

# The burden of chairing the Pacific Islands Forum

by Sione Tekiteki

9 September 2025



Solomon Islands' Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele addresses ACP leaders during the 2025 Pacific Island Forum Leaders Meeting in Honiara

Photo Credit: [Facebook/ForumSec](#)

As the Pacific Islands Forum happens this week in Solomon Islands, the spotlight will fall on the leaders gathering under one roof. All Forum meetings are memorable (or sometimes infamous) for different reasons, but for those at the centre of it all — it is often the more personal experiences and relationships forged among the chaos that really leave a lasting impact.

Tonga was no different last year. True to our “Pacific way”, people were still rushing to arrange chairs and finalise stage settings on the morning of the opening, while paint was **literally drying**. Then, before leaders even began arriving, torrential rain swept across the capital, Nuku’alofa. Confusion followed. The leaders’ procession, which was meant to leave the hotel in alphabetical order, quickly descended into chaos as leaders arrived out of sequence. The master of ceremonies, caught off guard, began announcing the wrong leaders as they entered the Tonga High School Stadium.

And then the students started singing. Their voices — strong, unshaken, powerful — stilled the turmoil. For that moment, everything else was forgotten but the harmony. And then, as if to remind us again of our vulnerability, **an earthquake struck** following the conclusion of the ceremony. A UN observer remarked that it was a vivid demonstration of the region’s vulnerability. To some locals, it was a sign that God had indeed attended the Forum. But what might have been remembered as divine intervention was, by the week’s end, overshadowed by **geopolitics and China**.

This year, the pressures wielded by China arrived even earlier, forcing Solomon Islands’ Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele to **defer the partners’ dialogue** altogether. It would not have been an easy decision. Despite all **the criticism**, it was likely the right one under the circumstances.

As Tonga passes the chairmanship of the Forum to Solomon Islands, it is worth reflecting on the burdens and political pressures that come with the role. Yes, the

Chair helps shape the regional agenda, but that task is never straightforward in a gathering of 18 members including middle powers alongside sovereign Pacific states and territories, each with their own interests.

In many ways, the opening day's rain and tremor in Tonga captured the spirit of Pacific regionalism — vulnerable, unpredictable, challenged, yet ultimately purposeful.

Hosting the Forum offers little guarantee of political gain at home. More often, it carries risk rather than reward. Except for Cook Islands, recent chairs have followed a consistent pattern: Tuvalu's Enele Sopoaga lost office while still chair; Fiji's Frank Bainimarama soon followed; Tonga's Siaosi Sovaleni fell not long after hosting. Even Manele almost lost the position before his chairmanship had properly begun.

At the same time, the Forum itself risks becoming a spectacle: grand ceremonies, gleaming venues, fleets of new vehicles, chartered flights and the pressure to build accommodation. The symbolism is heavy, the costs heavier still.

In Tonga, the pressure point was over the limited rooms at the Tanoa Dateline Hotel. Partners lobbied furiously for space, turning officials into brokers of scarce hospitality. What begun in the early years as a gathering grounded in quiet conversations and humility has become a strain even for the best-prepared hosts. The fanfare, the media glare and the tug of bilateral meetings pulls leaders away from the quieter, harder work of consensus building.

But there are tangible benefits hidden in all the noise. For Tonga, hosting the **Pacific Resilience Facility** (PRF) is an important milestone. While less headline-grabbing than the geopolitics, the PRF is a long-sought, regionally owned financing mechanism for climate adaptation and resilience, and is intended to tackle the region's long struggle with accessing large multilateral funds. The PRF treaty will be signed in Solomon Islands, but the litmus test will be in its operationalisation.

Chairing the Forum is never straightforward; the difference is only in the direction of the pressure. In Solomon Islands, it was widely speculated that China had applied pressure on the host. In Palau next year, where Taiwan is recognised, the reverse is likely: Taipei pushing for greater space, Beijing countering through its partners. In 2027, should New Zealand host, the influence will shift again — less Taipei or Beijing, but perhaps more conversations with Canberra and Washington.

Pacific nations however are more susceptible to this issue because their structural vulnerabilities, urgent needs and dependencies gives far less room to manoeuvre. But that does not mean that they too don't have their limits. In Nauru in 2018, then-host President Baron Waqa — now the Forum Secretary General — **famously stood**

his ground with Chinese diplomats while chairing the partners' dialogue.

There is no single “right” way to chair the Forum. Some leaders step back and rely on the Secretariat; others steer discussions themselves. Either way, expectations are immense: to manage competing demands, balance security and development, and broker unity where unity is fragile. Our own dependencies and insecurities weigh us down. The work is thus rarely triumphant — more often it ends in delicate compromise and ambiguity, with communiques that preserve continuity amidst all the challenges. The pressures come for all different directions: members, partners, non-government organisations, private sector, media, publics — even friends and family.

Few truly know what Forum week feels like for the Chair, the Secretary General, the Secretariat and host officials. It is a blur of sleepless nights and endless coffees, of hurried meetings and the weight of thousands of competing demands. It can be thankless work, rarely noticed. Yet without it, the Forum could not endure. We should spare them a thought — for carrying these burdens, they give Pacific regionalism its heart.

### Author/s:

#### **Sione Tekiteki**

Sione Tekiteki is a senior lecturer at the Auckland University of Technology. He previously served at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat in three positions over nine years, most recently as Director, Governance and Engagement.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/the-burden-of-chairing-the-pacific-islands-forum-20250909/>