

# Further opposition to Australia's takeover in the Solomon Islands

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In another sign of growing tensions in the Solomon Islands, Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza has dismissed two ministers over their criticisms of the Australian-led intervention force and, on February 9, survived a no-confidence vote in his government.

Sacked Finance and Treasury Minister Francis Zama has openly criticised the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission (RAMSI) for violating the country's national sovereignty. Former Communications Minister Patterson Oti, who was ousted on February 3, was also critical of the Australian presence.

The Australian-led intervention in July 2003, which Canberra pressured the Solomon Islands to accept, resulted in a virtual takeover of key posts in the police, finance ministry and prisons. As finance minister, Zama worked closely with RAMSI personnel for the past 16 months and has first hand knowledge of the degree to which Australian officials have taken control.

The crisis erupted following a parliamentary debate in early February on three reports reviewing RAMSI's first year of operations. These were the Review Report by the Intervention Taskforce Committee, the Cabinet Committee's Report on the Taskforce's Review and the Parliamentary Foreign Relations Committee Review Report.

Zama and Oti were part of a group of six ministers who wrote a cabinet committee report on RAMSI, recommending its police role continue for five years, but proposing a scaling back of its involvement in the administrative apparatus. In particular, the report called for the withdrawal of Australian public servants from the government finance sector by the middle of the year.

Pointing to the neo-colonial nature of the Australian takeover, Zama told the *Solomons Star* on February 3: "Look at the Magistrate, High Court judges, Public Solicitor, Director of Public Prosecution, they [Australian officials] are all there, it is sad". Zama explained that five Australians were taking top posts in the Finance Department, while another 12 were acting as "technical advisers". He openly denounced the role of Australian officials, declaring: "These

people did not bring anything to the department."

In the course of the parliamentary debate, other ministers were critical. Fisheries Minister Paul Maenu called for RAMSI's legal immunity to be removed from the Facilitation Bill. The provision is a source of growing friction as villagers face the full force of the law, often for minor offences, while RAMSI personnel are immune from prosecution whatever they do. Maenu accused RAMSI of flagrantly violating the basic rights of ordinary people.

Minister of Police, National Security and Justice Michael Maina was also objected to RAMSI's pervasive domination. Calling for a more unified approach in policing, he said: "If we are not careful, it will demoralise Solomon Islands police officers".

In sacking Zama, Kemakeza accused the finance minister of breaching cabinet solidarity during the parliamentary debate. "Your recent display of adverse actions has put your political conduct and attitude as a crown minister in question," he wrote in the dismissal letter.

Zama, however, has pointed the finger at Canberra. Asked by the *Solomons Star* about Australian involvement in his sacking, he declared: "I would not rule it out. I honestly would not rule that out because my statements had made headlines in Australia."

The sackings left the Kemakeza government in a precarious position. In the lead up to the no-confidence motion on February 9, a "top government source" had told the *Solomons Star* that the government was split and may well lose power. Behind the scenes, the prime minister reportedly held meetings with a number of MPs in a desperate attempt to shore up support. He appointed two opposition parliamentarians to fill vacant cabinet posts.

In the event, the no-confidence motion failed to materialise. Its mover—former Prime Minister Bart Ulufa'alu—has long been a Kemakeza critic. Ulufa'alu made his speech denouncing Kemakeza for involvement in "illegal" activities, including a failed pyramid scheme. He condemned the government for coming to power in 2001 at the point of a gun. He also cautiously criticised Canberra's

influence declaring that Kemakeza was controlled by outsiders.

However, after speaking for over an hour, Ulufa'alu withdrew his motion. His only explanation was that there was a lack of time to debate the issue properly. While the press suggested that he simply did not have the numbers, it is also possible that other factors were involved—including threats and intimidation by RAMSI officials.

The ousting of Kemakeza and the installation of a less subservient government would create a major political headache for Canberra. Prior to the RAMSI intervention, the Australian press branded Kemakeza as a symbol of everything that was corrupt and wrong in the Solomon Islands. The *Australian*, for instance, denounced him as a “bad-penny” prime minister, “wrapped tightly in subterfuge, allegations of bribery and vote-buying and political uncertainty”.

There was no doubt an element of truth in the accusations. Kemakeza, a former policeman with close connections to one of the country's island-based militias—the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF)—has had a chequered past. But having rubberstamped the Australian military intervention and all of RAMSI's subsequent actions, Kemakeza is now regarded as an important asset. If anything, the allegations of corruption are a convenient means for keeping him in line.

In the course of the last 18 months, RAMSI has arrested four cabinet ministers on various charges, but Kemakeza has remained untouched. Moves to take him to court in 2003 stalled after Australian Prime Minister John Howard very publicly expressed his confidence in his Solomon Islands counterpart. Others have not been as fortunate.

Former foreign minister Alex Bartlett is in custody charged with arson and demanding money with menace. Bartlett is a leading MEF figure, who showed a marked reluctance to disarm the militia. It is quite possible that RAMSI officials saw him as a political danger—a rival to Kemakeza and a potential focus for the growing opposition to the Australian presence.

The latest to be arrested is Police and National Security Minister Michael Maina. On February 18, a little over a week after he called for a revision of RAMSI's policing role in parliament, he was detained and charged over an alleged overpayment of \$A200,000 in 2002 into a bank account he controlled.

Whatever backroom machinations were involved, the Kemakeza government has survived the no-confidence motion. But it is not in a strong position. Government MPs have already expressed their disagreement with Kemakeza's decision to bring opposition members into the cabinet. At the same time, the prime minister is losing popular support because of his close identification with RAMSI.

The criticisms of disgruntled ministers are just a pale reflection of far broader anger over Australian domination of the country. In an article published on January 18 entitled “RAMSI, the Police and the Future”, Bishop Tony Brown painted the following picture of life under RAMSI's rule:

“Finally, as a general comment, I would say that there is a major disparity between RAMSI's rhetoric tying for 10 to 15 years in the Solomon, bringing peace and prosperity, and [the] reality of reemerging violence, increasing poverty and unemployment, high school fees, a downward-spiraling economy, higher inflation and lower incomes, declining medical services, ongoing corruption in government ministries, lack of planning and implementation of how Solomon Islanders will competently run all parts of their own government, crumbling infrastructure, millions and millions of RAMSI funds spent on Australians with the money going back to Australia with minimum cash benefit for Solomon Islanders, continued centralising of everything in Honiara, and so on”.

Referring to the murder of Australian Protective Service officer Adam Dunning in December, Brown warned that if RAMSI did not change its relations with the general population, it would be seen “more and more as an occupying army and more anti-RAMSI incidents will occur.” The behaviour of RAMSI officials is, however, inherent in the colonial character of their mission, which is not to better the lot of Solomons Islanders, but to look after Australian interests. As a result, hostility, opposition and active resistance to the Australian presence can only further increase.



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