

# Riots in the Pacific: Control and Change

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## Abstract

In the Pacific Islands region, one quarter of all 14 independent countries have experienced rioting from 2006 to end 2021. Yet, despite these incidents of collective violence inflicting major damage in small island states, they are poorly understood, with responses from national as well as international actors remaining static. This discussion paper summarises the common features of riots - defined as episodic disturbances creating threats and violence to people and property - across the Pacific. The analysis is based on a comparative analysis of riot events (as described in literature and media reports) and draws on relevant theory and sources. Subsequently, factors contributing to riot violence are weighed against the effectiveness of possible responses by security and development actors. The final section of the paper provides suggestions and implications for relevant scholars, practitioners, and policymakers interested in security and peacebuilding in the Pacific Islands.

*Keywords:* riots, collective violence, Pacific, security, policing, peacebuilding

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## Introduction

The peace and security of the Pacific Islands region has been confounded by episodes of rioting. One quarter of all independent Pacific countries have experienced riots since the start of 2006. These events have brought with them significant damage to properties, loss of life, and trauma. In this study, riots are defined as episodic, self-organised, public disturbances involving non state actors, that create threats or violence to people and property (Newburn, 2021, Havercroft, 2021). While this definition applies to a range of events, this paper focuses on those in the Pacific that have been described as 'riots' by the media. This brings into greater focus conflict manifesting in towns and cities that involve grievances against the state of governance on a national level.

Globally, there has been a rise in incidents of unrest in recent years. In 2021, there was a 10 per cent increase in civil unrest and a doubling in the number of countries that experienced political instability (GPI, 2021). There is some evidence to suggest that as inter and intra state wars in certain regions has decreased, political violence has become exacerbated. For example in Africa since 2000 there have been fewer wars but more riots, protests, and crime

(Aucoin, 2017). A greater understanding of the factors behind riots and political violence is therefore a significant concern for not only the Pacific, but also actors everywhere concerned with security and peacebuilding.

Responding to riots has often been under the purview of bilateral and regional security arrangements. The Biketawa Declaration by Pacific leaders (PIFS, 2000), sets out some bounds for regional security interventions, and shaped the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) which commenced in 2003 following a period of violent conflict. Since then, the Biketawa Declaration has been relied upon to shape support to Tonga which suffered from riots in 2006, and the same year to Solomon Islands following a widescale riot in Honiara. Australia and New Zealand have also invested over several decades in police capacity building in Pacific countries. More recently, China too has provided police with training and equipment intended to be applied in situations of unrest in Solomon Islands.

The most recent intervention responding to riots in Honiara in November 2021 was done under a bilateral security treaty between Solomon Islands and Australia (DFAT, 2017) that allows, in addition to the sending of personnel, the leader of the intervening force to act as Deputy Commissioner of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force, and to bring in third parties such as New Zealand and other Pacific countries. Therefore, the costs of riots can go beyond the Pacific country experiencing them to other intervenor countries, particularly Australia and New Zealand. Understanding riots is thus important for both Pacific governments as well as their donors and security partners.

While inquiries, academic analyses, development, and security sector reports (such as Aspinall et al, 2012) have given us some insights into the causal factors behind conflict in the region, the literature is sparse regarding research, practice and policy when it comes to riots specifically. Intervenors to riots have tended to focus on increasing (usually foreign and temporary) security personnel plus training and equipment for Pacific police. Meanwhile, political leaders in the Pacific Islands region have often taken a reductionist lens to the causes of riots, blaming them on other local actors. Notably, the ruling regime in Tonga blamed the opposition in 2006 for riots (Ratuva, 2018), the Solomon Islands Prime Minister blamed “foreign powers” in an off the cuff comment in 2021 (Clarke, 2021), and the Papua New Guinean (PNG) Prime Minister blamed “criminal elements” for violence following anti-corruption protests in 2016 (Doherty et al, 2016). Unfortunately, these narrow lenses by national actors and intervenors frequently obscure the true causes of riots, to the detriment of peace and security.

This paper thus takes a more holistic view by triangulating literature on riot incidents, with media reports, and consultations (in person or online) with ten Pacific journalists present during riot events. From this, thirteen profiles of riot events that occurred in Pacific countries from 1 January 2006 to 31 December 2021 are developed. These riot profiles are then compared with each other to provide an outline of factors common to riots in the Pacific Islands region. Key research questions explored are:

- 1) What are common factors found in riots in the Pacific?
- 2) What impact has government and regional responses had on riots?
- 3) How can recent experiences of riots and responses inform conflict prevention in the Pacific?

To examine these questions, this paper first defines key terms and outlines common actors, grievances, targets, and effects in relation to riots in the Pacific. Second, responses by national agencies and their security partners are outlined. Finally, the paper provides an initial examination of implications from this study for policing, peacebuilding, and security in the Pacific Islands region.

### **Defining and interpreting riots**

In most legal definitions, a riot is defined as a gathering of people that creates a public disturbance while posing threats to people and property (Newburn, 2021). Riots and protests often happen in the same location or time, but protests are gatherings of people to express views that are peaceful, whereas riots involve physical violence to people and property, or attempts at such violence. Havercroft (2021) points to four features of riots that help distinguish them from other forms of collective violence: self-organisation (often spontaneous action by groups, as opposed to more deliberate violence such as crime gangs), involvement of non-state actors, breaking of laws, and occurrence outside of parliamentary or official processes.

The early literature on riots - which were overwhelmingly written by wealthy, western men (such as LeBon, 1896) - largely equated them with irrationality, impulsiveness and indiscriminate violence. This trope of the rioter "losing his senses" has held on in the popular imagination. Emergent sociological literature, however, has moved away from a focus on 'the irrational individual' and towards an understanding that riots are defined by group behaviour and that this behaviour is not senseless but instead has specific meanings for the groups perpetuating it (Olzak, 1989).

To this end, most Pacific-focused writing about riots has underlined their complexity by pointing to the historical, social, and political processes and meanings in group's conceptions of and behaviour during riots. (See Ratuva, 2018, and SIG, 2008). At the same time, these analyses (Ratuva, 2018, SIG, 2008) note that riot behaviour is also frequently influenced by non-political factors, such as consumption of alcohol and intoxication after rioting has started.

Within the category of riots, there are several types, with classification usually accordant to their ascribed meanings. Some sub-types are more prevalent within the Pacific context ,

namely urban riots related to grievances with the state, which are the most common, as well as those targeting certain ethnic groups.

The “ethnic riot” - a term popularised by Horowitz (2001) - can be seen most acutely in PNG, where targeted violence against individuals and property is relatively common between family and tribal groups. This includes sorcery related events where perceived acts of sorcery frequently result in attacks on the supposed sorcerer’s family. A study examining incidents from 2016 to 2020 found 30 per cent of all sorcery related incidents involved multiple people accused, although in some locales, such as Jiwaka province, incidents involving multiple people were the majority of cases (see Forsyth et al, 2021). Given that this paper focuses on events described as ‘riots’ in the media, other non-sorcery related incidents of tribal fighting due to issues of land ownership, electoral contests, and theft are not included in the analysis. This is because, in common parlance, media and official reports from PNG, this type of violence is usually blanketly referred to as ‘tribal fighting’ or ‘violence’, rather than ‘rioting’. By contrast, within the context of PNG and the Pacific more broadly, media usually refers to riots as urban events where people destroy properties. Examples in PNG include major riot episodes in 2009 which targeted Asian businesses, and following the 2016 student protests against corruption, violence stemming from dissatisfaction with current political leaders.

The sample of incidents examined in this paper includes media reports on riots in four of the 14 independent Pacific countries. This selection of locations does not include current territories such as New Caledonia or West Papua, nor recently independent former territories such as Timor Leste. This is not to say there are no commonalities between riots in Pacific Island nations and neighbouring current or former territories. For instance, New Caledonia had significant rioting in 2020 and 2021 derived from resentment against the economic benefits of mining flowing to mostly to non-indigenous residents, which is similar to outbreaks elsewhere in Melanesia (Fisher, 2020). Timor Leste and Solomon Islands, meanwhile, also share status as post conflict nations, and are therefore expected to have increased risk of political instability (Donovan et al, 2005).

## Methodology

For the purpose of comparing like-to-like events across the Pacific, this study - in line with Havercroft (2021) - defines riots as public gatherings that create disturbance, involve non-state actors, lack formal organisation, threaten people as well as property and have been denoted as "riots" in media and official responses.

After examining events reported in national and regional media described as "riots" that fit the above description, it was found that there were 13 riot events from 2006 to 2021 concentrated in four Pacific Island countries: PNG (8 events), Solomon Islands (3 events), Vanuatu (1 event) and Tonga (1 event). It is noted that this only includes those events reported in the national and international media, the latter of which generally assess the newsworthiness of events in terms of death toll, damage, and novelty. This sample then may not capture all events, but those that were larger and deemed newsworthy.

This sample of riot events does not include prison and detention centre riots, such as the riots in Australian detention centres run in Nauru and on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, or isolated problems in prisons (such as unrest and break outs) in different locales. While worthy of examination, these incidents are generally restricted to locations under specific local or foreign administration and thus may have different actors involved in rioting behaviour and response, compared to public events.

Each riot event was summarised in an event profile created by the researcher. Event profile details were compiled from a total of 78 media and academic sources (30 media reports, and 48 academic and government publications). Topics covered in the event profiles include location, year, actors, grievances, targets, deaths, duration, and timing (i.e. whether they occurred during major political events such as elections). To compare responses to events by relevant actors, each event profile also includes whether an intervention by Australia and/or New Zealand followed the event, what the key activities of interventions were, as well as the key response activities by the government and police. These event profiles were then compared, using Microsoft Excel, to assess the number of riot events with common actors, grievances, targets, and responses.

In one event in PNG, some of the details were not readily apparent from the media reports, so an anonymous journalist present at the event was called to provide background information to fill in the event profile. In Solomon Islands, a workshop of nine journalists was held to confirm key facts about the 2021 riots, in order to confirm the event profile and also as a check on any bias this paper's author may have had, as the researcher and journalists were also present at the riot collecting information.

## Findings

### Actors in Pacific Riots

In examining the event profiles, it is found that riots are predominantly the domain of male adults and youth. However, at the periphery of violence, women can also be involved, notably in the looting of stores observed in Tongan and Solomon Islands riots (SIG 2008, Ratuva 2018). For instance, of the 678 people arrested following Tonga's 2006 riots, 54 were women (8 per cent) (Ratuva, 2018).

The dominance of men in riots is not surprising given norms associating men, masculinity and violence throughout the Pacific, as shown by the prevalence of gender based violence (GBV) in the region. According to the World Health Organisation (2021) there are extremely high rates of GBV lifetime experiences in Tonga (79 per cent), Samoa (76 per cent), Kiribati (73 per cent) Fiji (72 per cent), Vanuatu (72 per cent), Solomon Islands (64 per cent) and Papua New Guinea (63 per cent). Gender based violence is also recognised as a concern in many Pacific state's national security strategies (GoPNG, 2013, GoV, 2019 and SIG, 2020).

This is not to say there is a direct correlation between GBV and rioting, although studies indicate countries that have experienced violent conflict are more likely to have increased rates of GBV (OHCHR, 2022). However, the legitimising of men's violence in public and private domains helps to explain why men are more likely to riot on the streets than women. In the Pacific context, cultural and historical norms and traditions of revering warriors as well as the colonial positioning of women as subservient and bound to the household, have contributed to the legitimisation of violence by men (Pollard, 2000). This masculinisation of security also extends to the dominance of men in state violence, with the majority of police and armed forces in the Pacific also being male. As an extension of this, women who work in these sectors face barriers from their employers and society (see Ride & Ghebe, 2018, Ride & Keen, 2020).

There is little data available about the relationship between education and involvement in rioting. Despite this, poverty is a common point of reference when media describe rioters, as is the involvement of people living in informal or poorer settlements in looting (Ratuva, 2018, Ride, 2019). This is in contrast to the organisers of protests that may arise prior to riot violence, who tend to be better educated. For example, in PNG in 2016, it was tertiary students who organised key protests against corruption, that were followed by riots (Connors & Barker, 2016). Additionally, prominent educated civil society leaders - such as Akilisi Pohiva, who later became Tonga's Prime Minister - were the main organisers of protests in Tonga's year of riots in 2006. (Ratuva, 2018).

Broader comparative analyses have suggested a correlation between high youth populations, or "youth bulges", and conflict (Urdal, 2006). Major reasons for this include the fact that unemployed young men tend to be a strong source of recruitment for militias, crime gangs

and the like as well common participants in riots and political violence (Urdal, 2006). However, it is important to note that other issues such as inclusiveness of political governance, and levels of youth employment, also increase the likelihood of rioting. As such, we should not assume a direct causative effect between youth bulges and riots. For example, data from the Pacific indicates that while many countries affected by riots have large youth populations, there are also two where the youth population is large but are not affected (See Figure 1).

Pacific population statistics indicate the regional youth bulge has, and will continue to be, most prominent in Melanesia, with PNG, Solomons, and Vanuatu having growth rates of 2 per cent or more. This is quite high relative to the rest of the Asia Pacific region. As a point of comparison, the highest country growth rates in the world are only just above 3 per cent (UNPF, 2021). It should be noted, however, that across the Pacific Islands region, there is considerable diversity in population growth rates and migration trends (Howes et al, 2020).

One result of the 'Pacific youth bulge' has been an increase in concerns regarding youth unemployment. However, based on available data (Figure 1), unemployment is not shown to have a strong correlation to riot events. Although the Pacific is not highly urbanised, some cities are experiencing rapid increases in population, and in many there are large numbers of young people idle. For instance, an estimated 48 per cent of people living in PNG's capital, Port Moresby, were aged 15–29 in 2015, while a 2014 study estimates 68 per cent of urban youth in PNG were unemployed (see Wilson, 2020). Due to inconsistencies in the way unemployment is quantified in countries in the Pacific, there are frequently significant disparities between official and actual unemployment rates, particularly amongst youth. For example, the International Labour Organisation (2022) states that youth unemployment in PNG is three times higher than amongst the general population.

*Figure 1: Pacific countries with the greatest number of youth (15 to 24 years) as a proportion of total population (%), official youth unemployment rates, and rioting events.*

COUNTRY	Proportion of Youth	Official Youth Unemployment Rate	Riot Event since 2006 to 2021
FSM	22%	19%	No
Kiribati	20%	17%	No
Vanuatu	20%	12%	Yes
Papua New Guinea	20%	4%	Yes
Tonga	19%	7%	Yes
Samoa	19%	20%	No
Solomon Islands	19%	1.3%	Yes
Tuvalu	19%	21%	No
Marshall Islands	18%	Not available	No
Fiji	17%	15%	No

Sources: UNFPA, 2014, International Labour Organisation, 2022.

However, despite PNG's struggles, we should not assume that large youth populations inevitably lead to greater crime. *Figure 1* indicates that social policies have strong moderating effects, as Samoa, FSM, and Tuvalu, despite having large youth cohorts, have not experienced a growth in informal settlements as seen in PNG and Solomon Islands. For example, research reviews (see Higginson et. al, 2018) have shown that socialisation plays a major role in participation of youth in crime. For example, research in Port Moresby, indicates it is increasingly becoming common for young men to be socialised into criminal gangs, thereby normalising their association to violence (UNDP, 2015). Youth also commonly have less to lose from rioting violence as a direct result of social norms and policies. For example, in Solomon Islands, youth are excluded from local level decision making (e.g. over land lease and use), as well as national politics, and are also more likely to be exploited in formal and informal employment (UNDP/UNW/SIG, 2018, Jourdan, 2008). A 2022 political economy analysis of Fiji and Solomon Islands (Craney, 2022) found that perceptions of injustice and inequality, as well as structural barriers to pro-social behaviour, frequently leads to youth participation in conflict and violence. This would indicate that the challenges developing countries face in creating services, education and employment for youth (see Wilson, 2020) may exacerbate their grievances with politics and governance, thereby increasing participation in riot events.

### Grievances and Targets in Pacific Riots

While there might be a vast array of disputes, dissatisfaction and dissent that can create political instability, riots in the Pacific have a high degree of similarity in the types of grievances that are used as a rationale for rioting. As *Figure 2* suggests, grievances of rioters can be grouped into the following categories; dissatisfaction with national politics and governance (9/13 riot events or 69 per cent); resentment over economic benefits for Asian migrants and businesses (9/13 riot events; 69 per cent); and tensions between ethnic groups in urban areas (2/13 riot events; 15 per cent). One miscellaneous case in Boroko, PNG, was sparked by online rumours of kidnapping and organ sale. (Harriman, 2019). This provides a cautionary note about the role of social media and misinformation as a trigger for violence.

Additionally, eight out of 13 riot incidents (62 per cent) occurred at times of political transition, such as during prodemocracy reforms in Tonga, the removal of political oversight mechanisms such as the Ombudsman's Office in PNG, as well as pre and post-election. This study does not include the year 2022, in which PNG had several instances of violence in the national elections period.

It is important to note that riots can seem to happen "all of a sudden", which can obscure the factors that set actors, grievances, and rioting processes in motion. Violence around political transitions in particular are rooted in historical and structural factors. The case of Tonga's riots are instructive in this regard. Ratuva (2018), attributed the seemingly sudden outbreak of violence to the "multilayered relationships between authoritarian monarchical rule, feudalistic restrictions of political rights, depressed socioeconomic conditions,

inequality, corruption, cultural patronage, the pro-democracy movement and the demand for reform” (p. 156).

Despite these historical factors, the correlation between governance transitions and riots in the Pacific concurs with some relative deprivation literature (first posited by Gurr, 1970). Scholars in this class generally suggest that triggers for riots can relate to crowd expectations and whether they are met or frustrated (Walker & Smith, 2002). Some relative deprivation studies (Chandra & Foster, 2005) suggests riots do not happen when injustice or repression is at its worst, but when there is a general presumption that improvements are coming that then do not materialise. Thus, when we consider what grievances give rise to riots, we should also consider whether the responses to these grievances are proportionate to public expectation.

Looking at the Pacific’s recent history, there are key examples of frustration with a lack of effective reform or action turning protests into riots. For instance, PNG students in 2016 amassed a popular program of anti-corruption support, but when action was not taken by the government, violence quickly ensued. Similarly Tonga’s prodemocracy reforms were stalled despite protesters expectations of progress in 2006, and the frustrations of Solomon Island protestors in 2021 were exacerbated due to an assumption that the Prime Minister would respond to widespread calls to step down. Consequently, there is strong evidence that the dynamic relationship between public anticipation and unmet expectations is just as important as the substance of grievances themselves.

We can also see then that there is an association in many cases of riot violence with a sense of relative deprivation and economic exclusion. In the Pacific context, this is most visible in the perceived wealth of foreign migrants versus Indigenous peoples, which has been a feature of mass violence in Tonga, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands (Ratuva, 2018).

As such, it is important to note that the categories of grievances used in this study are not mutually exclusive but overlapping, particularly in the intersection of resentment over economic benefits being channelled to foreign migrants, dissatisfaction with national governance, and political transitions. Thus, the targets of violence tend to be buildings representing government and foreign (predominantly Asian) businesses.

In addition to the success of foreign business, another core source of rioters frustration is frequently low levels of development as well as real or perceived corruption. Notably, Solomon Islands and PNG which have experienced the highest number of riot events, have also often topped the list of most corrupt political systems in Pacific wide reports. Most recently, a Transparency International report (2021) stated these were the top countries in the region in terms of people’s perceptions of government corruption. Vanuatu also had a large majority of survey respondents (73 per cent) reporting corruption as a major problem (although lower than PNG’s 96 per cent and Solomon Islands 97 per cent) (Transparency International, 2021). Frustrations with corruption also occurred in Tonga, which despite enjoying a higher standard of living than most Melanesian countries, has a hierarchical legal system of which allows royalty disproportionate access to land and other assets, even as large

numbers of regular citizens struggle to own property and youth struggle to find employment (Good, 2019). In 2021, 62 per cent of survey respondents in Tonga reported corruption as a significant problem (Transparency International, 2021). Moreover, in 2019 Tonga was ranked 104 (out of 189 countries) on the Human Development Index. This said, Melanesian countries such as Vanuatu (140), Solomon Islands (151), and Papua New Guinea (155) by and large ranked lower (UNDP, 2019).

*Figure 2: Pacific riots, their grievances, targets, and related deaths from 1 January 2006 to 31 December 2021*

COUNTRY	YEAR	GRIEVANCES	POLITICAL TRANSITION	TARGET	DEATH TOLL	DECEASED
<b>PNG</b>	2021	Foreigners and economic benefits, politics and corruption	Yes, Death of former PM	Asian shops	0	
	2019	Fake story of kidnapping	No	Police	1	Student in crowd shot by police
	2018	Disputed electoral outcome, local and national politics	Yes, Elections (post)	Plane, Governor's Residence, Court Buildings, Commerce and Industry Building burned, Warehouse of Aid Supplies Looted	0	
	2016	Corruption, calls for PM to step down, Foreigners and economic benefits	Yes, Elections (pre)	Police, Banks, Asian Shops, University building	4	Crowd members shot by police
	2015	Foreigners and economic benefits, mining	No	Asian shops	1	Shot by police
	2011	Highlander migrants allegedly causing crimes	No	Highlander houses and people	6	Killed in fires, one shot by police
	2010	Foreigners and economic	Yes, Amidst protests	Asian shops	0	

		benefits, politics and corruption	about changes to government system e.g. Cuts to Ombudsman			
	2009	Foreigners and economic benefits, politics and corruption	No	Asian shops	3	Chinese killed by rioters
<b>SI</b>	2021	Foreigners and economic benefits, Relations with China, Provincial Autonomy, Calls for PM to step down	Yes, Calls and Parliamentary Vote for PM stand down	Parliament, Asian shops	3	Died in fires
	2019	Foreigners and economic benefits, Relations with China, politics and corruption, calls for PM to step down	Yes, Elections (post)	Parliament, Asian businesses	0	
	2006	Foreigners and economic benefits, politics and corruption, Calls for PM to step down	Yes, Elections (post)	Asian shops	0	
<b>TON</b>	2006	Delay Democracy Reforms, Foreigners and economic benefits	Yes, Transition of power from King to Prince (post); transition to democratic reforms	PM Office, Financial Department, Power Company (part owned by King) Asian Shops	6	Died in fires
<b>VAN</b>	2007	Tensions between groups over alleged sorcery	No	Houses of the groups	3	Killed in fighting

Geopolitics also can play a major role in grievances towards foreign businesses. The November 2021 Honiara riots in particular dramatised the security ramifications of geopolitics, with protests and linked to local grievances over the national government's increasingly close ties with China and a perception of government favouritism towards Chinese businesses. The latter issue is a common feature among riots across the Pacific, with Asian businesses being targeted in 69 per cent of all riot events (see Figure 2). In Tonga, Solomon Islands, and PNG rioters targeted Asian businesses, burning and looting them, often following protests over corruption and unpopular government decisions. Such protests can be multiscalar, relating to local and international influences on civil society responses to corruption (Walton, 2016). PNG has had four anti-Asian protests and riots in the past 15 years, with a notable case in 2009 where three Chinese people were killed. In the 2015 Madang unrest, grievances included perceptions that a proposed Pacific Marine Industrial Zone would predominantly benefit foreigners in terms of land and employment, rather than locals (RNZI, 2015). Other countries have had protests against ties with China, notably Kiribati (RNZI, 2019), but to date these have remained peaceful.

Despite the intersection between grievances over governance and foreign influence, government buildings are targeted far less than foreign owned businesses, being targeted in only 31 per cent of riot events. This said, damage to both government and business properties are more common in larger scale events involving widespread damage. This was seen in Solomon Islands in 2021 when a police station and a building on national parliament grounds were burned. These riots created a loss of SI\$ 811 million (AU\$ 149 million), damaged or destroyed 81 buildings in Honiara, and continue to have ongoing effects on the country's economy, school infrastructure, transport, retail, and other key sectors. (Koli, 2022).

The effects of riots range from theft and property damage to murders and accidental deaths (such as rioters being trapped in fires). As can be seen from the above table of event profiles, intentional deaths in riots across the Pacific between 2006 to 2021 have been relatively rare. There are six confirmed deaths intentionally caused by rioters; the 2009 deaths of three Chinese in PNG (Chin, 2010) and the deaths of three Ni-Vanuatu in rioting and fighting between Tanna and Ambrym men in 2007 (SMH, 2007). At least seven people in PNG have been killed by police firing on crowds in different incidents from 2006 to 2021 (See Figure 2). Another 13 people have died in fires set by rioters, (six in Tonga, three in Solomon Islands, and four in PNG). In the Solomon Islands and Tonga cases, evidence indicates those who died were likely looters who were accidentally trapped (Anonymous Journalist Interview, Honiara, 2022, RNZI, 2006). It should be noted here that these are official figures, and that the death tolls could be higher.

These event profiles reveal most Pacific riots are episodic and pass within one to two days (this was the case 8/13 or 62 per cent of events), a few last three days (3/13 events; 23 per cent) and only very few have spread across one week or more (in PNG in 2016 and 2009).

## Responses to Pacific Riots

Most responses to riots by Pacific governments thus far have prioritised short-term increases in security. This often includes elevating the presence of police, applying State of Emergency measures to areas affected as well as increasing arrests and prosecutions. Rarely do riot events prompt reconciliations, mediations, and other peacebuilding activities to calm underlying tensions. For larger events, committees (in PNG in 2016 and 2009) or commissions of inquiry (in Vanuatu in 2007 and Solomon Islands in 2006) have been called in order to learn from experiences and events, as happened in 4 out of 13 events (31 per cent) in this study.

Examining the list of responses, it appears that an increase in policing occurred in all cases. In three events (23 per cent) a State of Emergency (SOE) was declared to give police wider powers, enforce restrictions on movement of people and otherwise take control of the city or town affected. In most cases, the SOE is only for a short time, from days to a month in PNG (2018) and Vanuatu (2007). Conversely, in Tonga, the 2006 riots resulted in a number of long term SOE's from November 2006 to January 2011, while in Solomon Islands the 2021 riot occurred during an SOE which was implemented from March 2020 to July 2022. In both of these countries, a set of arrests were made related to the riots (over 600 in Tonga, and 100 in Solomon Islands) during the SOE. A much smaller number of these arrests resulted in prosecutions: only around half of all arrests led to prosecutions in Tonga (Ratuva, 2018) and at time of writing (October 2022) there have been prosecutions of just four juveniles in Solomon Islands (Kusapa, 2022c) and three adults for looting (Buchanan, 2022, Kusapa 2022b) in relation to the 2021 riots.

Evidence of long-term reforms or adaptations made by governments in response to these events are difficult to find. Results of inquiries have often been hidden, disputed by political actors, or ignored. For example, the Solomon Parliament Commission of Inquiry in 2008 argued that responsibility for violence was shared by protest leaders and the crowd alike. The report noted the collective nature of decision making during riots made it difficult to clearly allocate blame on individual actors and that a multifaceted response involving authorities, leaders and communities was required (SIG, 2008). Despite this, after the riots in 2021, police decided to mainly target individual protest leaders, claiming they instigated and "directed" the resultant property damage (Anonymous Journalist Interview, 2022).

In comparison to the ubiquity of the securitisation approach noted above, only in cases of violence between indigenous groups have mediation or peace talks been held. These occurred via Vanuatu's Council of Chiefs in 2007 (Sydney Morning Herald, 2007) and in PNG in 2018 following a riot related to disputes over the result of a local election in Mendi (Asia Pacific Report, 2018). Despite the dearth of formal processes, there have been some signs of implicit political accommodation after riot events. This most notably occurred in 2006, when Tongan leaders acquiesced to demands for political reform following riots (Ratuva, 2018) and when Solomon Islands Prime Minister Rini decided to step down to pacify protesters and quell unrest that same year (SIG, 2008).

Regional actors, notably Australia and New Zealand, have limited options when supporting responses to riots, and thus mostly rely on sending police and military to affected locations. This occurred in 2006 in Tonga (170 military and police officers from Australia and New Zealand were deployed), in Solomon Islands in the same year, and again in 2021 (Kusapa, 2022 a).

In addition to sending personnel, security partners often help train Pacific police in “riot control” equipment, strategies and methods. Solomon Islands has been the largest recipient of this type of support, mostly via RAMSI between 2003 - 2017 and more recently from China following the 2021 riots.

## Implications

Investment in training and arming Pacific police forces by partners such as Australia, New Zealand, the US, and China, has had mixed results. It is noted this report examines riot events, not disturbances that had the potential to become riots and were thwarted by the authorities, and so is only a partial view of violence in the Pacific and in turn police effectiveness. As illustrated in Figure 2, most riot events have not involved deaths caused by interaction between police and protesters or rioters; however, in PNG, police violence is a cause of concern. Police shootings at crowds has led to seven deaths in the past 15 years. Such violence adds to public mistrust of law enforcement. This may add to the challenges of policing more broadly as it leads to further tensions and conflicts in urban areas where interactions between police and young men are common. Research indicates Papua New Guineans trust in police is low (Yakum, 2019), with many resentful of frequently indiscriminate violence. Concerningly, a report in 2010 recorded instances of torture of young people by police (see Noble, Pereira & Saune, 2011).

The geopolitical and political nature of riots means they are frequently taken advantage of by politicians to their own ends. A notable recent illustration of this occurred when the Prime Minister in Solomon Islands utilised the November 2021 riots as a reason to expand the country’s security relationship with China through the donation of non-lethal riot equipment and training (Iroga, 2022). This was despite the fact Solomon Islands was already accepting police weapons and training from Australia and New Zealand. There are concerns that this securitised response, including an increased focus on equipment such as tear gas and “non-lethal” weapons, may contribute to more aggressive police responses and subsequently more violence in the future (Miletic and Ride, 2021).

Solomon Islands and PNG illustrate the need for safeguards to be built into policing programs, particularly regarding the provision of weapons, in order to prevent the possibility of police response contributing to human rights abuses during protests or riots. The importance of this is further highlighted by the low levels of public trust in the police in both contexts. Kaidadaya & Midelit (2021) have called attention to instances where police repress people critical of the government and suggest the police are seen as politically compromised in PNG. The final survey commissioned by RAMSI (2013) indicated 60 per cent of Solomon

Islanders who utilised police services were not satisfied. This lack of trust between people and police will confound future responses to riots, as their presence may inflame tensions and violence. There is no one way to increase trust in police, however, research in other contexts has found that procedural justice, transparency, and accountability - including prosecution of misconduct and abuse – are all crucial tools (Tyler et al, 2015).

Additionally, some suggest interventions by foreign armed forces and police may also exacerbate conflict and increase the risk of riots. In Tonga, during the pro-democracy movement, the intervention and use of foreign forces was criticised by protest leaders who argued the move was unnecessary and would encourage repression and violence from the local police and military forces (see Ratuva, 2018). Similar concerns were raised when Australia and other countries sent personnel to Honiara in 2021, with civil society and opposition groups implying the intervenors were keeping the unpopular Prime Minister Sogavare in power (Wasuka, 2021).

Herein lies the dilemma for countries providing additional security personnel to Pacific countries during situations of unrest. Grievances behind riots generally have widespread support amongst populations where they occur. For those who lose out in riots, notably foreign businesses, and government offices, and for those who felt under personal threat, notably political leaders, foreign forces will be welcomed. But for those who want governments to respond to grievances, such as pro-democracy and anti-corruption campaigners as well as the politically and economically marginalised, foreign forces can be seen as supporting the current political regime. As such, clear communication of the purpose, duration, and conduct of foreign operations is needed. Moreover, due consideration needs to be taken as to whether interventions are needed at all, and how they can actually address the underlying conflict conditions.

Foreign forces can provide support in a variety of ways. This can include the presentation of more visible policing on the streets to encourage rioters and looters to disperse. This enables services to return and faster access to necessities such as utilities that may be disrupted. However, foreign interventions require appropriate legal arrangements, and this can be difficult to secure, as occurred with the Enhanced Cooperation Program under the Australian Federal Police in PNG in the mid-2000s (Connery, 2014). If deployed, foreign personnel usually arrive at the tail end of rioting events, and by that stage are normally too late to directly intervene in riot violence. For example, in the case of Solomon Islands in 2021, the first foreign troops arrived two days after rioting started; this was also the case in Tonga. This then puts the onus back on local actors to more effectively prevent, anticipate, and respond to rioting events.

Thus, there is a need to move away from sole reliance on securitised responses and towards a more strategic and sensitive approach. This should be undertaken at several levels: community, institutional and structural, to address causes and triggers for conflicts while bolstering local efforts that prevent or contain violence. Such multipronged approaches, rather than relying on police forces exclusively, would better engage non-state actors and initiatives that contribute to security in local contexts (Peake & Dinnen, 2014). Local initiatives,

such as community policing, in Honiara have been observed by some to reduce disturbances related to riots in suburbs such as West Honiara (Journalist consultations, 2022, Solomon Islands). There is an opportunity for more effective linkage and consultation between these community initiatives and security sector agencies to maximise their effectiveness. Further, initiatives within the police that emphasise accountability, such as regular inquiries and transparent complaint systems, could help rebuild trust with citizens. This would not only support conflict reduction, but also broader law enforcement operations. Addressing structural poverty and disadvantage, and facilitating dialogue between protest and elected leaders, as well as other conflicting parties, could also help take the heat out of grievances. In some cases, this dialogue can include changes to the structure and conduct of governance (Aqorau & Ride, 2022).

Whilst perhaps crude, rioting behaviour signals to political leaders the need to change course or proceed more carefully in certain political or policy directions. As Coser (1967) concluded, the grievances of rioters generally have community support and violence is used to indicate that when grievances are raised, people “really mean it”. In the Pacific over the past 15 years, real dialogue between those involved in protests and/or rioting and political leaders is extremely rare. In the absence of consultation and dialogue, this disconnect between people and leaders is likely to contribute to further conflicts. If national, regional, and partner institutions responded to riots as they do to civil wars - by employing long-term reconciliation, dialogue, institutional reform, projects and funds to address grievances and disadvantages (see Joshi and Wallenstein, 2018) - they may be able to stop riots before they start.

## **Conclusion**

This report provides a preliminary examination of factors in common to riot events across the Pacific over the past 15 years. As discussed, it has limitations related to data, relying on media reports and journalists firsthand accounts, and a restricted number of sources. Despite these limitations, this analysis reveals important insights for Pacific policymakers and researchers.

This research first focused on answering the question: What are common factors found in riots throughout the Pacific? Common factors to countries with riot events are firstly, public perceptions of poor governance and governance transitions and secondly, tensions between ethnic groups residing in urban areas. Countries with riot events also have high youth populations, although this is also the case in Pacific countries without riots, pointing to the influence of socialisation rather than simply age.

These common underlying factors lead to violence when they are combined with strong expectations of social and political reform, contextual norms of group behaviour, socialisation of individuals (mostly men) towards violence, and a lack of response to grievances. This study concurs with other analyses (Ratuva, 2018, in relation to Tonga, Ride, 2019 in relation to Solomon Islands) that riots are “symbolic political acts” and have a degree of purpose, political meaning and selective action. The actors, grievances and targets of riots are not

random but based on understandings of norms, behaviour, relationships, and situations within their context.

Men, particularly young men, are the predominant actors in riots. Additionally, the grievances that are the basis for riots share a degree of similarity across the region, as demonstrated by the targeting of mostly Asian businesses and/or government buildings in the majority of instances. Further research could focus on the degree to which riots arise as a response to the political systems of countries as well as their levels of repression of free speech and association. In several PNG and Solomon Islands incidents, the protests that proceeded riots were illegal either by law or according to temporary SOE's, whilst Tonga's 2006 riots occurred during a period of media repression. Does this then create a scenario where the repression of dissent leads to and exacerbates violence? Or as a counterfactual, do certain Pacific Islands countries lack riots because they restrict dissent, or because they allow it?

The second question this research focused on was: What impact has government and regional responses had on riots? The outcomes of different responses are difficult to assess due to the over representation of short-term securitisation approaches, and a relative lack of attempts at conflict prevention to limit the likelihood of future violence. Despite nominal support for broader conceptions of security, as codified in the Boe Declaration (PIFS, 2019), responses to riot events by security partners such as Australia, New Zealand, and China have been squarely in the "traditional" security box: more personnel (usually foreign), police visibility, more police capacity building activities and equipment. Particularly in the case of Solomon Islands, the resumption of city-wide riots in Honiara in 2021 after the experience of similar riots in 2006 and 2019 is sobering. This recurrence of violence suggests these existing efforts by the government, security partners, and the police force itself have not been very effective in preventing and responding to riot violence.

Unfortunately, security partners like Australia and New Zealand have thus far been reluctant to engage with the underlying causes of riot events, either rhetorically or through funding conflict prevention in urban areas. There has been a tendency for riots to fall between the cracks of crime prevention and peacebuilding initiatives. Crime prevention rarely includes measures aimed at occupying young men to discouraging them from violence. Similarly, peacebuilding efforts often focus too much on preventing the types of conflicts that have occurred in the past, such as organised civil wars. More effort must be made to examine emerging trends and conflicts arising from pressures such urbanisation, economic exclusion, Asian migration, lack of youth employment, political transitions and dissent around national governance. Meanwhile, Pacific governments themselves must be self-reflective by acknowledging that existing governance structures are often unresponsive and lack outlets for peaceful dissent such as protest and dialogue.

The third question this study sought to answer was: How can recent experiences of riots and responses inform conflict prevention in the Pacific Islands? Given the frequency of Pacific riot events in the recent past, and the likelihood they will occur again in the near future, there is an opportunity to proactively intervene to reduce future damage, loss of life, fear and instability. Such interventions can be the domain of local state and non-state actors, as well

as bilateral and regional partners. However, to be successful these initiatives must focus on conflict prevention, rather than purely responsive securitisation. Up until now, riots in the Pacific have too often been referenced to in policy and security circles as discrete events requiring “control” techniques and equipment, as the recent assistance from China and Australia to Solomon Islands demonstrates. There has been much less attention to the trends and underlying factors that may influence the likelihood and extent of riots. In 2022 and beyond, we need to understand riots as situational factors, actors and grievances bound in processes. Riots are not just events to “control” but conflicts that need “change” in order to prevent its patterns being painted on the streets of Pacific urban areas again and again.

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