

Pacific Buzz (March 6): Media freedom debates | Blue economy push | Telco power struggle | Election doubts in PNG... and more

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A roundup of development policy issues in the Pacific by the [Pacific Institute of Public Policy](#) and the [Development Policy Centre](#).

Concerns mount over media freedom debates

Ironically, as [censors](#) leave the newsrooms and [Radio Australia](#) is poised to resume broadcasting in Fiji, concerns are mounting about media restrictions in other Pacific countries.

In Samoa, Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi has [defended](#) the government's move to set up a body to regulate the media. Industry representatives have labelled the government's [moves as unnecessary](#) and are pushing for self-regulation.

At the same time in PNG, the O'Neill government has come under fire for "[monitoring](#)" text messages, emails and comments posted on Facebook. The *Sharp Talk* group on Facebook has over 4,000 members in PNG, and has become a popular space for engaged Papua New Guineans to exchange views and ideas on contemporary political issues. PNG has always enjoyed a robust free press, and this latest development has been met with great concern for free speech, including a statement from the [International Federation of Journalists](#).

On the subject of media, the recent launch of the Pacific Media Assistance Scheme ([PACMAS](#)) could bring greater resources and support for independent media across the region.

Blue economy push

Speaking at the recent World Oceans Summit in Singapore, World Bank President, Robert Zoellick, launched a US\$1.5 billion global effort to [save our oceans](#). A number of Pacific island countries have been championing the development of the [blue economy](#) as a means of protecting and better utilising marine resources.

The UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in June should provide leaders of the world's small island (and big ocean) states an opportunity to further explore measures to address the key "blue issues" surrounding fisheries management, resource extraction and climate change.

Vanuatu PM takes over telecommunications portfolio

Meanwhile, Vanuatu's Prime Minister, Sato Kilman, has taken over [responsibility for the country's telecommunications portfolio](#). This follows ongoing tensions between the Minister for Infrastructure and Public Utilities and the independent telecommunications regulator. As the near region-wide push for increasing mobile phone coverage continues, we are witnessing significant changes to the legislative and regulatory frameworks. Governments are clearly taking note of the increasing economic and political weight of the rapidly growing sector.

PNG election doubts

Confusion has surfaced over the timing of the PNG election with claims that [40 per cent of eligible voters](#) are not yet on the electoral roll. PNG's Deputy Prime Minister, Beldon Namah, flagged the possibility of a [12 month delay](#), but the Electoral Commissioner has stated that the roll should be completed within two months and the [election will proceed](#) in June as planned. Doubts around the legitimacy of the electoral roll in PNG are not new, with previous investigations finding names of dead people and the likes of Elvis Presley and Tom Jones on the roll.

In the meantime, Prime Minister, Peter O'Neill has [taken over the finance portfolio](#) from his Finance Minister, Don Polye. It was reported that the decision was based on [allegations of misappropriation](#) of landowner funds and budget overruns in the Department of Finance and Treasury.

And, in a move to maximise the benefits of the resource boom, the PNG government has passed legislation to establish an independently managed [sovereign wealth fund](#) to manage the revenue from new resource projects.

In brief:

- The International Monetary Fund released its [assessment](#) of the Fiji economy, predicting GDP growth to be only 1.5 per cent this year.
- The Australia-Pacific chapter of International Parliamentarians for West Papua was [launched in Canberra](#), amidst controversy.
- Clay Forau has been appointed as the [new Foreign Minister of the Solomon Islands](#) as Bob Carr replaces Kevin Rudd as the Australia's Foreign Minister.
- A symposium will meet in Vanuatu to discuss how the international [kava ban might be lifted](#).
- Australia has [closed](#) its TB clinics in the Torres Straits which have been providing care to PNG nationals, but [re-opened](#) them as "joint handover clinics".
- Timor-Leste will go to the polls on March 17 to [elect a new president](#) for a five-year term; tensions are high after offices connected to the election were [firebombed](#).
- Development Policy Centre has published a [new paper](#) on non-formal institutions and health development in Papua New Guinea.
- Fiji's leader, Voreqe Bainimarama, gives his [first interview](#) in 18 months arguing that Canberra's policy of shunning Fiji had weakened Australian influence in the region.
- Due to continued politicking, [Palau's budget](#) for FY 2012 is five months overdue.

This biweekly roundup of development policy issues in the Pacific is a joint venture of the [Pacific Institute of Public Policy](#) and the [Development Policy Centre](#). Editorial content is the responsibility of Derek Brien, PiPP Executive Director, and Stephen Howes, Devpolicy Director.