

# Solomon Islands coup sets stage for civil war

Peter Symonds  
7 June 2000

Just three weeks after failed businessman George Speight and his gunmen took the Fijian government hostage in Suva's parliament building, an armed group in the Solomon Islands known as the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF) seized that country's Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu on Monday and placed him under "protective care".

MEF spokesman Andrew Nori, a lawyer, former MP and minister, denied that the group was engaged in a coup, preferring to say the prime minister was under supervised detention in order to force him to resign. He was escorted under heavily armed guard to a meeting of the government caucus and then to a further meeting with the Governor-General on Tuesday.

Minister of State Alfred Sasako reported yesterday that Ulufa'alu had offered to resign "if that is the price for peace in the Solomon Islands." But he added, the prime minister was only prepared to do so at a meeting of parliament. According to Sasako, Ulufa'alu had reached an agreement with Nori to convene parliament on June 16 at which a new leader will be chosen.

A number of countries including Australia, the US and New Zealand have condemned the coup. According to Sasako, Nori withdrew his ultimatum for Ulufa'alu to resign by 5am today after the European Union threatened to cancel all aid to the Solomons if the country were to be ruled by unconstitutional means. The EU provides about 25 percent of the government's budget.

An Australian Defence Department spokesman indicated in the *Australian* newspaper that the Howard government had plans to evacuate hundreds of expatriates including the dispatch of Special Air Services (SAS) units to the Solomons, ostensibly to secure the country's airport.

On Monday, MEF gunmen, reportedly backed by elements of the Field Force, the country's paramilitary police, cut phone lines, set up roadblocks around the capital of Honiara, cancelled flights into the country and imposed a curfew. Banks and businesses were closed on Monday. The group also raided police armouries and patrols boats for weapons. The country has no army.

The rival IFM militia responded by occupying the Gold Ridge gold mine owned by the Australian company Delta

Gold and seizing mine vehicles, equipment and weapons. Heavy fighting between the two groups erupted yesterday near the international airport—Henderson Field—that is now under IFM control. At least four people were injured in the clash which lasted for several hours and involved around 1,000 people.

The IFM has issued a statement condemning the coup and calling for an international force to "intervene immediately by sending in armed peacekeeping troops to take control of the capital Honiara."

The bitter conflict erupted in December 1998 when the IFM was formed on the main island of Guadalcanal and began terrorising settlers from the island of Malaita. The IFM, initially called the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army, insisted that Malaitans squatting on land around Honiara be forced to leave, and that steps be taken to redress Malaitan dominance in business and the public sector. More than 50 people have been killed over the last 18 months and an estimated 20,000 Malaitans have fled from Guadalcanal.

The government imposed a state of emergency last June with sweeping powers of arrest, detention without trial and six-month imprisonment for causing disharmony, fear, annoyance or danger. Shortly after it announced the imposition of media censorship, including two-year jail sentences for publishing material deemed to cause racial or communal disharmony, or incite violence.

The Honiara Peace Accord was signed on June 29 after extensive negotiations brokered by former Fijian coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka acting on behalf of the British Commonwealth. The deal was heavily weighted towards the IFM providing for a separate Guadalcanal provincial government, rent for the land on which Honiara is situated and the exclusion of settlers from other provinces through a ban on squatting.

But the accord failed to end the fighting between the IFM and the police or attacks on Malaitans despite the dispatch of a small Commonwealth monitoring group comprised mainly of Fijian and Vanuatan police. Discontent with the government among Malaitans led to the formation of the Malaitan Eagle Force in January, apparently with the support of sections of the Malaitan-dominated police force. Nori

who emerged as the MEF spokesman accused Ulufa'alu of making too many concessions to the IFM.

A series of talks brokered by Rabuka to end clashes between the MEF and IFM collapsed in early May leading to violent attacks by both sides and renewed fighting. The coup came on the last day of a 14-day ceasefire declared by the MEF.

The government was no longer certain that it could command the loyalty of any significant section of the police force and appealed to Australia to dispatch police officers to deal with the militia and help shore up its rule. Reluctant to commit Australian police, the Howard government agreed to provide funds to double the size of the Commonwealth police monitoring group. But in the midst of the Speight coup, the Fiji police were in no position to send extra officers.

Ulufa'alu, who is rumoured to have set up his own Seagull militia, was increasingly a prime minister with no state apparatus at his command. Last month a program on Australian ABC TV revealed a desperate bid by the Solomon Islands government to secure military assistance from Cuba in return for shares in potentially lucrative mining ventures. Cuba denied that it intended to provide military help and Ulufa'alu explained that the move was aimed more at pressuring the US to twist the arm of Australia and New Zealand to step in.

The coup leaves the island of Guadalcanal divided between armed militia. The capital Honiara is under MEF control while the outlying areas are dominated by the IFM. The country's small police force appears to have completely fractured with its arms and personnel gravitating to the two militia groups.

The coups in the Solomons and Fiji underscore the economic and political fragility of all of the tiny island nation states scattered across the Pacific. The population of the Solomons, a former British colony that was granted independence in 1978, is just 455,000 making it the third largest nation after Papua New Guinea and Fiji. The population of the entire region is only six million, over half of which is in Papua New Guinea. Among the smallest is the former Australian colony of Nauru with a total area of 20 square kilometres and a population of around 8,000.

The absurd division of the islands into separate nation states is itself the legacy of colonial domination. The western islands of the Solomons, for instance, are close to the Bougainville group—part of Papua New Guinea—both geographically and culturally. The line of demarcation was the colonial border between the British Solomons and German New Guinea that later became an Australian protectorate after World War I.

For the most part these nation states were only granted

independence in the 1970s and 1980s. Their economies were always extremely limited. In the case of the Solomons, the Gold Ridge mine accounts for 30 percent of the country's GDP. Logging and plantations make up most of the remainder. The Asian financial crisis had a drastic impact on the Solomons sending the value of its exports plummeting and the GDP diving by a massive 10 percent in 1998.

Ulufa'alu, a former head of the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers, came to power in elections in August 1997. Faced with an economic crisis and growing indebtedness, the previous government led by Solomon Mamaloni was unable to pay public servants' wages, government creditors or regional governments.

Ulufa'alu set out a series of austerity measures in line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund to slash government spending through job cuts and privatisation and intensify the exploitation of the country's natural resources. He devalued the Solomon Island dollar by 20 percent in December 1997. In January this year, the government announced another 100 job cuts on top of 500 over the previous year from the public sector.

But the government's policies failed to end the economic crisis and simply compounded the country's already high levels of unemployment and poverty. About 80 percent of the population still survives mainly on subsistence agriculture and lacks adequate health and education services.

In the midst of growing social tensions, figures such as Nori and Guadalcanal premier Ezekiul Alebua have exploited disgruntlement with the government, particularly among young people, to whip up communalism by blaming other ethnic groups for the social decline. The potential for conflict is underlined by the fact that there are some 70 different language groups scattered across more than 1,000 islands in the Solomons group.

The ousting of Ulufa'alu is just the latest step in a conflict that threatens to plunge the Solomons into open civil war as each militia group makes a grab for power.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**