



ISSN 1172-3416

**MACMILLAN BROWN CENTRE FOR PACIFIC STUDIES
PACIFIC POLICY BRIEF 2016/4**

Youth participation and security – the
case of Fiji

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Policy summary of paper presented at the regional conference on *Rethinking regional security: Nexus between research and policy*, November 25-26, 2015, University of Canterbury. A partnership between University of Canterbury, Australian National University, United National Development Program and International Political Science Association



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Young people exist at the heart of security debates. A common position is to view them as anarchists, victims or opportunities. These images are evoked at the global level via events like the Arab spring revolutions of 2011; in the Pacific through discussions about the ‘youth bulge’. In Fiji, following the reduction of the voting age to 18 years, young people were touted as opportunities. In his campaigns Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama appealed to young people that Fiji needed a new brand of politics and new politicians whilst other political parties were visibly receptive to youth involvement. Youth voter outcomes in the elections was difficult to ascertain, however, given the overwhelming support FijiFirst which campaigned mostly on development and ‘bread and butter’ issues it is safe to suggest that the majority of young people voted on the basis of securing their wellbeing.

Since the elections the hype around young people’s participation has waned. In a country like Fiji, constantly beset by leadership crisis, young people need to be involved in decision making strategies. This isn’t a novel idea for researchers and policy makers, however, it is challenged by competing frameworks and unsustainable commitment to youth participation. Adopting a rights based framework would address these concerns and augur well for young people’s contribution to human security. This can be operationalised through the UNDPs (2014) three lenses (youth as beneficiaries, partners and leaders) approach for youth and development. Three examples are offered below.

i. Youth as beneficiaries through citizen education

In a study of young people’s political participation in Fiji in 2014, 45 percent of participants suggested that the best way of receiving political information in future

would be through citizen education in schools (Vakaoti, 2014). The government has at its disposal the infrastructure and resources to introduce in schools a citizenship education curriculum that includes topics like voting and the constitution. This will help influence the development of critical and informed young minds. Related spaces like universities should also be encouraged to continue with this tradition, although this has somewhat become challenging given post 2006 experiences where for example the University of the South Pacific (USP) has had political debates and free academic discourse restricted.

A challenge to this consideration is the ‘type’ of citizenship education or citizen the education system intends to mould within schools. Fiji’s current education policy directives like free school fees, text books and bus fare subsidies and automatic progression regardless of performance whilst noble are clothed with political motives to appease and pacify citizens. School activities like the compulsory scout programme from 2016 has been introduced to instill discipline and life skills. Children are increasingly being responsabilized but in a very controlled way

ii. Youth as partners through political party involvement

Historically, the involvement of young people in party politics has been minimal. Results of the aforementioned study reflect this reality; where 90 percent stated that they did not belong to a political party (Vakaoti, 2014). This could in part be explained by the absence of party politics since 2006 and to the historical tendency of political parties to exclude young people from its party machinery and processes. However, in the lead up to the 2014 elections political parties actively involved young people in the election processes and

young people were either candidates, volunteers or campaigners.

Currently, it appears that the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) is the only party with some active youth engagement. The test of young people's sustained involvement in political parties will be seen in the period between elections. Political parties should continue to develop strategies that support the representation of young people on their management board, ensuring that their interests are considered and discussed at the decision making level. It is also important that there are clear pathways within political parties for young people who aspire to move beyond being mere members, campaigners and volunteers. Parties serve as ideal breeding grounds for future election candidates, politicians and leaders. Senior party officials and leaders could act as mentors and allies to support this process.

The biggest challenge to this is the practice of guided democracy observed in Fiji at present.

iii. Youth as leaders supporting youth led initiatives

Generally young people in Fiji are taking leadership roles in the private and public sectors. Youth political leadership remains a challenge but there is an increase in issues based youth involvement and youth-led organizations in the areas of environmental conservation, democracy, mental health, gender discrimination, queer activism and the creative arts.

Organizations like political parties, the national youth council, youth parliament and leadership forums are meant to offer enabling structures and environments for leadership development to occur. This has yet to be fully realised because young people and the structures they are part of lack resources and influence. In addition,

leadership is often not viewed as a process but a position. Few young people are able to articulate their personal issues and link them to wider structural influences or develop a socio-political career that could eventually be transformed into political leadership.

In Fiji, political leaders have historically emerged from traditional and class elites or from particular occupational groups; in recent years many have indirectly and directly emerged from coup related processes. The contemporary landscape has the potential to shape and influence a wider cross-section of individuals as potential leaders. However, the absence of or deliberate attempts to encourage this is a challenge in Fiji. Issues based politics and activism are gaining popularity with young people but they exist in pockets and mostly online. Perhaps as Fiji transitions into democracy young people will be able to complement their virtual activism in bolder and more visible ways.

Where to from here?

Political developments in Fiji is reflective of a democracy that is still a 'work in progress'. Many questions are being asked of its institutions and leaders as a way of ensuring stability and security. Whilst addressing these challenges, genuine engagement must continue with young people to address their concerns and support structures that enable their genuine and critical participation in society. Young people in Fiji are accorded rights; they know what they're entitled but demonstrate little in terms of responsibilities. The challenge for policy makers is to balance these out. A secure Fiji will be one where young people and all its citizens enjoy their rights, develop strong identities and are actively involved in nation-building and democracy.

References

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