

Solomon Islands government fighting for survival

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In a move likely to further destabilise the Solomon Islands government, the country's High Court has given the go ahead for former prime minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu to challenge the constitutional legality of the Sogavare regime. The case is expected to commence in mid-September—only six weeks before general elections are due to be held.

The case is certain to be used to put pressure on the government during the election campaign, with Ulufa'alu arguing that he is the rightful prime minister. The current Prime Minister, Manasseh Sogavare, grabbed power following a coup by an ethnic militia, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), just over one year ago. After seizing the capital, Honiara on June 5 last year, the MEF forced Ulufa'alu to resign and Sogavare was elected at a controversial June 30 sitting of parliament. Some members of Ulufa'alu's deposed government were prevented from attending by threats to shoot down their plane.

Facing both international and domestic opposition to his rule, and with the economy near collapse, Sogavare has been engaged in a series of manoeuvres to secure the survival of his government. Last month he backed down over a constitutional amendment aimed at deferring the scheduled elections and extending the parliament's life from four years to five.

The British and Australian governments called on Sogavare to drop the legislation, refusing to resume aid to the Solomon Islands until elections were held. Premiers from each of the country's provinces and the mayor of Honiara also opposed parliament's extension. The Solomon Islands Christian Association, the Solomon Islands Development Trust, the Solomon Islands Council of Trade Unions and an umbrella group for NGOs joined the outcry. At a public meeting in Honiara, 500 people almost unanimously opposed

Sogavare's measures.

Sogavare finally withdrew the legislation at the last minute when he failed to secure the necessary two-thirds vote in parliament, even though, according to Ulufa'alu, 18 members of the opposition were offered bribes of cash, overseas trips and various government posts.

The government appeared to change tack when Development Planning Minister Michael Maina announced that elections could be held at the end of November if aid donors provided the \$US4 million needed to fund the poll. New Zealand, Australia, Taiwan and the European Union have pledged \$US1.3 million so far, but criticism has since emerged that the government is proceeding too slowly to hold the elections on time.

Ulufa'alu has announced that his party, the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change, will form an electoral alliance with the Solomon Islands Liberal Party, the National Party and former prime minister Francis Billy Hilly. This coalition is likely to be favoured by the Australian government, which praised Ulufa'alu for his fiscal austerity when he was prime minister from the end of 1997 until last year.

He has attacked Sogavare for publicly criticising the Australian government's refusal to renew aid to the Solomons. Ulufa'alu has also backed calls by an International Monetary Fund team for the government to reduce borrowings drastically and to cut its generous tax and royalty concessions to logging and other companies.

Since coming to power, Sogavare has been unable to prevent the collapse of the economy. Last month, government coffers were reduced to just a few weeks of foreign reserves before being bailed out temporarily by a \$US23 million loan from Taiwan.

Already hit hard by the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the economy was further devastated by the eruption of civil war between the MEF and its militia rivals in the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM). Minister Michael Maina has told parliament that total exports fell by more than half from \$US150 million in 1999 to \$US69 million in 2000, while the level of foreign aid dropped from \$US63 million to \$US42 million.

A recent report by the Asian Development Bank estimates that during 2000, the Solomon Islands economy contracted by 14 percent in real terms. Exports of palm oil products fell by 93 percent from 1998 to 2000, while fish exports dropped from \$US39 million in 1999 to \$US9 million in 2000. Of the workers who participate in the formal economy, 15 percent or 8,000 have been sacked or sent on unpaid leave.

Despite this catastrophe, the Australian government has refused to resume aid and is exerting its influence on other aid donors to do likewise, demanding that Sogavare drop plans to establish a defence force and return to Western-supervised fiscal austerity. The Howard government has made it plain that it is prepared to see the Solomon Islands completely ruined in order to have its way.

In a radio interview on April 11, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer declared: “There’s no point in throwing good money after bad, if there isn’t a structure in place to manage the economy.” He emphasised that Australia had “levers of influence, other than diplomacy and persuasion and inherent common sense—we do have our aid program, and the leadership role we play amongst the donor countries”.

Downer accused Solomon Islands politicians of pursuing “very short term personal interest” and issued a contemptuous warning: “Until the collapse of the economy catches up with them personally they’re not going to be as responsive and responsible as you’d hope.”

The Australian government intervened in the Solomons last year. Alarmed by the instability in the Solomons—the third political crisis in the South Pacific region, following the conflict in East Timor and the coup in Fiji—the Howard government convened talks in the north Australian city of Townsville in an attempt to forge a deal between warring ethnic militia leaders.

The conflict initially erupted in 1999, when IFM

thugs drove an estimated 20,000 settlers from the neighbouring island of Malaita out of their homes on Guadalcanal, the country’s main island. The MEF and the Malaitan-dominated paramilitary police force responded by carrying out the June 2000 coup.

The Townsville agreement provided for Australian and other regional military and police personnel to supervise a ceasefire. It also gave the militias an amnesty for their killings and fuelled ethnic divisions by advocating separate economic development on the two islands and in other provinces. No funds have been forthcoming to finance the development projects, however, and the disarmament measures have broken down.

The Sogavare government also channelled scarce funds into the pockets of former militia members by appointing up to 1,900 “special constables”. In an attempt to bolster his position, Sogavare also proposed to establish a defence force. The Australian government immediately opposed this plan, with Downer warning that a defence force could become a source of instability, alluding to the situation in Fiji.

Facing bankruptcy, however, Sogavare can no longer maintain cash payments to the ex-militia members. In recent months, his regime has held talks with both Taiwan and China seeking financial assistance in return for diplomatic recognition. The \$23 million loan from Taiwan followed the opening of an embassy in Taipei, a meeting between Sogavare and Taiwan’s President Shui-Bian Chen and the granting of generous tuna fishing licences to Taiwanese fleets.

In effect, Sogavare is trying to play Taiwan off against China and both off against Australia, in a desperate bid for survival. The Taiwan loan will not stave off economic collapse for long, however, and the pressure on Sogavare’s government will intensify with Ulufa’alu’s constitutional challenge.



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