Book Review

Deepening ‘Regionalism’: beyond the rhetoric

Vijay Naidu


Kennedy Graham’s edited book is a timely and useful discussion of current challenges and shortcomings of Pacific regionalism, and on its possible future form(s) and direction. Prominent scholars and practitioners have set down their thoughts, analysis of models of regionalism, experiences and reflections as well as some of their ruminations on ways forward. The 260 pages are subdivided into 11 chapters organised into four parts and five sections.

In the Foreword Charles Chauvel, a New Zealand parliamentarian, reflects on New Zealand relations with Pacific island countries and highlights some of the significant challenges of regionalism in Oceania. This provides an appropriate backdrop to the chapters that follow. In two chapters, Part 1A looks at the United Nations and the Pacific and ‘Alternative Models of Regional Governance’. The first, by Graham himself, is entitled ‘Models of Regional Governance: Is there a choice for the Pacific?’, the second, by former European Union Head of Delegation, Roberto Ridolfi, considers the relevance of the European experience to the Pacific. Graham notes the uniqueness of Oceania, linked by water rather than land, and explores whether, in the face of economic globalisation and climate change, deepening regionalism is an imperative, with or without the larger metropolitan neighbours, Australia and New Zealand. He is firmly of the view that multi-layered jurisdiction is feasible and desirable and that Africa and Europe provide clear signals that ‘sovereignty shared is sovereignty enlarged’. Ridolfi sketches the evolution of the European Union and signposts the specific circumstances, champions and personalities, their vision and the positive outcomes that have resulted in an incremental commitment towards political union.

The chapters of the well known law scholar, Anthony Angelo, and former Pacific Islands Forum legal adviser, Shennia Spillane, make up Part 1B containing ‘The Pacific Plan’ and ‘Regional Governance’ respectively. Angelo maintains that the two recent reviews of regional organisations, ‘the regional architecture’, have not gone far enough to strengthen regionalism. Being preoccupied with the strengthening of the legal
basis of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), he is strongly of the view that Pacific islands countries must take a leaf out of CARICOM experience and expeditiously institute a recognised corporate and legal personality to the Forum. In her chapter, Spillane points to the informal and practical orientation of the Pacific Way regionalism characterised by informal consensus-building among Pacific leaders, the limited success of CROP in its bid to coordinate the efforts of regional organisations better, and the far reaching legal implications of the Pacific Plan. It is a matter of some speculation whether 21st Century leaders can go beyond the rhetoric of their vision for the Pacific.

Whether global processes and UN mechanisms enhance regionalism is taken up by Part II of the book. The UN–Regional Partnership incorporates section C, ‘The Consultative and Planning Process’. It includes Chapter 5 by Maria Telalian, who dwells on UN Security Council partnership with regional organisations, with a case study of the African Union and the Dafur crisis; and Chapter 6 by Tapio Kanninen, exploring whether UN and regional high-level processes can contribute to the promotion of democracy in PICs via the Pacific Islands Forum.

‘Stability in the Pacific: Culture, Politics and Regionalism’ is the topic for Part III, with section C dealing with ‘Self-Determination and Conflict Prevention’. Two interesting chapters, by Yves-Louis Sage and Kevin Clements, constitute this section. In chapter 7 Sage examines the notion of shared sovereignty and outlines an institutional model of sharing sovereignty in New Caledonia and the partnership model of ‘Free Association’ that New Zealand has with three of its former colonies. Whether such models can be adopted at the regional level is an interesting topic for further discussion, as are notions of a common currency, a Pacific regional parliament and Pacific Union. As Pacific scholars and observers know, these matters have been raised from time to time, so far without any firm resolution.

Clements’s Chapter 8 grapples with the complex issue of conflict prevention and seeks to answer the question of whether ‘the Responsibility to Protect fits into Biketawa’. It is clear that the international community has given itself the role of intervening in national states that fail to protect their citizens from extreme harm as experienced in Rwanda and Central–Eastern Europe in the 1990s. This ‘hard approach’ is different from the ‘soft approach’ reflected by the Biketawa agreement. As states themselves are often the source of insecurity for their citizens, Clements suggests a greater role for civil society and regional and international partnerships in preventing, managing and resolving conflicts.

Part III E ‘Constitutional Law and Good Governance’ comprises two chapters that are coming from somewhat opposite standpoints about island cultures and practices and their impacts on modern institutions. The first, by Graham Hassall, considers institutional arrangements in PICs and their capacity to deliver development and security; and the second scrutinises the difficult issue of the harmonisation of human rights with culture and customary law. Hassall identifies the numerous limitations of existing constitutional arrangements, the concentration of power among small national elites, the malfunctioning of institutions and human capacity limitations that have
therefore failed to address the growing inequality and related development and security challenges that face island states. He advocates good governance initiatives including the review of existing constitutions, greater incorporation of traditional institutions and a movement to more regional-based activities to promote good governance. Baird, in contrast, advocates the theme of bottom-up engagement with customary norms and values, which she perceives as the way forward for harmonising local Pacific cultures with universal human rights norms. There are serious contradictions and tensions between the two, which she identifies, but she feels, nevertheless, that harmonisation is indeed feasible. In this regard she has the support of Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, Fiji’s former Vice-President and a traditional high chief, who has maintained that ‘the Pacific is a better place for the infusion of human rights’ (p. 189).

The conclusion of the book comprises Part IV with Chapter 11, ‘Sovereignty and the Future Architecture of Pacific Regionalism: Reflections’, by Kennedy Graham and Graham Hassall, drawing together the large and diverse range of threads addressed by the 11 authors.

The book has a number of gaps, as is to be expected because it is an ambitious multi-country regional-level publication. Areas not adequately dealt with include the role of non-state actors in the promotion of a regional identity and regionalism. The role of the churches, NGOs, trade unions and women’s groups has been glossed over without being addressed in any meaningful way. These actors are critical, as some authors, notably Clements and Hassall, recognise in passing. Sub-regional groupings, particularly the Melanesian Spearhead Group, which is emerging as an important player on the regional stage, have not been satisfactorily addressed. With respect to regionalism, a number of authors dwell on ‘small and isolated island countries’. Of course it is, as they say, all relative; in typical regional perspectives, it is difficult to think of Papua New Guinea as either small or isolated.

The chapters are extremely thoroughly researched, as evidenced by close to 30 pages of notes. The book is nevertheless very readable and the authors have sought to avoid legal and technical language as much as possible, ensuring its accessibility to the lay person.

*Models of Regional Governance for the Pacific: sovereignty and the future architecture of regionalism* is an important new resource for those teaching and learning about regionalism in the Pacific. It is highly recommended reading for scholars, policy makers, diplomats, inter-governmental organisation employees and everybody interested in regional relationships, and in the geo-politics of Oceania.
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