

‘Political settlements’ implies an unrealistic permanence

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Björn Dressel and Sinclair Dinnen’s [thoughtful post on political settlements](#) reawakens concerns I felt when I heard of the emerging focus on ‘political settlements’ as the latest magic bullet for socio-economic progress in developing nations. Practitioners working in Pacific island countries (PICs) might overlook physically faraway debate about concepts that sound as if they might be relevant here. As the blog points out, the concept of political settlements seems to resonate better in larger and older political economies with mature institutions and powerbroking networks (which naturally exclude or buy off a lot of troublesome minor players). But the phrase is apparently passing into the global professional handbooks, so we should be ready for its appearance in political speeches and policy statements from Melanesian and other PICs, regional institutions and aid donors.

My initial reaction was that ‘political settlements’ has connotations of big-picture deal-making at an institutionally high level (always seductive for top people) under conditions of secrecy about components of the deal (enabling inclusion of financial incentives and rewards for the parties). Deals with similar characteristics occur all the time at the interface between commercial and political leaders and interests, frequently giving rise to public concern and pressure for remedial action by the forces of good governance, not often to much effect.

But my second and main concern with the phrase ‘political settlements’ is its implication of durability. A ‘settlement’ is an agreed arrangement that is expected to last a long time. In today’s Melanesian PICs this is unreal. The conditions that determine the fate of any political agreement are changing so fast, under personal and institutional influences that are themselves emerging and changing shape and weight as we speak, that ‘political settlements’ has an oxymoronic ring to it. What matters in asserting and maintaining political control in Melanesia is the ability to adapt quickly to changes in the dominant politics-power-money relationship, while appearing to maintain the announced development trajectory.

With this in mind I suggested last year that ‘political accommodations’ would be a better phrase. An ‘accommodation’ can last a short or long time without anyone having to eat their words. Those entering into a political accommodation can be assumed to reserve part of their resources and adaptive capabilities in case something goes wrong, key elements of the accommodation are found to need reappraisal, and complete breakdown is a real possibility.

‘Settlements’ conveys an unreal sense of permanence, when we know such arrangements are simply current political fixes.