



Africanization of the South Pacific? A party system perspective

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Abstract

About two decades ago Reilly (2000) suggested that the South Pacific region was undergoing a process of 'Africanization'. One of the symptoms of this process of 'Africanization' was represented by the fact that the institutions of governance were weak and that party systems were fragmented. The purpose of the present note is to argue that while Reilly is correct in suggesting that parties in the South Pacific are weak and party systems are fragmented, there are major differences between African and South Pacific party systems that prevent one from speaking of 'Africanization' of the South Pacific party systems. There are several differences between Sub-Saharan African and the Pacific Island states: first, the quality of government, as evidenced by political stability and absence of violence, is higher in the Pacific than in Sub-Saharan Africa; second, Sub-Saharan party systems are characterized by fairly low levels of fragmentation coupled with high levels of fluidity whereas in the Pacific Island states party systems are highly fragmented but fairly stable over time; third, the presence of atomized party systems in Sub-Saharan Africa is exceptional, while in the Pacific region it tends to be the rule; fourth, in the Pacific region fluidity is negatively associated with the fragmentation of the party system, while in Sub-Saharan Africa fragmentation and fluidity go together; fifth, greater party system instability is associated with and possibly responsible for a deterioration of governance in Sub-Saharan Africa, while it does not affect the quality of government in the Pacific Island states.



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Introduction

In a short note appeared in the *Australia Journal of International Affairs* Reilly (2000) suggested that the South Pacific region was witnessing the rise of four problematic trends: 1) the growing tensions

between civilian rulers and military elite, 2) the weakening of the institutions of governance, 3) an increasing number of conflicts sparked by the inter-ethnic competition for the access/use/exploitation of national resources, and 4) the increasing

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centrality of the state in deliberating how national resources could/should be exploited and in creating opportunities to gain material wealth.

Believing that these trends are a feature or a staple in African polities, Reilly suggested that the combination of these four trends was a correlate or a symptom of the Africanization of the South Pacific region.

Reilly's claim triggered a lively debate among Pacific specialists. Some noted that the use of notions such as the 'arc of instability' and/or 'Africanization' had some racist undertones (Chappell, 2005), while others remarked that while some of the trends or developments that Reilly (2000:262-263) had pinpointed in his article were actually taking place but that they did not amount to proper 'Africanization'. Teaiwa (2006) lamented the application of the concept of 'Africanization' to the South Pacific region is problematic because it blames Africa for political pathologies that it may not have invented there, because the comparison of these two regions is vitiated by the problem of conceptual stretching that Sartori (1971) had already identified, and because the use of the notion of 'Africanization', which inevitably discounts and neglects the role that culture plays in making political institutions work, is inherently reductionist. In a similar vein Wilikilagi (2009) emphatically noted that the notion of 'Africanization' provides little insight into the problems and crises that the South Pacific region is experiencing – problems that, according to Wilikilagi (2009) are simply due to the fact that the process of state formation in the South Pacific is a relatively recent phenomenon and that the region has not yet had a chance to overcome the problems and the challenges that their European counterparts were able to solve in the course of several centuries. The most scathing critique of Reilly's argument was formulated by Fraenkel, who, claimed that Reilly's argument was "analytically weak, internally inconsistent and empirically flawed" (Fraenkel, 2004:3).

One of the reasons why Reilly believes that the South Pacific is (or was) undergoing a process of Africanization was represented by the fact that the institutions of governance, such as political parties and parliaments, were weak (Reilly, 2000:265). Reilly (2000:265) in fact noted that "the political party

structures that emerged in much of the South Pacific have been weak, fragmented, amorphous and increasingly irrelevant (...)" and that the absence of proper party organizations was coupled with "the lack of a meaningful party system (...), unstable governments, (...) parliamentary fragmentation"—all issues that eventually lead to what Reilly regarded as the "ongoing crisis of governance and governability." (Reilly, 2000:265).

The fragmentation of the party system has long been known to undermine government stability (Lowell, 1896; Taylor and Herman, 1971; Laver, 2003), government effectiveness and on the quantity and the quality of legislation (Tsebelis, 2011), and, ultimately, the stability of democratic regimes (Sartori, 1976).

Political scientists (Sartori, 1976) have generally acknowledged that mass parties perform a structuring role in the sense that they give shape to the preferences of the voters (thus preventing the emergence of atomized party systems) and to ensure the stability of party systems over time. While Reilly (2000) is correct in suggesting that the absence of mass parties in several South Pacific Islands is responsible for the high level of fragmentation or atomization of the party system, it is not entirely clear whether the absence of mass parties in the South Pacific Islands is responsible for what is the most peculiar characteristics of the party systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, that is for their instability or fluidity.

Since the literature on African party systems has consistently shown that they are unstructured, unstable and fluid (Sartori, 1976; Bogaards, 2004, Bogaards, 2008; Erdmann and Basedau, 2008; Basedau and Stroh, 2008; Pelizzo and Nwokora, 2016; Nwokora and Pelizzo, 2018), if party systems in the South Pacific have undergone a process of Africanization, then they should have experienced a marked increase in the level of party system fluidity. And, furthermore, the relationship between the fluidity and the fragmentation of the party system in the South Pacific region should be similar to the way in which those variables relate to one another in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The purpose of the present paper is precisely that of testing, using the index of fluidity (Nwokora and

Pelizzo, 2018), whether the fluidity of South Pacific party systems has increased and whether the level of party system fluidity that one can detect in the South Pacific region is similar or is approximating the level of party system fluidity of its African counterparts.

This article is organized in three sections in addition to the introduction. The first section discusses Sartori's framework for the analysis of party systems. In doing so, attention will be paid to the fact that Sartori developed a taxonomy to classify party systems that was based on two dimensions—pertaining respectively to the fragmentation of the party system and to its ideological polarization. Sartori, however, also noted that the combination of fragmentation and ideological polarization affects the pattern of inter-party competition, the patterns of inter-party competition may be structured/stable or fluid. Building on this discussion, the second section presents the index of fluidity (Nwokora and Pelizzo, 2018) which is designed to capture how fluid/unstable are the patterns of inter-party competition over time. By computing this index for the elections held in fourteen Pacific Island states between 1999 and 2023, the analyses presented in this section reveal that the pattern of inter-party competition display a unique feature, namely, that they are highly fragmented and, more often than not atomized, but highly stable. The nature of the pattern of inter-party competition in the Pacific Island states is hence rather different from the pattern of inter-party competition that one may detect in Sub-Saharan Africa where party system tend to be less fragmented but considerably more unstable. The third section formulates several conclusions and suggests that as far as the analysis of party systems is concerned, it is inappropriate to claim that party system in the Pacific Island states are becoming or have become 'Africanized'.

The structuring of Party Systems

Forty-five years after its publication, *Parties and Party Systems* (Sartori, 1976) remains the most important contribution to the study of party systems. In this classic study Sartori (1976) defined a party system as the system that results from the pattern of inter-party competition and suggested that in such a system a party is a function of every other party in the system in the sense it reacts competitively or otherwise to the presence/existence of these other parties.

He suggested that party systems could be categorized on the basis of their ideological polarization and the number of relevant parties; he proposed two rules for identifying whether a party is relevant or not; and went on to identify seven types of party systems (one party, hegemonic, predominant, two party, moderate pluralism, polarized pluralism), atomized

One party systems are characterized by the presence of only one relevant party, which is always in power, and by the fact that no opposition party is allowed to participate in the elections. Hegemonic party systems are characterized by the presence of only one relevant party, which is always in power and by the presence of opposition parties that are allowed to exist as long as do not pose an electoral threat to the success of the ruling parties. Predominant party systems are characterized by the presence of one relevant party, which wins office in at least three consecutive elections, and by the presence of opposition parties which are unable to defeat the ruling party. Two party systems exist when there are two relevant parties, which run for office, and are willing to govern alone if successful in the elections. Moderate party systems are characterized by the fact that no single party is able to win a majority of seats in parliament, by the fact that two coalitions are competing against each other and that the winning coalition will govern if successful in the elections. Pluralist party systems are more fragmented, have more than five relevant parties, have anti-system parties and are characterized by high level of ideological polarization. Atomized party systems have more than eight relevant parties or, as in the case of many Pacific Island states, have no parties at all competing in the elections.

Sartori (1976) also noted that these party systems could be regarded as such only in those polities in which the pattern of inter-party competition was stable over time and introduced the notion of 'fluid polities' to describe those polities in which the pattern of inter-party competition was not structured or stable over time. And, in this respect, he went on to add that the best indication of whether a party system is structured (or not) is provided by the presence/existence of a mass party.

While no study has been able to produce a framework of analysis that could in any way be superior (or, for that matter, even comparable) with

that of Sartori, several studies have attempted over the years to make marginal contributions that could improve, however marginally, the framework that Sartori (1976) had proposed. In this regard, one should note that some efforts (Pelizzo and Babones, 2007) were made to estimate the impact of macroeconomic conditions on the polarization of the party system which Sartori (1976) viewed simply as a function of the depth of the cleavages. Some efforts

were made to refine the notion of predominant party system that in Sartori's work was treated as a sort of residual category (Nwokora and Pelizzo, 2014), while another stream of scholarship attempted to further Sartori's insight into the nature, the working, the causes and more generally the consequences of party systems' fluidity (Nwokora and Pelizzo, 2015; Nwokora and Pelizzo, 2018; Pelizzo and Nwokora, 2016; Pelizzo and Nwokora, 2018; Pelizzo, 2020).

Table 1. Fluidity in the South Pacific

	Year of the Elections	Frequency of party system change	Scope	Variety	fluidity
Cook Islands	2022	.428	1	2	.857
Fiji Islands	2022	.50	1	2	1.0
Kiribati	2020	.20	1	2	.80
Marshall Islands	2023	.15	3	2	1.71
Micronesia	2019	.0	0	1	0
Nauru	2022	.0	0	1	0
Niue	2020	.125	3	2	.75
Palau	2020	0	0		0
Papua New Guinea	2022	0	0	1	0
Samoa	2021	.6	2	3	3.6
Solomon Islands	2019	.143	2	2	.571
Tonga	2021	.125	1	2	.25
Tuvalu	2024	.0	0	1	0
Vanuatu	2022	0	0	1	0
average					.68

Fluidity of South Pacific party systems

In order to test whether the party systems in the South Pacific have experienced some sort of 'Africanization', I will compute the index of fluidity for all fourteen polities in the region, namely the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu . The index of fluidity, proposed by Nwokora and Pelizzo (2018) can be computed with the following formula:

$$\text{Fluidity} = \text{Frequency} * \text{Scope} * \text{Variety}$$

Where frequency is computed as the number of party system changes divided by the number of elections; the scope measures how different are the two most different party system types emerging in a country's electoral history, whereas the variety reflects the number of party system types that can

be detected in a country's electoral history (Nwokora and Pelizzo, 2018). For example, if there are 2 party system changes in 5 consecutive elections, from two party to polarized pluralism, the index of fluidity takes the following value:

$$\text{Fluidity} = .4 * 1 * 3 = 1.2$$

By computing the index of fluidity for the seven Pacific Island states mentioned above we find that fluidity, after the most recent elections, varies from a minimum of 0 (zero) in Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu and Vanuatu to a maximum of 3.6 recorded in Samoa. Overall, the average fluidity score in the South Pacific region is .68. Considering that the three countries in which we failed to detect any fluidity had a hyper-fragmented or, to use Sartori's terminology, atomized party system, it is possible to immediately appreciate the

differences between South Pacific party systems and party systems in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Sub-Saharan Africa party systems are characterized by a relatively low level of fragmentation but by high levels of fluidity, while the opposite is true in the case of South Pacific Island states. In fact, by analyzing the revised dataset compiled by Nwokora and Pelizzo (2018), one finds that the party systems in Sub-Saharan Africa have less fragmentation (Effective Number of Parties, ENP = 2.8) than South Pacific party systems, while they are characterized by a much higher level of fluidity (2.88).

A second difference between the party system in the South Pacific region and in Sub-Saharan Africa pertains to the relationship between fluidity and fragmentation of the party systems. In the South Pacific region, as visual inspection of figure 1 reveals, there is a strong and negative relationship between the fragmentation of the party system and the fluidity of the party system. This means that more fragmented, atomized, party systems display a much higher level of stability than less fragmented party systems. The correlation analysis reveals that there is a negative, strong and statistically significant relationship between the fragmentation of the party systems and their fluidity ($r = -.559$; $sig. = .038$).

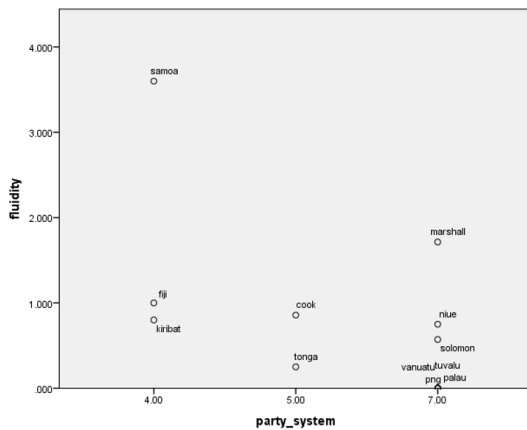


Fig. 1: Fragmentation and Fluidity in South Pacific Party Systems

When I perform the same analyses for the party systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, I find instead that there is a positive, strong and statistically significant relationship between the fragmentation of the party systems and their fluidity ($r = .344$; $sig. = .000$)

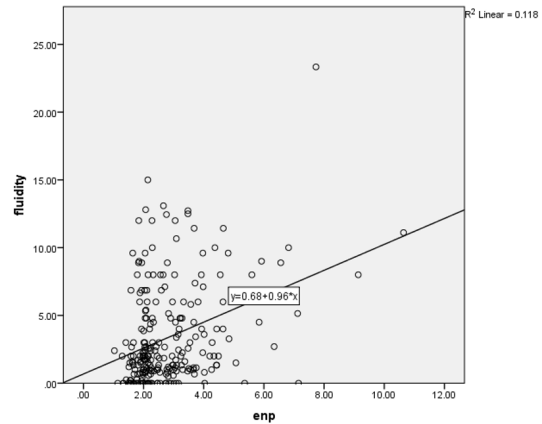


Fig. 2: Fragmentation and Fluidity in Sub-Saharan Africa

This brief overview of the party systems in the South Pacific suggests several conclusions. The first of which is that high levels of party system fragmentation, which are a defining feature of what Sartori (1976) described/categorized as atomization, are rather common in the region. Sixty-two of the party systems, that emerged from the 90 elections previously discussed, were atomized. In other words, 68.8 per cent of the time elections in the South Pacific resulted in an atomized party system (Pelizzo, 2023). Second, that the party systems in the South Pacific region are very stable – with the exception of Samoa- and that the atomized party systems in the region (Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands from 2006 onward) are the most stable/least changeable party systems in the region. Finally, the data presented here revealed that seven of the party system changes recorded in the region went hand in hand with an increase of the fragmentation of the party system (Cook islands, 2018; Fiji, 2001; Marshall, 2012; Niue, 2002; Samoa, 2021; Solomon Islands, 2006; Tonga, 2008), while in the remaining cases party system changes went along with a reduction of the relevant number of parties and the emergence/establishment of either a two party, moderate pluralist or a predominant system (however short-lived).

Do party systems in the South Pacific resemble African party systems? Did the changes in the South Pacific patterns of inter-party competition made

them resemble the pattern of inter-party competition in the African continent? In other words, can the party system changes, discussed in the previous section, be regarded as symptomatic of an alleged Africanization of South Pacific party systems? Before formulating an answer, it is necessary to review some data.

The analyses of the data compiled by Pelizzo and Nwokora (2016) for party systems in Sub-Saharan Africa reveal that only in 4.5 per cent of the cases (18 out of 396) the party systems in Sub-Saharan Africa were atomized—a value which is considerably lower than what we reported for the South Pacific Region.

The second difference between the party systems in the South Pacific and those in Sub-Saharan Africa is represented by the fact that while South Pacific party systems are remarkably stable, as evidenced by the fact that their fluidity score is often below 1, African party systems are (often) characterized by extremely high levels of fluidity. The score for Cape Verde, the Republic of Congo, Madagascar and Uganda was 6; 6.67 for Malawi, 6.85 for Chad, 6.86 for Burkina Faso, 7.11 for Guinea, 8 for Sao Tome and Principe, 8.88 for Mali, 9.60 for Burundi, 12 for Equatorial Guinea and Mauritania, 12.8 for Sierra Leone, 15 for the Central African Republic and 20 for Sudan. The third difference between Africa and the South Pacific region concerns the relationship between the fluidity of party systems and good governance measured on the basis of the Worldwide Governance Indicators. Pelizzo (2020: 276) reported that in the African continent rising levels of party system fluidity were negatively, and (statistically) significantly associated with each of the governance sub-dimensions of governance. Greater fluidity went hand in hand with lower government effectiveness, less political stability, lower levels of rule of law, lower regulatory quality, and lesser ability to control corruption. Since fluidity was stable, at zero, for both Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, variation in the level of governance was in no way related to (the non existing) changes in the levels of party system fluidity.

When I correlate the index of fluidity for the 14 Pacific Island states with the fragmentation of the party system and with the governance indicators and, I find that neither one of them is significantly related to the political stability and absence of violence included

in the Worldwide Governance Indicators. In fact, the correlation between political stability and fluidity yields a positive but insignificant coefficient ($r = .169$, sig. = .564) while the correlation between political stability and the fragmentation of the party system yields a negative and (statistically) insignificant coefficient ($r = -.171$, sig. = .560).

This means that while in the South Pacific changes in the level of good governance were unrelated to the stability of the party system, in Africa fluidity and bad governance go together: as Pelizzo and Nwokora (2018:519) and more recently Pelizzo (2020: 276) showed when fluidity rises, political stability declines and conversely when fluidity declines, political stability increases. This finding is of particular importance especially if one considers that the quality of government, or good governance, is much higher in the Pacific region than it is in Sub-Saharan Africa. When Pelizzo (2020:274) explored the relationship between good governance and party system change in Sub-Saharan Africa, he reported that, on average, the region was characterized by high levels of political stability and violence—as evidenced by the fact that the average score for Political Stability and Absence of Violence, one of the indicators of governance included in WGI, was $-.44$ (on a scale that ranges from -2.5 to a maximum of 2.5). By contrast, in the Pacific Island states the average score for Political Stability and Absence of Violence is $.947$. But, to reiterate what I think it is an interesting point, in Sub-Saharan Africa if there is more party system change, or more fluidity, there is more instability, whereas in the Pacific Island states fluctuations in the level of party system fluidity have no impact on the political stability of the countries in the region.

The difference between Sub-Saharan Africa and the South Pacific, in terms of party system fluidity, is not simply a difference in degree, it is actually a difference in kind. Africa experiences higher levels of fluidity than the South Pacific region and this fluidity deteriorates governance.

Conclusions

If one takes the notion of 'Africanization' simply to denote a growing similarity between a continent or a region and Africa, can one actually detect such a similarity between the South Pacific and the African party systems?

If the question asks whether South Pacific party systems lack structuring just like their African counterparts, the answer is that party systems in both regions lack structuring but that the kind of structuring that they lack is not the same in both regions.

African party systems are generally properly formed, atomization is very uncommon, but fluidity is very high. By contrast, South Pacific party systems are not always properly formed, atomization is fairly common, but the patterns of inter-party competition are remarkably stable.

In other words, a comparative analysis of the African and South Pacific party systems does not provide much support to Reilly's claim about the Africanization of the South Pacific and, for that matter, it does not provide much support, conversely, for advancing some claims about the Pacification of the African party systems.

The South Pacific party systems are different from their African counterparts. But in spite of the differences that we have attempted to highlight in

this note, the two regions have however something in common. The lack of structuring that one can detect in the South Pacific stems from the same root cause from which the lack of structuring that one can detect in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is after all the absence of mass parties in both regions that prevents the patterns of inter-party competition from achieving some kind of stability (in Africa) and prevents political parties from aggregating voter preferences (in the South Pacific).

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Conflict of Interest

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Data Availability

The data used in this paper can be made available by the author.

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