacific states position themselves on sensitive human rights related issues, will also influence the direction of regionalism.

This is all to say that regionalism is challenging, highly complex and is an on-going process. It can be "circular" in nature because leadership, administrations and regional civil servants may change in every cycle.

In the Pacific, regionalism is about so much more than the delivery of outputs. It is foremost about people and relationships. For Pacific states, strong relationships, networks and personalities drive strategic foreign policy just as much as, if not more than, any foreign policy white papers. While regionalism remains a key modality for achieving the region's sustainable development aspirations, it is fickle in nature because you are dealing with people.

Many people have their own perspective on what regionalism ought to do. From a membership perspective, regionalism is frustrating because it is slow-moving and resource-intensive. Most member states' participation in regionalism suffers due to capacity constraints. This affects their ability to effectively coordinate their engagement across the regional architecture. Moreover, regionalism often competes with national priorities, and members are frustrated as to why regional institutions are not working better together. Some officials believe that the regionalism agenda is driven by the regional institutions, who are first and foremost motivated by funding. Deep down there is an underlying sense that regional civil servants are overpaid and underworked. For larger members their motivation is in the maintenance of the status quo, and ensuring returns on investment.

Thus, the membership itself desires different things from regionalism — so it can be frustrating and contradictory. The issues that fuel the momentum of regionalism can come from many different directions and can be driven by different personalities and egos. Everyone has their pet issues.

The narrative of the Forum at the apex of Pacific regionalism is becoming more commonly used, particularly with increased geopolitical competition and the flurry of partner engagement with Pacific states. While it is important to reinforce the power of the region as one political bloc, it comes off as self-serving. Pacific islanders generally do not think in these terms. Our communal values are much stronger. Rather, it is Pacific people who are at the apex of Pacific regionalism. It is the Pacific people as a collective who remind us why we are pursuing regionalism in the first place.

From a personal development perspective, the Forum Secretariat has seen the best of me, and the worst of me. I have also seen the Secretariat at its best, and at its worst. It is a demanding work environment, but you are working with your “Pacific family”, so you put in the long hours. You take the critiques from member countries on the chin. Yet, you go to work wanting to do more. You collaborate and interact with many development partners and stakeholders, each with their own interests. It can feel all over the place, but your job is to try and bring it all together.

It is an emotional ride – an adrenaline that you will miss, and not miss, all in the same breath. It absorbs all your frustration, yet there is always scope to celebrate and build enduring friendships along the way. And when you leave, hopefully, someone better takes over.

This is the reality of Pacific regionalism on the ground.

Disclosure

The views expressed in this blog are those of the author. They are not the views of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

Blue Pacific **Framework for Pacific Regionalism** **Pacific**

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