

Australian troops dispatched to Solomon Islands to suppress local population

By Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Nearly three years after its virtual takeover of the Solomon Islands, the Howard government has sent fresh contingents of troops and police to put down serious political and social unrest in the small South Pacific country. The Socialist Equality Party unequivocally opposes this neo-colonial operation. Its aim is to suppress the Solomons people and reinforce Australian military and economic hegemony over the region.

This week's emergency deployments of more than 300 heavily-armed soldiers and police serve to shatter the myth, carefully cultivated by the Australian political and media establishment, that the Australian-led military intervention in July 2003 was a humanitarian mission to bring peace, prosperity and democracy.

In 2003, the 2,500-strong Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) force was supposedly dispatched to protect the local population from rival ethnic gangs and gunmen. Now, the troops have been deployed openly against the population itself—to quell mass demonstrations and rioting involving thousands of ordinary people in the capital, Honiara.

For all Australian Prime Minister John Howard's talk of "restoring democracy," his government has intervened to protect and prop up an openly corrupt elite, which has helped Canberra rule the country over the past three years. It has done so in clear defiance of the wishes of the voters who, at a general election on April 5, threw out the Australian-backed government of Sir Allan Kemakeza and his deputy prime minister Snyder Rini.

The immediate trigger for the eruption of widespread political protests, followed by looting and burning throughout Honiara's commercial and tourist districts, was Rini's installation as prime minister-designate on Tuesday. Rini's selection—in a closed-door meeting of the 50 newly-elected members of parliament after several days of horse-trading—was clearly the product of what local people call "money politics".

On April 5, voters had done their best to oust the Kemakeza-Rini regime. In an election closely monitored and certified as "free and secret" by 50 Australian-led international observers, some 453 candidates and 13 party groupings contested the 50 seats, with more than 300 of the candidates listed as independents. Many called for the defeat of incumbents accused of corruption. As a result, Kemakeza's government was routed. Half the parliament, including 11 of Kemakeza's 20 Peoples Alliance Party MPs, lost their seats. Rini barely survived, retaining his seat with just 29 percent of the vote under the "first past the post" balloting system.

Having voted out a notoriously corrupt government, the Solomons people discovered on Tuesday that much the same group had returned to office, via backdoor methods, reportedly involving bribes of thousands of dollars. Kemakeza had stood aside from the parliamentary ballot and endorsed Rini, but his former deputy initially secured only 17 votes, against 22 for Job Dudley Tausinga, whose Rural Advancement Party had gained popularity by calling for an end to corruption, and 11 for former prime minister Manasseh Sogavare. For the final count, 10 MPs switched

to Rini, giving him a 27 to 23 margin over Tausinga.

Just two weeks earlier, the Australian media had hailed the holding of the general election, the first since the RAMSI takeover, as proof of the "success" of the military intervention in returning democracy to the Solomon Islands. But the routing of Kemakeza's government served to demonstrate, above all, the level of popular hostility to the country's tiny political and financial elites. Courtesy of the RAMSI occupation, which has taken over all the key posts in the country's police, prisons, courts, finance ministry and other government departments, these people have seized upon the opportunity to further enrich themselves.

While money has poured in for luxury hotels, expensive supermarkets and upmarket shops and cafes to cater for the highly-paid RAMSI officials and officers, and profitable investments have been made in fishing, timber, tourism and mining to plunder the islands' rich resources, the already appalling conditions facing ordinary people have only deteriorated. Out of a population of 550,000, an estimated 80,000 are jobless or underemployed. Nothing has been done to restore thousands of public sector jobs, provide decent housing or repair devastated education, health care and other basic services.

To pursue their own interests, RAMSI and the Howard government deliberately kept Kemakeza in office. He had been under police investigation for misappropriating compensation funds for victims of communal fighting, while his own family received \$1.5 million. But moves to prosecute Kemakeza in 2003 stalled, after Howard publicly expressed confidence in his Solomons counterpart. Having rubberstamped the Australian military intervention, Kemakeza was regarded as an important political asset despite his connections with the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF)—one of the country's militias. By contrast, four of Kemakeza's ministers who voiced mild criticisms of the RAMSI takeover were promptly dismissed and charged with corruption offences.

As soon as Rini was named prime minister, an angry crowd besieged the parliament building, claiming the election was fixed and the votes had been bought. After four hours, Rini and his parliamentary supporters were rescued by RAMSI officers, who provoked a violent confrontation by opening fire with tear gas. They overrode the relevant parliamentary authority, the Speaker, Sir Peter Kenilorea, who accused them of ignoring his request for more time for talks with the demonstrators. Kenilorea told reporters he had asked the officers "not to use tear gas on them because it would simply aggravate the situation".

In the ensuing clashes, 28 police officers, including 17 Australians, were reportedly injured when they were pelted with stones. In addition, nine Australian police cars were torched and others damaged. Anti-government and anti-RAMSI protests then spread across Honiara, accompanied by looting of upmarket hotels, shops and businesses throughout Tuesday night and Wednesday.

Howard later claimed there was no evidence of hostility toward RAMSI. Yet buildings associated with the RAMSI force were specifically targeted. One Australian eyewitness, an Air Vanuatu pilot, said that the

newly-built 104-room Pacific Casino Hotel was filled with Australian tourists, RAMSI officials and staff from international aid organisations when it came under attack by a stone-throwing crowd.

Some of the looting seemed indiscriminate, as people took off with anything of value they could find—a measure of the poverty and pent-up social tensions. There were reports of teenagers and women carrying away basic foodstuffs, such as bags of rice, and elementary school requirements, such as pencils and marker pens.

Disturbing signs also emerged of racist politics being injected into the crisis as a deeply reactionary diversion from the real culprits and underlying causes of the widening social divide. Chinese and other Asian business people were blamed for bankrolling vote-buying and corruption, and most of Honiara's Chinatown district was burnt down, with people of Asian descent being attacked or threatened, simply on the basis of their skin colour or appearance.

Those actually responsible for imposing the social and economic catastrophe in the Solomon Islands are now using colonial-style methods to suppress the inevitable discontent, with heavily-armed soldiers patrolling city streets. Before the troops arrived, the Australian-appointed commander of the Solomon Islands police, Shane Castles, met the country's governor-general and instructed him to invoke emergency powers to impose a dusk-to-dawn curfew and "lock-down" Honiara. Police and troops were given sweeping powers to ban assemblies, order people off the streets, set up road blocks, carry out searches and arrest anyone on the basis of "suspicion" of involvement in, or inciting, unrest.

While an uneasy clampdown is currently being imposed, none of the underlying tensions have gone away. Howard and Foreign Affairs Minister, Alexander Downer, have declared their readiness to send in more troops if necessary to quell any further disturbances after Rini was secretly sworn-in yesterday.

In 2003, many Solomon Islands people may have initially believed Canberra's claims to be acting in their interests. The country had been engulfed in political turmoil since the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis caused an economic breakdown, followed by punishing job cuts and austerity measures imposed by the IMF and World Bank. The ensuing downward spiral ignited fighting between rival armed gangs from the main islands of Malaita and Guadalcanal, leading to the virtual collapse of social services and the police force.

Over the past three years, however, social conditions for the majority of the population have not improved and the role of RAMSI as an occupying force has become increasingly evident. Far from raising living standards, RAMSI has focussed on implementing further economic restructuring. One of the first actions of the inaugural RAMSI chief, Australian official Nick Warner, was to insist on the reversal of a small wage rise of \$8 a fortnight for lowly-paid public sector workers who were earning about \$30 a week. By contrast, Australian advisers and consultants were being paid salaries 100 times higher—around \$14,000 a month.

The RAMSI intervention was never aimed at helping Solomon Islanders, but at re-asserting Canberra's traditional sphere of influence in the South West Pacific. After joining the Iraq invasion, Howard almost immediately drew on Washington's support to mount his own "pre-emptive action". Branding the Solomons a "failed state" that could become a breeding ground for "international terrorists and criminals", he bullied Honiara into accepting an Australian occupation and other Pacific Islands nations into backing his plan.

For the past three years Howard has helped prop up a thoroughly discredited political and business elite. Now he is exploiting the resulting social conflicts to further bolster the Australian government's position as the strongman of the region, with the loyal support of Helen Clark's Labour government in New Zealand, a smaller regional power. At Howard's request, police reinforcements have been sent from New Zealand and Fiji.

Howard yesterday declared that Australian forces would remain committed in the South Pacific for the "long-term" to deal with "failed states". In language reminiscent of the "white man's burden" claims for colonising Africa in the nineteenth century, he insisted that as "the biggest and wealthiest and strongest country in the region," Australia had to "shoulder the burden" of restoring stability.

Echoed by the Australian media, Howard and Downer have seized upon the racist component of the riots, as well as a fierce contest between Taiwan and China for influence over the region, as an added pretext for sending in troops. Downer referred to "racially-inspired riots" and Taiwanese "influence-peddling" as reasons for extending the RAMSI operation for "quite some time to come yet".

These comments reveal Canberra's growing preoccupation with defending its position in the South Pacific under conditions of intensifying rivalries. Taiwan gives about \$4 million annually in financial aid to the Solomons, one of half a dozen countries in the South Pacific that diplomatically recognises Taiwan rather than mainland China.

Taipei also provides a secret prime ministerial slush fund, which is allegedly used to buy MPs' loyalty. Rini, a former finance minister, has visited Taiwan and his party, the Association of Independent Members (AIM), is accused of being a Taiwanese-sponsored caucus. AIM gatherings were reportedly held at Honiara's Flamingo Nightclub under the patronage of prominent businessman Sir Thomas Chan, whose son was Kemakeza's foreign minister.

On the day Rini was anointed prime minister, troops from two visiting Taiwanese naval ships staged a parade in a Honiara sporting stadium, in a not-too-subtle display of diplomatic muscle. The visit came just weeks after Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao landed in Fiji for talks with the eight South Pacific nations that recognise Beijing, rewarding them with offers of \$US375 million worth of preferential loans.

For its part, Canberra doles out hundreds of millions a year in the region. Moreover, it has sent police and officials to supervise the governments of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Fiji, as well as setting up what legal experts have labelled a "parallel government" in the Solomons. For the RAMSI operation alone, the Howard government had budgetted \$850 million for 2005-09, even before the latest expansion of its intervention. The "money politics" of the Solomon Islands is financed, above all, by Australia.

And definite interests are at stake. While Australian governments have long been totally indifferent to the plight of its people, the Solomon Islands is a strategically-located country of 992 islands covering more than a million square kilometres of ocean between PNG and Fiji. It was first occupied by the British in the nineteenth century and proclaimed a protectorate, in order to counter the German takeover of Papua to the west and the French colonisation of Vanuatu and New Caledonia to the south.

In the opening years of the twenty-first century, the region is once again the target of imperialist rivalry. The *Australian's* foreign editor Greg Sheridan voiced the neo-colonial designs of the Australian ruling class in an opinion column yesterday. He declared that "independence has been a disaster" throughout Melanesia, which covers seven million people in PNG, the Solomons, Fiji and Vanuatu. Sheridan contemptuously blamed "Melanesian culture" for being "warlike and tribal" and "comprehensively corrupt" and therefore unsuited to democracy.

Sheridan went on to say that while he was not pushing recolonisation, Australia had decolonised PNG "far too quickly" in 1975. Moreover, he asserted, "Melanesian culture," particularly "communal ideas of property ownership," made "serious economic development almost impossible". Australia, he insisted, "has adopted some of the burdens of colonialism and will inevitably have to deal with the most serious security problems in the Melanesian world... We are likely to be in the Solomon Islands for a long, long time to come".

In other words, the mission should take complete command of the

region indefinitely, not only in order to protect the predatory interests of Australian capitalism but to batter down resistance to the imposition of a corporate free-market agenda.

Responsibility for the violent and dictatorial methods now being unleashed in the Solomons lies with the entire Australian political establishment. Over the past three years, the Howard government's intervention has received unanimous support from all the parliamentary "opposition" parties—Labor, the Greens and Democrats. Labor leader Kim Beazley's only criticisms of the latest deployment have been from the right—accusing the government of not sending enough troops and not acting earlier.

The police-state methods being employed on the streets of Honiara are a warning of what is being prepared for the streets of Sydney, Melbourne and other Australian cities as anger erupts over the mounting social and economic crisis at home. Working people in Australia must oppose the Howard government's military intervention into the Solomon Islands by developing a common struggle with the working class and oppressed masses of the entire Asia-Pacific region against Australian imperialism and its ruthless political and economic agenda.



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