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Agenda success?

The prospects for sub-regional human rights arrangements in the Pacific

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Abstract

Regional human rights institutions have been established in all United Nations (UN)-defined regions except for the Asia-Pacific. Although as a region the Asia-Pacific faces myriad human rights challenges, the diversity of countries and cultures and absence of a shared sense of regional identity inhibits momentum to form a regional mechanism for the promotion and protection of human rights. Within this region several sub-regional configurations exist. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), whose members include fourteen small island states, Australia and New Zealand, is the primary political body in the Pacific section of the broader Asia-Pacific region. The vision of the PIF emphasises the promotion and protection of human rights in the Pacific. Human rights issues have, however, tended to be addressed within individual countries, and Pacific leaders have paid little attention to the idea of sub-regional human rights arrangements (SHRAs) as a means of supporting human rights objectives.

Within the PIF complex political and institutional processes shape the work of the Pacific leaders and affect which ideas are focused on and advanced. Within the policy process agenda setting is a critical element as new ideas and policy solutions can only be implemented after they have been deliberately considered and agreed upon by the political decision-makers. Several elements shape the agenda setting process: the framing of issues and possible solutions by policy advocates, the availability of appropriate venues in which decisions can be made, and opportunities to have ideas presented to the decision-makers. If the political decision-makers, in this thesis the PIF leaders, agree to advance and implement a policy idea then agenda success has occurred. This thesis examines the prospects for agenda success of SHRAs in the Pacific.

Twenty two semi-structured interviews were undertaken with selected experts from throughout the Pacific. These empirical materials were triangulated with secondary sources. Analysis of these materials highlighted that all components of the agenda setting process are evident in this case study of SHRAs in the Pacific. In particular, interrelationships between the framing of issues and alternative solutions, venues and policy advocates, previously understated in other agenda setting research, are able to be identified. Certain conditions, such as political instability, international obligations,

environmental challenges, and the current scoping exercise, provide opportunities for policy advocates to push their ideas.

Further, the results of the research identify several contextual factors that are shaping the agenda setting process in the PIF. These include historical, national, sub-regional, international, cultural, economic, and geo-political factors, and issues of sovereignty. Before Pacific leaders are likely to agree to the advancement of SHRAs in the Pacific they will also need to be convinced that the idea is both feasible and immediately important. Therefore, although there is moderate evidence of the preconditions for agenda success being in place, the receptivity and political will of the PIF leaders is critical, and will, in the final instance, determine agenda success for SHRAs in the Pacific.

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List of Acronyms

AIPO	ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Organisation
APF	Asia Pacific Foundation
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
AU	African Union
EU	European Union
HRB	Human Rights Body
IACHR	Inter-American Commission on Human Rights
LAWASIA	Law Association of Asia and the Pacific
MPs	Members of Parliament
NGOs	Non-government Organisations
OAS	Organisation of American States
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PIFSec	Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SHRAs	Sub-regional human rights arrangements
SPC	Secretariat of the Pacific Community
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNHCHR	United Nations High Commission for Human Rights
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
US	United States of America