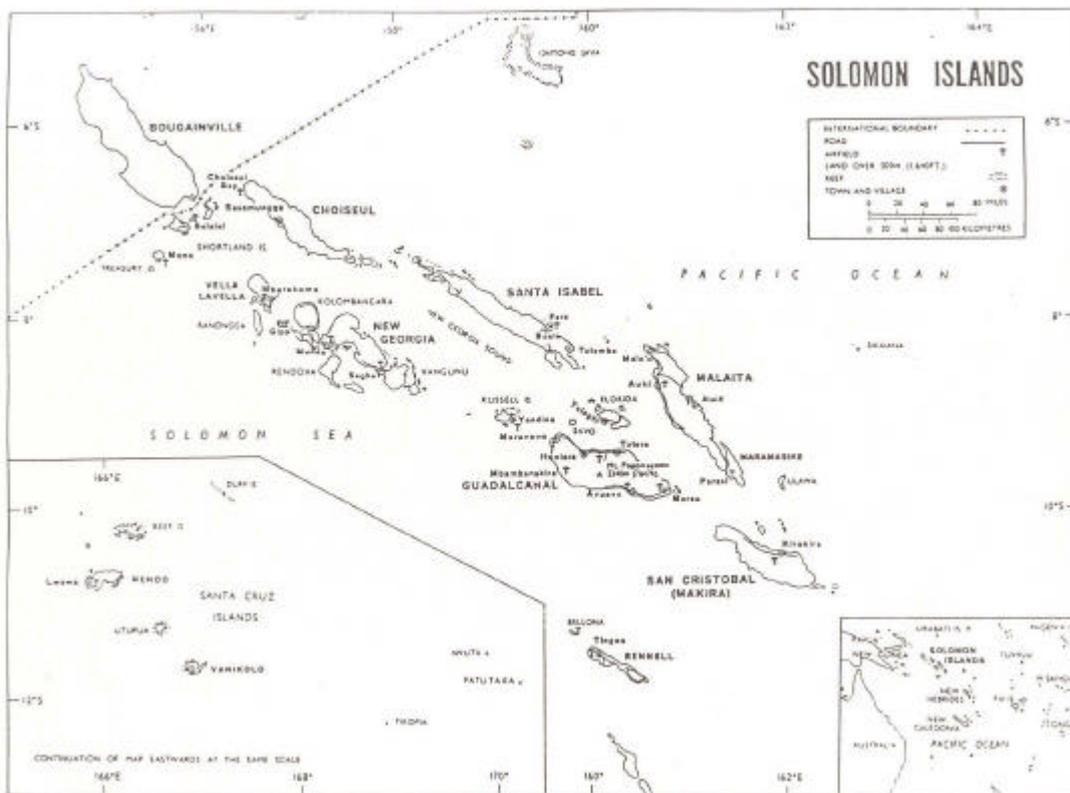


*Helpem Fren:*  
**The Solomon Islands and RAMSI, 2003-2006**

**National President's Forum  
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Three years ago, on 17 July 2003 the Solomon Islands Parliament gave unanimous support for legislation to authorize and protect the presence of a Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) under the auspices of the October 2000 Biketawa Declaration of the Pacific Islands Forum and loosely supported by the United Nations.<sup>1</sup> The situation was desperate. Rival militia groups from Malaita and Guadalcanal Provinces had been sparring with each other since 1998, causing severe problems on the two islands and particularly in the capital city, Honiara. Although the disturbance did not affect the rural majority, Honiara was tense, and law and order was out of control. A coup in June 2000 had removed the legitimate Prime Minister, Bartholomew Ulufa'alu, and his replacements, first Manasseh Sogavare in 2000 and 2001, followed by Sir Alan Kemakeza, were unable to control the situation. The export economy was in free fall and outside intervention was sought by all sides.<sup>2</sup>

The decision to send a regional mission, rather than to act through a more international agency, was appropriate. It enabled a quick response with the key Special Coordinator position able to liaise between the Participating Police Force (PPF) commander, the military commander and civil development components. The initial contingent of the Regional Assistance Mission that arrived in Honiara in late July 2003, a combination of around 2,000 armed services personnel, police, development advisors and public servants, the majority from Australia along with smaller representation from other Pacific Islands Forum countries. They arrived with little more than a blueprint on how to handle the chaotic situation: to restore law and order and to assist the proper functioning of the state apparatus. The vagueness in the initial brief remains central to ongoing problems; and RAMSI was late arriving. One could argue that the mission was three or four years late, given the previous pleas from Prime Ministers Ulufa'alu and Sogavare for intervention.<sup>3</sup> Economic and political problems had compounded during the 1990s. This mismanagement, along with the ethnic tensions that overflowed in 1998 and the coup in June 2000, meant that the subsequent ramshackle Governments of Sogavare and Kemakeza could do little to govern the nation.

Although the Assistance Mission is sponsored by all Pacific Islands Forum nations, Australian and New Zealand personnel dominate and run the long-term agenda. Fiji is the next most important participant, mainly through providing police, and all other contributions are fairly tokenistic.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of its Forum origins, RAMSI is open to accusations of neo-colonialism. RAMSI is a unique assistance package never intended to control the Solomon Islands Government. Two similes occur to me in relation to this unusual situation. Solomon Islands were a British Protectorate from 1893 until 1978. RAMSI's position is not unlike that of a European colonial power dealing with an almost ex-colony during self-government years in the lead-up to independence, or perhaps with an ex-colony during its first decade as an independent nation. RAMSI can offer guidance and assistance but has no ultimate legal power. Yet there is also an element of threat: the situation also has similarities to Hong Kong after the takeover by the Chinese Government. Hong Kong remains autonomous, except when its plans contradict those of the mainland Government which controls its existence. In practice, although RAMSI keeps a low profile, the Mission does have significant leverage to direct the policy of the elected Solomon Islands Government. Currently RAMSI includes around 250-300 PPF officers, a small military contingent and 120 civilians. Financial limits constrain the Mission. Australia has been supporting RAMSI at around A\$200 million a year, and has promised to continue this level of funding until 2009. New Zealand provides around NZ\$16 million per year. Although this funding is substantial, RAMSI has limited capacity to tackle large national projects. However, the question that arises here is are the aid funds emanating from RAMSI-related sources and other international aid monies being properly coordinated and used in the best way to develop the Solomon Islands for the benefit of the bulk of the people?<sup>5</sup>

**Australian Government Planned Expenditure on the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, 2005-2009**

**Expense (\$m)**

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**2005-06 2006-07 2007-08 2008-09**

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**Expense (\$m)**

|   | 2005-06      | 2006-07      | 2007-08      | 2008-09      |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Australian Federal Police                       | 129.7        | 124.6        | 120.3        | 119.7        |
| Australian Agency for International Development | 72.2         | 73.8         | 69.8         | 66.4         |
| Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade         | 3.8          | 3.9          | 4.0          | 3.4          |
| Attorney-General's Department                   | 1.4          | 1.3          | 1.2          | 1.3          |
| <b>Total</b>                                    | <b>207.1</b> | <b>203.6</b> | <b>195.3</b> | <b>190.8</b> |
| Related capital (\$m)                           |              |              |              |              |
| Australian Federal Police                       | 15.6         | 9.5          | 8.4          | 10.2         |

Source: Australian Government Budget 2005-06, Budget Paper No. 2 [<http://www.budget.gov.au/2005-06/bp2/html/expense-13.htm>, accessed 28 June 2006]

Organising the surrender of firearms was relatively easy, given the show of military strength. Within weeks almost 2,500 weapons, including some high-powered military weapons, and 300,000 rounds of ammunition had been handed in. Most of these were collected around Honiara and on Malaita, although 600 came from Gizo in Western Province.<sup>6</sup> By late in 2003, 3,700 weapons had been destroyed, their remnants now interned in a grassed mound on the ocean side of Rove police headquarters, a visible memorial to the years of senseless and destructive violence. At least 100 to 150 high-powered weapons are still unaccounted for. Although the initial RAMSI activities were accomplished without loss of life, two RAMSI personnel have since died: an Australian police officer was killed by a sniper in Honiara in December 2004 and another died through misadventure in March 2005. Others were injured in the April 2006 riots in Honiara, but the mere fact that no illegal weapons emerged during the riots indicates that disarmament has been reasonably successful, although there are rumoured to be guns buried close to Honiara and there are clearly illegal guns still on Malaita.<sup>7</sup>

More than half of the troops were withdrawn by the end of 2003 and most others left in early 2004, leaving the police, a few dozen armed forces personnel, and public servants in 'line' positions. The Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the Guadalcanal Liberation Front that were the focus of discontented ethnic groups during the 'crisis years' no longer exist, although in mid 2005 there were stirrings in north Malaita from a group calling itself the Malaita Separatist Movement. Right from the outset, RAMSI methodically pursued the main corrupt and criminal figures. One of the first areas strengthened was the justice system, with improved court facilities and imported magistrates and lawyers in the Public Prosecutor's and Public Solicitor's offices. By November 2003, over eighty Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP) officers had been charged, including two Deputy Police Commissioners, and the former commander of the Police Field Force. Several politicians from the 'crisis years', including members of the Kemakeza Cabinet, have also been charged with corruption. Members of the Supreme Council of the MEF are now in prison or have faced charges, and the main Guale (Guadalcanal) renegades are in prison. Other investigations and trials continue. Nevertheless, many Solomon Islanders are disappointed that so few senior corrupt politicians, police and public servants have been detained. Collecting solid evidence

and gaining convictions is a slow and exacting task, and three years on RAMSI must be concerned by the diminishing rate of returns.

When Prime Minister Kemakeza asked Australia to intervene, he knew that he would be inviting close scrutiny of his own actions, which could still see him charged in the courts. Propped up by RAMSI, Kemakeza survived as Prime Minister until the national elections in April 2006. All members of his and previous Cabinets have been closely scrutinized by RAMSI, which undoubtedly has enough evidence to initiate further prosecutions. Phase one of the intervention restored law and order, much to the relief of all Solomon Islanders. Phase two restored regularity to the operation of the public service. To give Sir Alan his due, he invited RAMSI in, and accepted senior public servants from Australia and New Zealand as 'line' appointments in Treasury, Finance and Health, where they regularized the administration. Soon after RAMSI arrived, Kemakeza removed eight departmental heads and swapped some key portfolios, in an attempt to improve the efficiency of his Government. RAMSI officials quickly helped establish a workable budget, began to manage the national debt, resumed revenue collection, removed 'ghosts' from the payroll, and gave public servants confidence that they would be paid on time. The second phase included large-scale institutional reform, first to the RSIP. About one-quarter of the force was removed, including 400 officers, the whole paramilitary division and all the Special Constables. RAMSI officers began working alongside local police. The problem with this clean sweep was that too many senior officers were removed at one time, which weakened the knowledge and authority base of the RSIP; and a ludicrous situation remains where many of the officers never received their severance money and some are still living in police accommodation.

RAMSI's major task is planning for large-scale economic reform, and as their own publicity announces, *helpem fren*: "helping the government and the people to help themselves".<sup>8</sup> Phase three concentrates on sustainable long-term development and strengthening earlier infrastructure reforms. It is here that one central weakness in RAMSI plans is emerging, which underlines the Mission's uneasy relationship with the Solomon Islands Government. RAMSI is now out of step with the new Sogavare Government.

Although Manasseh Damukana Sogavare is Solomon Islands' twelfth Prime Minister, he is only the sixth individual to hold the position. He was born on 17 January 1955. A Seventh Day Adventist from eastern Choiseul, he left High School in 1974 to become a clerk in the Honiara Consumers Cooperative shop, but soon moved on to another clerical position, in the Inland Revenue Division of the Ministry of Finance. He rose through the ranks until he became the Commissioner for Inland Revenue in 1991 and Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Finance in 1993. Sidelined by the Mamaloni Government in 1994 when he disagreed with their shoddy practices, he resigned and went to study accounting and economics at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, from which he graduated in 1997. His parliamentary career began when he won a Choiseul seat in the 1997 elections and became Minister for Finance in the Ulufa'alu government. He was sacked in 1999 and became Leader of the Opposition. Sogavare then completed a flexible delivery Masters degree in Management Studies from Waikato University. When Sogavare took over from Ulufa'alu in late June 2000, many Solomon Islanders had hopes of a new beginning. Unfortunately, the forces stacked up against the first Sogavare Government were even greater than those which undid the reformist Hilly (1993-94) and Ulufa'alu (1997-2000) Governments, and his Government accentuated some of the worst elements of

past maladministration. Sogavare lost his prime ministership in a general election in December 2001 and became Leader of the Opposition.

The second Sogavare Government is signaling the need to redefine RAMSI's priorities. RAMSI has always argued that its task was to stabilize the government apparatus, not to become directly involved in rural development and land reform. But this was always the crucial missing ingredient and RAMSI should have worked harder on this aspect over the last three years. RAMSI priorities need to be moved away from the concentration on justice and towards aiding rural development and related land tenure reforms. RAMSI also performs poorly at a social and cultural level, of which more later. And RAMSI mishandled the recent riots in Honiara, which calls into question the relationship of the foreign and the local police and the extent to which RAMSI has been able to establish intelligence gathering in the islands. Indications are that, despite RAMSI officials' valiant efforts to put on a brave face, they must be worried about their ability to 'read' Solomon Islanders and to double guess the complex political machinations in the Happy Isles.

Phase four will be the withdrawal of RAMSI. Exactly how long RAMSI will remain is unclear: initial estimates were ten years. Because of continuing deep-seated problems it is clear that it would be counter-productive to withdraw too quickly. However, this will depend on several factors: how RAMSI is perceived by the people of the Solomon Islands; the wishes of the new Sogavare Government; and future international calls on Australia and New Zealand's financial, humanitarian and security commitments. In the lead up to the April 2006 elections, Manasseh Sogavare made clear his discontent with the open-ended presence of RAMSI and signaled that he wanted to review their operation. The only substantial external review so far was by an eminent persons group sent by the Pacific Islands Forum in mid 2005, many of the recommendations of which are echoed in the policies of the new Sogavare Government.<sup>9</sup>

### **Reforming the Parliament and Public Service**

When the Mission arrived three years ago RAMSI had no model to follow other than UN peace-keeping missions, which are often more military than civilian. RAMSI's task has been difficult, but it seems clear that not enough attention has been paid to guiding economic development, particularly in rural areas. Solomon Islanders' speakers at the April 2005 Conference of the University of Queensland's Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies critiqued RAMSI and made suggestions for the future of their nation.<sup>10</sup> It was clear from their analysis that RAMSI initiatives do not always address Solomons' needs and reality. Restoring law and order was absolutely necessary and RAMSI's success was lauded by everyone. However, the rest of the operation is open to criticism and advice.

At a human level, some of the early RAMSI military personnel transgressed local cultural codes by involvement with prostitutes and local women. While this problem has been rectified, RAMSI personnel are also criticized by Solomon Islanders for their lack of involvement at a social level. RAMSI staff has become a substantial new elite in a way that has never existed so obviously in the Solomon Islands before. Earning substantial salaries and allowances, climbing further up the promotion ladder at home, serving short secondments, and getting in a spot of diving and adventure tourism are high on most RAMSI personnel's agendas. RAMSI staff is extremely well paid for their presence: a few hundred Australian and New Zealand mortgages will be liquidated and suburban homes will get long awaited extensions, courtesy of gratuities earned in Solomon Islands. While not begrudging them their

danger and inconvenience money, which is necessary to get police and public servants to serve in what they see as a hardship post, RAMSI staff socialize separately from Solomon Islanders, and their new found wealth raised their recreational desires to levels far above Solomon Islanders.

There is no doubt that the old style expatriates in the public service were more sensitive to Solomon Islanders' cultural patterns. The RAMSI people mostly speak poor or very little *pijin* English— even the PPF, who often can not even comprehend what is going on around them, which is a serious concern—and they live an expatriate lifestyle, only interacting with locals at work. While the obvious rejoinder is that the more the interaction the more there will be infringements of local cultural codes, the risk is a necessary occupational hazard. Friendship and cultural understanding are important to establish and at the moment, three years on, this must be seen as a major failing. RAMSI planners should rethink this cultural level: cultural orientations need to be more extensive, village and urban family stays should be included, and gratuities should be dependant on learning *pijin* English and staying out to trouble. Although RAMSI has begun to pay more attention to basic linguistic skills, this emphasis should have been there from the beginning. The old British Protectorate government officers, and their Australian equivalents in Papua New Guinea, had to learn languages to gain permanency and promotion. While RAMSI staff is more transitory (a problem in its self) surely it is not too much to ask that cultural and linguistic strings be attached to receiving their lucrative tax free bonuses?

Patience and good manners are an enduring virtue in the Pacific, and RAMSI officials are sometimes a little too brusque in their demands. RAMSI PPF officers operate by international standards, but they do not always observe or understand Solomon Islands ways. A good example was the arrest and hand-cuffing of MP Charles Dausabea outside Parliament after the riots. The police had good reason to charge him, but humiliation of a public figure like Dausabea is a bad error. Solomon Islanders were aghast and told me that never in their lives had they seen a national leader treated in that way. Hand-cuffs are seldom used by the RSIP under any circumstances. PPF officers would no doubt defend the procedure they used to arrest Dausabea, but the operation shows the cultural gap that exists, even in policing techniques. RAMSI is also accused of insensitivity in placing foreign advisors into 'line' positions when there are Solomon Islanders qualified to hold these positions. The situation when RAMSI arrived was dire and the Mission made what were seen as necessary staffing decisions to bolster the Government, and would have been negligent if it had not. Three years on it is time to ask why these 'line' positions are still necessary and what has been done to train Solomon Islanders to regain control?

Generally, many Solomon Islanders feel uneasy about the Westminster system that they inherited from the British, and by what they see as the imposition of First World values on their Pacific state. They want radical change, but this is not what RAMSI was asked to undertake. Although there is a need to rethink how the Solomon Islands operates as a modern state, RAMSI's main task is ensuring the smooth operation of the existing system, not introducing a new one. Solomon Islanders generally have high expectations of RAMSI—far too high given that the assistance mission is not the Government and does not have bottomless pockets. RAMSI has the unenviable task of guiding a suitable – but also limited – reform process for a nation of half a million people spread through nine island provinces and 190 islands, by persuading an inefficient, poorly trained and often corrupt government and public service that reforms are necessary. Although history will probably assess RAMSI as having done a good job in difficult circumstances, this does not mean the

Mission should not listen to criticism, admit errors and change to fit new developments.

New parliamentarians have received training on the nature of their jobs, as have more than 1,000 public servants who have passed through the Institute of Public Administration and Management. The Ombudsman's position has been strengthened, as have public service accountability and grievance procedures. However, making the public service efficient requires more than new procedures. Retraining and putting the best people in positions of responsibility is also a necessary reform. There is also a distinct difference between what Australian and New Zealand public servants regard as corrupt practices and how Solomon Islanders judge the same practices. *Wantokism* (giving preference to kin) and *kastom* (customary way of behaving) are basic to local culture and have to be accommodated. These cultural concepts can be used to advantage or ameliorated, but not ignored. Although large-scale corruption must be condemned, an acceptable amount of 'grease' makes the Solomons' wheels go around. This is not necessarily financial, but as anyone who has dealt with public and commercial organizations in the Pacific well knows, how you make your approach and whom you know makes an enormous difference to the success of any quest. Access to any leader or person in authority is relatively easy, even for the lowliest citizen. Extended family connections are important and one would be foolish to ignore them. I have heard RAMSI officials argue that the next stage of 'grease' is corruption and that any accommodation to local culture is a mistake, but it is unlikely that a totally rules-based administrative system can be implemented. The reality is, as in much of the developing world, that what to Australians or New Zealanders would be low level corruption — presented in the Solomon Islands as *kastom* — will continue. Three years on, despite RAMSI's attempts to improve administration, by Australian standards the public service and health system is still remarkably inefficient.

Leading Solomon Islanders have suggested that their Government needs to rethink its relationships with its citizens and between the central administration and the provinces.<sup>11</sup> The late colonial indigenous elite became the modern elite and have too many vested interests to encourage any radical departure from the old pattern. Corruption may now be less blatant but it still exists. The larger overseas aid donors are nations with unadventurous agendas that follow the patterns of the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. RAMSI, supposedly a Pacific regional intervention mission, is actually driven by an Australian, and to a lesser extent, a New Zealand agenda. The riots following the 2006 national elections demonstrated the despair felt by many citizens when the 'old guard' was returned, and former Deputy Prime Minister Snyder Rini was elected Prime Minister. The hopes that a new style of Solomon Islands Government—one that listens to its people, involves all sectors of the community, and charts a new course—were dashed. The conflict resolution, human security and development initiatives that have emerged so far are not sufficiently radical to redress the mismatch between the Solomon Islands Government and the aspirations and needs of its citizens.

The Solomon Islands, ostensibly in a post conflict phase and buoyed by international support, could still return to violence if underlying problems are not addressed. The Government failed its people in 1998-2003 and is now undergoing a process of resuscitation and reconstruction. Elsinä Wainwright, the main author of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute paper that provided the justification and a partial blueprint for what became the RAMSI operation,<sup>12</sup> assessed RAMSI's progress in 2005 and reported fairly negatively. Wainwright correctly noted national identity-

building must remain outside the brief of any state-building operation, but other issues must be made more central to reform:

In Solomon Islands, issues of land tenure, reconciliation, and centralization versus decentralization all need to be addressed. But RAMSI has decided that these issues are outside its remit: they are for Solomon Islanders to decide upon. What RAMSI seeks to do is give the community a secure environment in which to debate important national issues, and to provide Solomon Islands with effective state machinery as these issues are discussed.

And state building operations can only do so much without local momentum for reform. For lasting change to take root there is a need to work with local reformers to build that momentum. RAMSI makes much of the fact that it operates in partnership with the Solomon Islands Government and people, and that continued local political will is necessary for the reform to continue.<sup>13</sup>

While still not well enough appreciated by RAMSI and other aid donors, four conclusions are clear. First, the village is the key to understanding development in the Solomon Islands. Second, reconciliation between the main protagonists from the 'crisis years' must be achieved. Third, Civil Society (including the churches) is an important part of the nation, working along side the formal government structure. Fourth, now is the time radically to rethink the role of central and provincial governments and their relationship with ordinary citizens and their land.

### **The April 2006 National Elections and the Riots**

RAMSI had become a little complacent. Its own publicity machine lauds its activities as a model to be followed in other Pacific trouble spots, or at least it did up until the riots. The Kemakeza Government was compliant and reasonably obedient to RAMSI suggestions, which made life easy. Then along came a major disruption and a less supplicant Sogavare Government with a new agenda. The national election went reasonably smoothly and the reports from international observers were favourable. As usual, after the election and before the Parliament sat on 18 April to choose a Prime Minister, there was jockeying for position between the major political parties and the candidates for the top job. The front-runners were Job Dudley Tausinga, the only parliamentarian to be re-elected unopposed (because of his connection to the Christian Fellowship Church), Snyder Rini, Deputy Prime Minister in the previous Kemakeza Government, and Manasseh Sogavare, elected Prime Minister from 2000-2001 in dubious circumstances after a coup. Luring politicians from one group to another reputedly costs between S\$25,000 and S\$60,000 a head, the difference depending on their status and connections. There were three political 'camps': at Honiara Hotel, at Pacific Casino Hotel, and at Iron Bottom Sound Hotel, with movement in between. In the end it was down to Sogavare and Rini, and it was Rini who, just after midday, emerged victorious at the front entrance of Parliament. Three hours later, and for the next twenty-four hours, Honiara was in crisis.

This is not the place for a lengthy analysis of the causes of and the events that occurred during the riots.<sup>14</sup> They began at Parliament when the crowd awaiting the announcement of the name of the new Prime Minister was poorly handled and dispersed with tear gas. The riots spread to the centre of the downtown Point Cruz area, where tear gas was used again, and then the rioters marched on Chinatown, half

an hour's walk away. The next day they destroyed a major hotel and casino on the beachfront at Kukum. Rioters were quite targeted in what they looted and destroyed.

About fifty RAMSI and emergency services personnel were injured during the riots, but there were no deaths, which is remarkable considering the scale of the destruction. Australia and New Zealand flew in extra troops and police. Solomon Islanders recount the puzzled looks on the faces of the troops, who arrived ready for action, Timor Est-style, but found themselves welcomed by smiling locals, who just a day before had trashed, burnt and looted. Gradually the situation came back under control, and rain helped put the fires out. Over two days, one-quarter of the commercial centre of Honiara had been destroyed and a foreign racial group targeted.

Several points need to be made. First, there is long term resentment against the Asian community in Solomon Islands: against the Chinese who control the retail trade, and against other Asian groups—Taiwanese, Japanese, Koreans, Malaysians and Filipinos—who have corruptly manipulated the fishing and logging industries. The Chinese divide into two groups: the 'old' Chinese—originally from mainland China and Hong Kong—who arrived between the 1910s and 1950s; and the 'new' Chinese who arrived after the 1980s, from mainland China and Southeast Asia. The main antagonism is against the 'new' Chinese, but a much larger resentment also exists against all Chinese and Asian business interests. Solomon Islanders feel powerless against corruption in the fishing and logging industries, and the 'dollar diplomacy' of the Taiwanese Government, all of which influence politics. The small-scale Chinese retail traders who bore the brunt of the anger in the riots are at the poorer but most visible end of this business web.

Second, there is not much doubt that there was an attempt at prior organisation of the riots. There seems to have been a core of about thirty to forty agitators who led the crowd, and identifiable individuals were also responsible for setting most buildings alight. There was no particular dominant ethnic element, except that Malaitans are proportionally the largest group in Honiara. If anything, the looters were a cross-section of the urban poor from all provinces. There was prior knowledge of the riot plans amongst some Solomon Islanders, but the agitators might not have achieved much if Rini had not been elected and if RAMSI police had acted more competently.

The third point concerns RAMSI's PPF. What is their relationship with the local police with whom they have been working for three years? What is the level of RAMSI PPF intelligence gathering? One telling piece of information concerns Edmond Sae, the most wanted man still at large in Solomon Islands, suspected of assassinating Sir Frederick Soaki at Auki in 2003.<sup>15</sup> Yet any Malaitan can tell you that he is often to be seen at Auki market: RSIP officers greet him, Fijian PPF officers greet him, and white PPF officers walk right past, not knowing he is there. Sae was also in the crowd up at the Governor-General's residence on the second day of the riot. His ability to move around in public reveals the disunity between the different groups of police.

Why weren't extra police or troops flown in by Wednesday morning, which would have saved the Pacific Casino Hotel complex? After the 'crisis' abated in 2003 RAMSI promised that reinforcements could be flown in from Townsville very quickly. Australian Army sources suggest that three days are needed to move a large force; the sixteen to twenty hour gap between the decision to send troops and the troops reaching Honiara is fast by their standards.<sup>16</sup> But it was not fast enough. Why was there no rapid deployment force available? Rumour is that there was a change in army command not long before the riot, which led to inefficiency. Could extra police

have been sent more quickly than troops? RAMSI seems not to have prepared for the possibility of violence. More forces could have been brought in before the announcement of the election of Snyder Rini, and should also have arrived more quickly once the riots began.

Should the police have been expecting trouble? The answer is yes. The RAMSI-sponsored Police Commissioner says that his forces had no prior intelligence of the riots, and were not prepared for the level of violence that occurred.<sup>17</sup> This fails to recognise that it was the most important political announcement since Sogavare became Prime Minister in June 2000 after the coup. Even a football game at the sports ground near Chinatown can lead to riots in Chinatown, and the political climate in Honiara was tinder-dry on 18<sup>th</sup> April, which was reason for concern. Local police were certainly expecting trouble. They were puzzled that no prior strategic plan had been issued to deal with the possible trouble, and decided not to wait for instructions. Even before events bubbled over at Parliament they went door to door down Mendana Avenue, telling shop-keepers to pull down their shutters.

There have been serious riots in Honiara before: in 1989, 1993, 1996 and 1998. The largest was in October 1989 when 3,000 Malaitans, mainly youths and young men insulted by scurrilous words written on the wall of Central Market, went in pursuit of Rennell and Bellona people and attempted to march on White River settlement west of Honiara. Over several days, shops were ransacked and people were injured. The police managed to diffuse the situation, forty-five arrests were made, the national Government paid Malaita Province S\$200,000 in compensation and one prominent Malaitan ex-cabinet minister went to jail for two months for his botched attempts at achieving conciliation.<sup>18</sup> There was also a major riot at Lawson Tama oval in 1998, when Police Commissioner Frank Short ordered his riot police not to use tear gas, even when they were being pelted with rocks. As Short commented, in relation to the 2006 riots: "I knew that an overreaction could have provoked large scale violence."<sup>19</sup> He was supported by a former Assistant Commissioner Mike Wheatley:

Even if there was a lack of intelligence available, [and] something did really happen as a surprise, there are well established procedures. [If] you go back through history of the police force, there are well established procedures to call out, to muster people, to call out including headquarters staff, and one of the first places you respond to, is Chinatown.<sup>20</sup>

The size of the April 2006 riots was hard to predict, but violence was always a possible outcome of the parliamentary decision and all Solomon Islanders knew it.

### **The Second Sogavare Government**

The future for government in the Solomon Islands is looking better than it has since 1998, but there are three major clouds on the horizon. The first is how to rid the nation of corruption. The second is how to ensure development benefits the bulk of the people in rural areas. The third is to ensure the stability of future Governments. The Hilly and Ulafa'alu reformist Governments were unable to counter the dollar power of corrupt business elements. The changed circumstances between these earlier Governments and the second Sogavare Government is the on-going presence of RAMSI, which should create the necessary stability to allow the necessary reforms to take place.

It is difficult to double-guess the future of politics in Solomon Islands. From the ‘West’ himself, Sogavare has support in Western and Choiseul Provinces. During his previous term as Prime Minister, Sogavare developed strong links to the MEF and was seen as ‘Malaita-friendly’. During the April election and the period before the parliamentary vote, Sogavare cultivated strong links with Guale politicians, finessed by the Detke family, of German and Guale origins, which has large Honiara business interests. Thus, Sogavare is able to balance the West, Malaita and Guadalcanal, which is an unusual but very necessary combination.

Foreign observers have probably made too much of some of Sogavare’s election rhetoric relating to finances and his threat to change allegiance from Taiwan to Communist China. And his Government made a poor start when two Ministers were appointed while they were arrested on charges relating to the riots. Wisely, the Governor-General refused to swear them in and alternate appointments have been made. There is every reason to suggest that the Sogavare Government will last for some time and may run its full term, although this will depend on no-confidence motions that bedevil the parliamentary process. Solomon Islands politicians gravitate towards strength, and several have already left the Opposition to join the Government side, impressed by Sogavare’s policies and his strength.

Three constitutional amendments are necessary to create confidence in the Parliament. The first is to declare vacant the seat of any parliamentarian who changes parties between national elections, ensuring that they face an immediate by-election. One of the characteristics of the political process is that ideologies are weak and that new alliances form constantly, often based on the lure of better positions or ‘invisible’ financial baits. While this could mean a more expensive electoral process in the short-term, in the long-term fewer political realignments will occur in between national elections, facilitating a more stable parliamentary process. Second, the Constitution needs amending (as Papua New Guinea has done) to stop votes of no-confidence during the first eighteen months of any Government. The aim would be to provide enough time for any new Government to implement its policies before facing a spoiling vote on the floor of the House. Third, in the entire history of the Solomon Islands national political system there have only been two women elected: Lily Ogatini in the 1960s and Hilda Kari from 1989 to 2000. Although a larger than usual number of women stood in the April 2006 elections, none were elected. A mechanism needs to be introduced to ensure that there are always women in Parliament. The 2004 Draft Federal Constitution rather vaguely suggests that within three years of the constitution coming into force a law should be passed to “ensure a fair representation of women in parliament”.<sup>21</sup> By comparison, the new constitution of Papua New Guinea’s Autonomous Region of Bougainville is much stronger and guarantees women three seats in the new parliament, calls for fair representation of women on all constitutional and other bodies, and requires the government to consult women’s organizations on all important matters, such as any future amendment to the constitution. Perhaps this is also the way forward for Solomon Islands.<sup>22</sup>

Sogavare has gained considerable credibility through two of his top appointments. His key political adviser is Malaitan Sam Alasia, a Minister for Education from the early 1990s, who was involved in the peace negotiations between the Guale and the Malaitans, and then worked for Sogavare as Special Adviser and National Policy Chief in 2000-2001. However, the wildcard, that no one could have expected, was his offer to Dr John Roughan, founder and advisor to the Solomon Islands Development Trust (a major NGO concerned with rural development) of the key position of Permanent Secretary to the Department of Prime Minister and

Cabinet. Roughan has been a fierce critic of many Governments, and publishes a weekly newspaper column. He is certainly the nation's major Civil Society critic of Government. Sogavare offered Roughan the top public service job and Roughan accepted the challenge. American born, he first came to the Solomons as a Catholic priest in 1957 and has always advocated emphasis on village level development, completing a PhD at University of Hawai'i in 1982 on this topic. At 76 years of age and with no public service experience, he is an unusual appointment. But his concentration on rural development sends the right signal and his clean, non-corrupt reputation will alter the power balance in the public service. Permanent Secretary positions were advertised and have now been filled. The process began transparently: there were eighty-three applicants; three 2006 appointments from the last Government were retained; Roughan was the only political appointment; and the other sixteen were to be chosen by a Screening Committee consisting of Frank Kabui (a recently retired Puisne Judge), the Ombudsman and the Auditor-General. However, politics quickly surfaced again when Sogavare decided to direct the appointment process.

Sogavare has a strong Ministerial team, including two former Permanent Secretaries, Toswell Kauwa and Derek Sikua, and two former Prime Ministers, Ulufa'alu and Hilly.<sup>23</sup> His Government has issued a Policy Framework Document that if implemented should go a long way to bringing about the necessary changes. Three Commissions of Inquiry are promised: a Truth & Reconciliation Commission relating to the 'crisis years'; another into the April 2006 riots; and a third into land matters on Guadalcanal. The most exciting thing about the new Sogavare Government is its emphasis on rural development, and while Roughan is at the public service helm there is a good chance that this will be more than lip-service. This emphasis will be strengthened if the new Government passes the Forrest Bill 2004, implements the 1995 Regional Forestry Code, and announces a halt to, or at least a substantial diminution of, natural forest whole log exports before this major resource is totally exhausted.<sup>24</sup> The rural emphasis is a sincere move from Sogavare, although he knows that he will face opposition from the same corrupt elements that brought down Hilly and Ulufa'alu. He remains personally obligated to many vested interests, but Roughan is not, which gives the Government the ability to implement policies that may be unpopular in some quarters. The promise of long-overdue Commissions of Inquiry is also a good sign.<sup>25</sup>

The vast majority of Solomon Islanders—eighty-seven per cent—live in rural villages. During the 'crisis years', village life continued to function and as ever their customs and traditions guided them. The 'crisis' was in the national Government and largely only in Honiara. Economic development must be decentralised into the provinces and the economic focus needs to shift to provincial towns and their rural hinterlands. Honiara must be contained (to become a Pacific Canberra-by-the-shore), and not allowed to encroach further into Guadalcanal Province. The answer is to improve provincial well-being and encourage people to stay at home and develop their nation from the 'grass-roots' up. This is the first Government to promise an emphasis on rural development that has some chance of implementation. Sogavare has called for a meeting to review the operations of the RAMSI facilitating Act. The Solomon Islands Government will use the occasion to reassert national sovereignty. RAMSI and the Australian Government should do everything possible to support Sogavare's reformist agenda.<sup>26</sup>

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## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Because Solomon Islands' recognizes Taiwan, not the mainland China, no attempt was made to get UN Security Council endorsement, which could have led to a Chinese veto. But both the Secretary-General and the Council President issued statements of support.
- <sup>2</sup> Clive Moore, *Happy Isles in Crisis: The Historical Causes for a Failing State in Solomon Islands, 1998-2004*, Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2004; Jon Fraenkel, *The Manipulation of Custom: From Uprising to Intervention in the Solomon Islands*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004.
- <sup>3</sup> Clive Moore, "The RAMSI Intervention in the Solomon Islands Crisis", *Journal of Pacific Studies*, Vol. 28, no. 1, 2005, pp. 56-77.
- <sup>4</sup> The first Special Coordinator, Nick Warner, completed his tour of duty in August 2004 and was replaced by another Australian diplomat, James Batley, a previous High Commissioner to the Solomon Islands (1997-1999), with recent experience in Bougainville and East Timor.
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- <sup>11</sup> Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, "Westminster Meets Solomons", Workshop: Solomon Islands: Where to Now?, Australian National University, 5 May 2006.
- <sup>12</sup> Elsin Wainwright, Quinton Clements, Mary-Louise O'Callaghan, Greg Urwin, John Ini Lapli, and Peter Kenilorea, *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute Policy Report, Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2003.
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- <sup>14</sup> Clive Moore, "No More Walkabout Long Chinatown: Asian Involvement in the Solomon Islands Economic and Political Processes", paper presented at the Workshop: Solomon Islands: Where to Now?, Australian National University, 5 May 2006.
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- <sup>16</sup> An official request for military reinforcements was made at 1.15 am on Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup>, but the extra forces did not arrive until late afternoon and into the evening of that day. Arthur Wate, "Police Chief Replies to Criticisms", *Solomon Star*, 19 May 2006.
- <sup>17</sup> Wate, "Police Chief Replies to Criticisms".
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