

## KONFERENZBERICHTE

### **Rich Vassals, Poor Sovereigns? Thoughts on "Nation-Building" in the South Pacific**

Münster, 10.-12.11.2006

This conference on nation-building (NB) in the South Pacific attracted some three dozen people with different backgrounds and from different disciplines. Among the expert speakers at the event were political scientist Prof. Jochen Hippler from Duisburg University, Germany, who talked about NB as a general topic, and Dr. Sinclair Dinnen from the Australian National University in Canberra, a specialist for Pacific issues. Other experts included Sina Emde, Dr. Roland Seib and Dr. Pierre Jadin, who moderated country-specific workshops.

Hippler explained the general concepts of NB by providing a brief overview of significant steps in its history. Currently, Prof. Hippler said, NB serves as a political instrument of peace politics to stop the decline of a state as a central regulatory authority. By way of illustration, he presented two different NB approaches. The first one is the typical European way of NB, characterised by a procedural and internal consolidation via conflicts. This necessitates a painful process of emergence as an identity producing basic memory. The other approach involves an external influence towards creating first a state, which hopefully will later become a nation. This is symptomatic for so-called developing countries in the post-colonial era, and in this sense this concept of NB shows a considerable proximity to the more technical process of state-building (SB), in other words the set-up of a state's infrastructure and institutions, possibly as a result of external support and motivation. By producing these technical prerequisites, mutual communication to create national consciousness and national identity is possible. Central points in both of these concepts are a fictive reality, which is expressed in a notional ancestry, and the interdependent relation of state and nation.

First of all, Dr. Dinnen outlined the Solomon problem of a traditionally egalitarian, fragmented and stateless society. He then asked whether artificially constructed states such as the Solomon Islands without an organic and common history are able to work. For this reason, he stressed that there is an important difference between NB and SB. NB as well as SB give rise to and influence one another, but they are not the same. This confusion by definition was named as one of the main problems of the Solomon Islands. The Solomon state was constructed by foreigners to fulfil foreign interests. The state as a state was technically perfectly conceived. However, it seemed impossible that the poorly educated Solomon Islanders would be able to run their state. As an example, Dr. Dinnen recalled that there were seven indigenous academics at the time of independence in 1978. Because the Solomon Islanders had traditionally no comprehension for something called a state, they began to recolonize and to transform the Solomon state in their traditional way. In regard to its functions, the modern state as a modern and external construction became dysfunctional. Currently one aim of the Australian-led RAMSI intervention is to remedy this dysfunctionality. However, RAMSI repeats old mistakes by focusing mainly on Solomon SB without considering the social consciousness for a state, which would be necessary within the framework of NB.

Dr. Seib also talked in his lecture about Papua New Guinea (PNG) and highlighted some similar problems there. Despite decentralisation, there has been no necessary nation-building from the bottom up so far. Accordingly, the Melanesian decision-makers are not acting in a

context of national consciousness, but as traditional leaders with only a local background. This becomes obvious particularly with regard to distributing the national proceeds, which only rarely bring advantages to the entire state. As a result, the people's trust in their own state becomes even further diminished, with the consequence that the state itself is called into question.

In contrast to PNG, Sina Emde showed the audience that such a basic distrust in their own state is not noticeable among Fijians. To illustrate this, she briefly sketched Fiji's history to demonstrate the basic cleavages between native Fijians and Fijians with an Indian background. In this context, she showed the extent to which the SB of the British colonial administration contributed to constructing institutions which seem to be traditional today. In regard to these ostensibly traditional institutions, it is no longer surprising to call Fiji a divided country. Nevertheless, in current times Fiji knows a functional civil society addressing the antagonisms between native and Indian Fijians and the problems resulting from unequal distribution of wealth. Accordingly, NB in Fiji does not serve to create a state-supporting national consciousness, but to transform this consciousness into a general imperative for all Fijians.

Finally, Dr. Jadin dealt with French Polynesia, elaborating under which conditions NB can become a danger if a nation does not lead to the desired results.

Subsequent to the country-specific workshops, Dr. Dinnen was asked to make an evaluative comment. He again stated that NB should be seen as an abstract, dynamic and omnipresent process of communication among different groups – not only for the Pacific states. As the most important influence for the young Pacific states, he identified the European colonial penetration as a working engine for the technical creation of states. However, any real national consciousness appearing prior to independence was unwanted by the colonialists, who viewed it as a danger. For this reason, Pacific states were created without having become nations, which Dr. Dinnen characterized as a post-colonial dilemma.

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