

« Time and Power in Western Melanesia »

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Depiction of western Melanesia as an 'arc of instability' draws on a post-independence experience of parliamentary convulsions, constitutional crises and broader social upheavals. In the contest for political office, fluidity of electoral allegiances, splintering of political parties and instability during Prime Ministerial elections have encouraged models of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu as forms of 'disorderly democracy' or 'unbounded politics'. Such characterizations have informed efforts to 'stabilise' political orders through party-strengthening legislation as well as restrictions on votes of no confidence. In this paper, I investigate the data underpinning such assessments covering five 'stylized facts' regarding electoral politics, composition of legislatures and triggers of government change, and I explore potential demographic, cultural, institutional and political economy explanations. The paper argues that the emphasis on a distinctive Melanesian propensity for 'disorder' misses critical regularities and changes in Melanesian politics and neglects to account for commonalities with diverse polities in other parts of the world. Instead, the paper offers an alternative model based on a post-colonial tension between elite consolidation and rebellion and on the barriers to centralizing power in highly heterogeneous countries.