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Islands in a Storm

Resurgent tribalism and clan violence threaten the South Pacific

By George Wehrfritz
NEWSWEEK

June 25 — When European colonizers carved up Melanesia in the 19th century, they encountered a dizzying patchwork of indigenous micro-societies. They grouped them into protectorates, which (with the exception of New Caledonia) gained independence in the 1970s.

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The rebels toppled the government and seized 31 hostages, including Mahendra Chaudhry, the country's first Indo-Fijian prime minister.

SINCE THEN, however, these new nations have proved unstable and, some experts now argue, unsustainable. When the Europeans departed, clan rivalries re-emerged, leading to corruption, economic stagnation and ultimately disintegration in what are “essentially artificial countries,” says John Henderson, a South Pacific expert at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. “People identify with their wontok [clan] or their island, but not the nation.”

That is increasingly apparent. Until two months ago, Fiji was the South Pacific's model multiethnic democracy. Not anymore. Today, an Indian minority making up 44 percent of the country's population wants desperately to flee. The reason: George Speight, a power-hungry ex-businessman who has demanded that Indians be excluded from all future Fijian governments. In the name of indigenous rights, Speight led masked gunmen in a May 19 raid on Parliament. The rebels toppled the government and seized 31 hostages, including Mahendra Chaudhry, the country's first Indo-Fijian prime minister. Fijian mobs trashed downtown Suva and razed hundreds of Indian farms in the worst rioting since Fiji's independence from Great Britain in 1970.

Standing in Fiji's first refugee camp, a 35-year-old Indian farmer from the village of Muaniweni recounted the nightmare. He gave the intruders \$900, but the indigenous Fijians still looted his home and, in a brazen affront to his Hindu faith, slaughtered his family's best milk cow. “I know their faces and names,” he told NEWSWEEK. “But they warned me: ‘If you tell anyone we will tie you inside your house and burn it.’ I'll never go back to my farm.” The military imposed martial law, tore up Fiji's multiethnic Constitution and began negotiating to end the crisis. At the weekend, four women hostages had been released, but 27 men were still being held. Elections, all agree, won't be held until the government writes a new Constitution that is likely to strip ethnic Indians of political power.

Sadly, the chaos and political disintegration of Fiji is not exceptional in the South Pacific. The region stretching from East Timor to New Zealand has become what analysts call an “arc of instability.” Across Melanesia, a string of once-peaceful island-nations face resurgent tribalism and clan violence. On Guadalcanal, the political and economic hub of the Solomon Islands, rival militias are poised for all-out civil war. In Vanuatu and New Caledonia, leaders fear the instability could spill onto their shores. On Bougainville, regional unrest threatens to rekindle a bloody guerrilla war for independence from Papua New Guinea, the region's giant. “What's happening now is that Melanesia is reclaiming its roots,” says Brij Lal, a South Pacific specialist at Australian National University in Canberra, “which

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— **BRIJ LAL**

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Take the Solomon Islands. Staggered like footprints across the Coral Sea, the archipelago is home to insular clans that speak 67 indigenous languages. After its independence from Great Britain in 1979, the country languished under an inept central government while tension between rival islands mounted. During World War II, U.S. Army forces on Guadalcanal imported thousands of workers from the neighboring island, Malaita, starting a mass migration. In recent years, Guadalcanal’s indigenous Isatabu majority has mobilized to reverse the flow. Last year they formed a guerrilla army called the Isatabu Freedom Movement and wielding antique Japanese weapons began “cleansing” Malaitan settlers from farms and villages.

This month the ethnic rivalry exploded. Vowing revenge against the Isatabu, an estimated 40,000 Malaitans have sought refuge in the capital, Honiara, or fled back to Malaita. They’ve formed their own militia, the Malaitan Eagle Force, and turned Honiara into an armed camp. Inspired by George Speight in Fiji, on June 5 the MEF seized the country’s prime minister, Bartholomew Ulafa’alu, and raided police armories. Ulafa’alu has since resigned, and the MEF now controls Honiara. Fearing civil war, Australia evacuated nearly 500 foreign nationals. Since then there’s been a run on banks, and most businesses have closed. Last week rebels emptied the country’s main prison, liberating militiamen, murderers and rapists. With government coffers bare, the capital will soon run out of imported fuel oil for Honiara’s power grid. “It is very clear we may be heading for an economic crisis never seen before in this country,” warned the Solomon Islands’ central bank in a June 18 report. Rebel leaders met last week on an Australian warship anchored just off Honiara to negotiate a ceasefire on Guadalcanal, but no agreement was reached.

The next crisis? Experts say it could occur in Papua New Guinea. Just months away from its 25th independence day, the former Australian territory is deeply troubled. Its capital, Port Moresby, is ringed with lawless slums. Squatter camps have no running water, no power, no schools, no health care. Migrants join gangs that prowl the streets looking for victims to assault. Expatriates live above the squalor in homes fenced with razor wire and defended by dogs. Many of the country’s more than 700 indigenous clans have formed private vigilante groups to defend turf or attack rivals a rising problem throughout the region. Sir Mekere Morauta, the country’s third leader in three years, has been remarkably steady but “there are lots of illegal guns in the country, [and] people are dying everywhere,” says Oseah Philemon, editor of the Post Courier newspaper.

Old grievances and ethnic bias are running loose on the islands these days.

As the region's superpower, Australia is struggling to stabilize Melanesia. Canberra funnels \$300 million a year in aid to Papua New Guinea. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has recently visited both Fiji and the Solomons in an attempt to return democratically elected governments to power. He has threatened Fiji with stiff sanctions over the military's apparent capitulation to Speight's racist demands. "I condemn Mr. Speight," Downer said during a visit to the Solomon Islands last weekend. He called the prolonged hostage drama "cruel" and "an act of terror."

In Fiji, unrest has crippled a once-booming tourism industry and delayed the vital sugar harvest. Indo-Fijian farmers now refuse to cut cane. Says one clerk in Fiji's "sugar city," Lautoka: "You can't expect us to do the harvesting when half of our leaders are locked up like animals." In indigenous areas, money isn't the issue. Near Muaniweni, the local chief calls Speight a "hero" for stopping Indian farmers from "taking our land." Toasting visitors with an herbal root extract and smoking cigarettes rolled from old newspapers, he lashes out at Fiji's discarded multiracial Constitution. "It made Indians and Fijians like this," he says, holding up his two index fingers to illustrate men standing as equals. "Indians should not be prime minister. If the Constitution had guaranteed that post for Fijians, we would have no problems today." Old grievances and ethnic bias are running loose on the islands these days. That's a bad mix in a beautiful place.

With Melissa Roberts in Sydney

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