

Solomon Islands bullied into accepting Australian-led military intervention

Will Marshall
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After three days of debate, the Solomon Islands parliament on Friday unanimously endorsed a cabinet decision to invite an Australian-led force of soldiers and police into the country. Despite the protestations of some MPs, who warned that the intervention amounted to the re-colonisation of the former British territory, the vote was largely a formality.

Well before the vote was taken, an advance team of Australian soldiers and police had arrived in the capital Honiara on Monday to prepare for the arrival of a 2,000-strong force. For all its pretence that this is a “cooperative intervention” at the request of the Solomons authorities, the Howard government had made it plain that the Solomons parliament had no choice but to rubberstamp the military operation.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard reinforced this message on Thursday by insisting that the Solomons MPs also adopt additional legislation giving sweeping powers to intervention force personnel and granting them legal immunity for any actions they take.

“I would expect the parliament to pass the legislation,” he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. “If the legislation is not passed, well we don’t go in. If the legislation is passed in a form that’s acceptable to Australia, we do go in. They’re the alternatives.” The issue will be discussed in the Solomons parliament next week.

Under the intervention plan, Australian and New Zealand police and soldiers, accompanied by token contingents from South Pacific states, will take control over law enforcement, the treasury, judiciary and prisons, for at least a decade.

Almost exactly 25 years after Britain granted the state formal independence following a century of colonial rule, the Howard government has branded the Solomon Islands a “failed state,” raising the prospect of an indefinite occupation.

While every Solomons MP lined up behind the current Prime Minister, Sir Allan Kemakeza, in voting for the intervention, at least six expressed grave reservations, revealing concerns within the tiny ruling elite that the operation will provoke unrest among ordinary people.

Former prime minister Manasseh Sogavare declared: “It’ll be nothing short of re-colonising this country. This honourable house is being deliberately used as a puppet for overseas agendas.” His predecessor Bartholomew Ulufa’alu angrily

denounced the government and its supporters, saying: “So who brought intervention on this country? You. You. Because you become the dirt. You became the rubbish.”

The Howard government has attempted to justify the intervention by pointing to the country’s acute economic and social crisis. The theme has been taken up in the Australian media which has painted a picture of the complete breakdown of law-and-order in the Solomons. The chief responsibility, however, rests with Canberra, which has insisted on policies that have devastated the country’s economy and inevitably led to sharp social tensions.

The tiny Pacific Island state of just 500,000 people, which was only granted independence in 1978, struggled with the legacy of economic backwardness bequeathed by Britain from the outset. But in the aftermath of the Asian economic crisis 1997-98, the economy was thrown into recession by the sharp loss of markets in, and investment from, Asia.

The response of the Howard government was to demand that the Solomon Islands government implement the IMF and World Bank’s program of severe austerity measures. Savage cuts were made to public sector jobs—the country’s largest source of employment—and to the limited social services.

In the late 1990s, Canberra praised the Ulufa’alu government for slashing expenditure, destroying public service jobs and devaluing the Solomon Islands dollar by 20 percent in December 1997. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade delivered the following assessment: “The government’s record has been impressive, with foreign reserves at satisfactory levels, debt arrears restructured and the prospect of the securities market being restored in the near future.”

But the resulting high levels of unemployment and poverty inflamed social tensions, particularly on the main island of Guadalcanal where locals and “immigrants” from the neighbouring island of Malaita clashed over land and jobs. Fighting between rival militias broke out in 1999, culminating in the ousting of Ulufa’alu in June 2000 by the Malaitan Eagle Force and much of the police force, and the installation of Sogavare.

Following the coup, Australia initially backed Sogavare’s government, which was installed undemocratically, in order to

restore stability and protect Australian investments, including the Gold Ridge gold mine. Despite the hardship and devastation caused by the 20-month civil war, Canberra cut off all aid and assistance to the Solomons until a ceasefire was signed.

In October 2000, Downer flew the various militia and faction leaders to sign the Townsville Peace Agreement in the Australian state of Queensland. In return for handing in their weapons, militia members would enjoy a general amnesty and immunity from prosecution. Lavish promises of economic development were made, including an international airport in Malaita, a fisheries centre, a new port, a new road and tourist facilities. None of this materialised. Instead, Australia insisted that an IMF austerity program proceed.

By March 2001, the situation had deteriorated further. Honiara residents were advised to boil drinking water because the treatment plants could no longer afford to pay for chlorine supplies. Australian pharmaceutical suppliers stopped supplying drugs to the Solomons due to unpaid bills, while pharmacy stores had their telephone lines disconnected for failing to pay bills. Honiara's main hospital cancelled all elective surgery, shut down the tuberculosis ward and forced patients to rely on their families for meals.

Far from providing aid and assistance, the Howard government exploited the appalling conditions to compel Honiara to do its bidding. In April 2001, Downer contemptuously declared of the Solomons' politicians: "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."

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Australia pursued the same policy when the Kemakeza government was formed at the end of 2001. Downer and his New Zealand counterpart Phil Goff flatly rejected a request from Kemakeza for \$US37 million to rescue the economy and provide critically needed funding for health, education and other services. Downer announced that an Australian representative had been installed as a special adviser to the Solomons government for three months in order to ensure that economic restructuring continued.

In March 2002, after meetings with the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and IMF, Finance Minister Michael Maina introduced a budget featuring a 25 percent devaluation of the currency. A political backlash rapidly erupted as it became evident that the price of food and other basic commodities would soar. Despite agreeing with the decision, Kemakeza was forced to sack the finance minister and reversed the devaluation in order to prevent a vote of no confidence.

However, the political crisis in Honiara simply made the Howard government more determined. At a meeting in June 2002 with the World Bank, ADB and major donor countries in Honiara, Canberra once more rejected Kemakeza's request for funds, insisting that there would be no aid unless Kemakeza

slashed government spending and jobs.

In an attempt to meet these conditions, Kemakeza's government effectively ceded control of its finances by appointing an Australian, Lloyd Powell, to the post of Permanent Secretary of Finance. Last October, the government pressed ahead with plans to retrench 1,300 employees or about 30 percent of the public sector workforce—compounding the already high levels of joblessness.

The Howard government and the Australian media have made great play of the need for stability and an end to lawlessness in the Solomons. But the focus on "law and order" is to divert attention from their own responsibility for the social breakdown. The austerity measures have created a pool of discontented young men, with no prospect of a job or a future, who are being exploited by militia leaders for their own ends.

Having failed to force the Solomon Islands government to implement their policies, Howard and Downer are now using the resulting catastrophe to justify an Australian-led military intervention designed to implement their agenda directly. As its pay-off for joining the US-led invasion of Iraq, the Howard government has secured the backing of the Bush administration to carry out its own colonial-style intervention into the Solomons.

Just three months after the war in Iraq began, a Canberra think tank produced a report calling for Australia to impose its domination over the small, impoverished nation, setting a precedent that would apply to other countries of the Pacific region. In early June, Kemakeza was flown to Canberra by jet and told that the Howard government had reversed its previous "hands off" policy and was preparing to head a force of troops and police, backed by naval warships and air support, to impose "law and order" on the Solomons.

To all intents and purposes, the Solomons government received an "offer" that it could not refuse. Having defaulted on all interest and some of its principal payments for the past four years, Kemakeza was desperate for financial assistance and well aware that Australia has the final say in the disbursement of funds by the global financial institutions.

The attempt by the Australian government and media to dress up the Solomons intervention as an act of humanitarian charity is a sham. The Australian officials, who will be inserted to preside over finance, the police and other key institutions, will be imposing the same austerity and "restructuring" policies that have produced the disaster. The only difference is that these dictates will now be implemented by an Australian-led force, inevitably provoking popular resentment and resistance.



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