

Solomon Islands PM quits amid mounting opposition to Australian occupation

Mike Head
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After a week of protection by Australian-led military and police forces, the Solomon Islands Prime Minister Snyder Rini resigned today in a bid to head off growing hostility to the Australian occupation of the small South Pacific country.

Rini quit after six MPs, including five of his cabinet ministers, switched sides and sat with opposition parties in the parliament before a scheduled no-confidence motion. He said he had “no alternative” but to tender his resignation. Parliamentarians are expected to choose a replacement next week.

Rini’s resignation came amid signs of deepening popular anger at the intervention of the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) to suppress serious unrest directed against his newly-installed government and against the local elites that have profited from RAMSI’s three-year rule over the Solomons.

More than 400 Australian, New Zealand and other troops and police were flown into the Solomons last week, bolstering RAMSI’s security contingent to more than 1,000. They were dispatched on Canberra’s orders to put down widespread political protests and looting.

The immediate trigger for the unrest was Rini’s election as prime minister in a secret parliamentary ballot amid allegations that MPs’ votes had been bought by well-placed business leaders, notably those with connections to Taiwan. The outcome effectively nullified the results of a general election conducted on April 5, in which voters ousted the notoriously corrupt Australian-backed government of Sir Allen Kemakeza, whom Rini had served as deputy prime minister.

On Monday, the Solomons parliament assembled under military guard after three opposition MPs were arrested, one of them in the grounds of parliament. The extraordinary scenes made a mockery of the Howard government’s claims to be delivering “democracy” to the people of the Solomons.

MPs were sworn in under the eyes of a large security force. Australian soldiers wielding sub-machine guns and heavily-armed riot police surrounded the building, while a military helicopter flew overhead. Ordinary citizens were barred from the entire area after the Australian-appointed police chief, Shane Castles, declared it a “no-go zone”.

“Parliament resembled a Baghdad bunker,” the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s Russell Skelton reported. “There were snipers on the roof, numerous contingents of riot police, a hovering helicopter overhead, Australian patrol boats at anchor and heavily armed military on standby.”

Before the MPs’ arrests, opposition leaders expressed confidence that they had the 26 votes needed in the 50-member assembly to topple Rini in today’s scheduled no-confidence vote. After the arrests,

opposition leader Job Dudley Tausinga said he had “lost all hope” of ousting Rini, and openly accused RAMSI of political interference.

These comments echoed the mounting disaffection throughout the country. A local journalist told the WSWs that people on the streets were denouncing the MPs’ arrests as “nothing but Australian interference with Solomon Islands politics”. Drawings appeared on walls in the capital, Honiara, portraying Rini as “the Australian government’s pet”.

Opposition politicians and media observers began warning that the arrests and parliamentary lockdown were such a blatant exercise of neo-colonial power that mass sentiment was moving decisively against the RAMSI occupation.

Opposition MP Patteson Oti told reporters the RAMSI response “portrays a negative image of a parliament under siege ... and of a parliament ruled by the military—that is not the case”.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) correspondent Sean Dorney commented that the atmosphere at parliament was “hardly a democratic one... It didn’t bear a lot of resemblance to democracy. The Solomon Islands people were totally forbidden from going anywhere near the Parliament... In fact, the clerk of Parliament said the public would be allowed, but that was banned by the Police Commissioner.

Writing in the *Australian* this morning, Honiara-based correspondent Mary-Louise O’Callaghan reported that the “wheel has turned” against the RAMSI operation. She wrote: “[Y]oung islanders openly sneer at heavily armed Australian troops making their rounds of Honiara’s markets”.

O’Callaghan warned: “Whatever the ultimate outcome of the Solomons’ political machinations, there is little doubt that the legitimacy that RAMSI and thus Australia’s presence in the nation has enjoyed is now seriously under threat.”

O’Callaghan’s comments amounted to a message to the Howard government to abandon Rini. She has been a long-time advocate of Australian military intervention in the Solomons and served as RAMSI’s public relations manager.

RAMSI authorities went to great lengths to maintain Rini’s government.

Two opposition MPs—Nelson Ne’e and Patrick Vahoe—were arrested in the lead-up to Monday’s swearing-in of parliament, while another, Charles Dausabea, was detained as soon as the opening session adjourned. A squad of gun-toting soldiers and riot police bashed on Dausabea’s hotel room door the previous day in a failed bid to seize him before parliament opened.

Vahoe, who was picked up for infringing the dusk-to-dawn curfew imposed on Honiara, was later released and allowed to attend

parliament. Ne'e and Dausabea, however, were denied bail at RAMSI's request, after being charged with a string of serious offences, including "managing an unlawful society", "incitement to cause harm" and "intimidation" associated with last week's demonstrations and rioting.

When Dausabea was denied bail, soldiers and police patrolled the courthouse perimeter and formed a line with riot shields as hundreds of people looked on.

On the face of it, the charges are highly-dubious. Ne'e was accused, for example, of urging the crowd outside parliament last week to "dynamite" the building. Yet no dynamite existed. Dausabea pointed out that he was inside parliament before the clashes began, and therefore could not have planned or incited them. Moreover, RAMSI officers provoked the rioting outside parliament by opening fire with tear gas, overruling a request by the parliamentary speaker, Sir Peter Kenilorea, for more time to negotiate with protesters.

Both Ne'e, the MP for Central Honiara, and Dausabea, the MP for East Honiara, had criticised RAMSI and the Australian government's political interference during the election campaign. A local journalist said they had won the "hearts of many," particularly from the growing camps of impoverished squatters around Honiara.

Rini provocatively thanked RAMSI for making the arrests and predicted that more MPs and community leaders would be detained. Expressing his confidence in retaining office, he nominated Kemakeza as deputy parliamentary speaker. Kemakeza was elected unopposed, 25 to nil, when the opposition parties boycotted parliament on Tuesday. But the loss of two votes (Rini was elected by 27 MPs) made it clear that his governing coalition was unlikely to survive, even with opposition MPs in jail.

Whichever parties and groups form the next government in the Solomons, the Australian occupation faces growing opposition from impoverished youth and working people to the free-market "economic reform" program being introduced. Since 2003, the occupation has widened the gulf between ordinary people and the thin privileged layers that have worked with RAMSI. Food prices have sky-rocketed while thousands of mostly young people have been left jobless in squatter settlements.

The three opposition MPs were not the only ones rounded up. Former Honiara mayor Robert Wale, a candidate for the "People's Power" group, which campaigned against high-level corruption, has also been arrested on charges of "managing an unlawful society" linked to last week's unrest.

Police Commissioner Castles stated on Monday that only four arrests were made in connection with the disturbances. But the local journalist told the WWS on April 23 that 40 arrests had been made. According to a *Sydney Morning Herald* report, police were combing through Honiara's squatter camps arresting people found with goods allegedly looted from stores.

RAMSI's official figures, published on the Australian government's AusAID web site, show that even before last week's eruption of discontent, RAMSI police had arrested 4,182 people since 2003. This represents almost 1 percent of the entire population of around 550,000.

Hundreds of people remain imprisoned in Honiara's overcrowded Rove Prison or the newly re-opened Tetere Prison Farm, both run by Australian officials and warders employed by a private contractor owned by Australia's wealthiest family, the Packers. Even those still awaiting trial are subjected to a harsh regime, including solitary confinement. Inmates have rioted in protest at least twice.

RAMSI also controls the legal system, supplying its top 20 officials and lawyers, from the Solicitor-General through to magistrates and prosecutors.

At the heart of the RAMSI operation, 80 "civilian advisers" supervise key government departments, particularly the finance ministry, which has imposed cost-cutting annual budgets. A top-level "Economic Reform Unit" has been established to "coordinate and drive economic reform" and draft laws to facilitate foreign investment.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer paid a brief visit to Honiara last weekend. He reportedly told Rini that his government's "absolute priority" must be "combatting corruption". "Economic reform is going to be central to the survival of the country," Downer told reporters.

He followed the visit with a thinly-veiled threat to move against Rini and his associates on corruption charges if they failed to deliver on Canberra's demands for further economic restructuring and the opening up of the economy to Australian and other foreign investment.

Interviewed on the ABC's "Lateline" program on his return from the Solomons, Downer emphasised that RAMSI police were investigating corruption allegations surrounding Rini's election as prime minister and that over the past three years RAMSI had jailed seven cabinet ministers on corruption charges.

Working through RAMSI, the Howard government's modus operandi in the Solomons has been to protect key ministers, notably Kemakeza and Rini, from investigations into their political donations and alleged rorting of compensation funds, while prosecuting ministers who offer even limited criticisms of the RAMSI takeover.

The events of the past week underscore the analysis made by the WWS in July 2003, opposing the Australian intervention. RAMSI is nothing but a colonial-style operation, aimed at reinforcing Australian military and economic supremacy throughout the South West Pacific. Taking the lead from the Bush administration's doctrine of "preemptive strikes" and the US-led war on Iraq, the Howard government is pursuing its own predatory ambitions in the Pacific.

As a Socialist Equality Party statement in 2003 warned: "The dispatch of Australian troops to the Solomons has nothing to do with lifting the living standards or defending the democratic rights of its 500,000 people... Canberra's policies will only exacerbate the country's chronic social crisis and tensions and the resulting resentment will inevitably be directed against the occupying forces."



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