

Solomon Islands: Australia's neo-colonial "model" for East Timor?

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Twice in the past six weeks, Australian troops and police have been dispatched to Asian-Pacific states to put down serious unrest and reinforce Australian economic and diplomatic interests. Last month, hundreds of soldiers were sent to bolster the three-year-old Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), followed by last week's military intervention in East Timor.

While the operations are nominally "multinational" and a response to "invitations", both intervention forces are overwhelmingly dominated by Australia, with the two local governments given little choice, economically or militarily, but to accede to their arrival.

Within days of the Timor deployment, Prime Minister John Howard was refusing to rule out the possibility of setting up a longer-term presence in the tiny former Portuguese colony, along the lines of RAMSI, which has virtually taken over the Solomons.

His comments are particularly noteworthy because just before the recent events, the RAMSI operation was being hailed in Australian and other Western strategic and foreign policy circles as an "innovative" template for a new kind of neo-colonial intervention. A report published in March by the Lowy Institute for International Policy, an Australian corporate thinktank, boasted of "growing international interest" in RAMSI.

The report quoted an article in *International Peacekeeping*, a British-based journal specialising in military interventions, which commented that RAMSI had "arguably broken new ground in lowering the threshold for intervention in the indisputably internal affairs of a sovereign state... To a degree not witnessed in international peacekeeping, insidious levels of crime, corruption and poor governance had become a primary impetus for external intervention, rather than a large humanitarian crisis".

In other words, RAMSI has provided a model whereby

interventions in the name of "humanitarianism"—used to justify the NATO war against Serbia in 1999 and the Australian-led occupation of East Timor in the same year—could be superseded by operations conducted under the banner of rescuing "failed" or "failing" states.

"Nomenclature can be highly sensitive in this field," the Lowy report noted. "States are understandably reluctant to be dubbed 'failed' or 'broken'; hence the search for euphemisms such as 'countries at risk of instability'."

Regardless of the label under which they are mounted, these operations have had nothing to do with protecting the welfare or uplifting the living standards of the local population. Rather, the spiralling levels of poverty, social crisis and debt have been used as a pretext by the intervening powers to pursue far-reaching geo-strategic interests, combat the influence of rival powers and impose predatory economic agendas.

Officially, under the RAMSI model, the Solomon Islands remains a sovereign country. According to RAMSI's publicity material: "RAMSI does not control the government or make national decisions on behalf of Solomon Islands. The Parliament, Government, constitutional office holders and the public service all remain responsible for exercising their respective functions, and they remain accountable to the people of Solomon Islands."

Closer examination shows that the situation is very different. For all intents and purposes, RAMSI runs the Solomon Islands, with its officials controlling all the key levers of power—the finance ministry, police force, courts and prisons.

To police a population of about half a million people, the RAMSI military and police has a presence in all provinces, with 17 police posts outside Honiara. It also supervises and trains the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP), whose chief commissioner is a seconded Australian Federal Police officer. Similarly, RAMSI's

prison contingent supplies the Commissioner of Prisons, the General Manager of the Central (Rove) Prison and more than 40 prison guard supervisors and support staff.

RAMSI's legal contingent literally runs the legal system. It consists of 20 lawyers and other legal staff, including the Solicitor General (the country's legal chief), Deputy Legal Drafter (in charge of drawing up legislation), Public Solicitor and seven assistants (controlling the provision of legal services to people charged with offences), two High Court judges, two senior magistrates, four senior prosecutors and four police prosecutor advisers.

Another 60 RAMSI-appointed officials dominate senior posts in government departments, with a heavy concentration on the Ministry of Finance. Led by the Accountant-General, who personally vetoes project funding, 17 "advisers and in-line personnel" control the budget and draft foreign investment laws and guidelines. An Economic Reform Unit "coordinates and drives" a restructuring program dedicated to "improving business conditions, encouraging investment and creating jobs and income-earning opportunities".

RAMSI's economic agenda is aimed at a radical restructuring of the country's finances. A report, *Solomon Islands: Rebuilding an Island Economy*, launched by Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer in 2004, called for the privatisation of basic services such as telecommunications, electricity and water, as well as the scrapping of communal land tenure. It also prescribed the removal of "cumbersome investment regulations" and labour market deregulation to lower workers' wages and conditions.

At the top of the "economic reform" priorities listed on RAMSI's web site are assisting the reactivation of the Australian-owned Gold Ridge Mine and Solomon Islands Plantation Limited; removing import duties; reducing the "regulatory burden that drives up the costs of doing business"; cutting taxation rates; and improving the "financial viability of state-owned enterprises".

Among the first fruits of these policies are the generous tax and duty exemptions given to Australian Solomons Gold (ASG), which has been granted rights to rehabilitate the Gold Ridge mine. An ASG spokesman told Reuters this month that only 3 percent of the mine's expected annual revenue of SB\$600 million (\$US78 million) would be split between the government and local landowners.

While Australian companies stand to reap a windfall, RAMSI's economic program will have devastating consequences for the majority of Solomon Islanders, who

depend on village and communal relations, kinship support and subsistence farming.

Despite its budget of nearly \$250 million this year, RAMSI provides only pittance for social programs. Education and training were allocated \$A1.6 million for 2004-05; basic health services \$27.2 million for 2001-10; community support programs \$32 million for 2005-10; and service delivery by Australia NGOs \$5 million for 2004-07.

These allocations are deliberate. RAMSI insists that essential social facilities and services will be provided only through the creation of a market economy. According to the RAMSI web site: "With more people and businesses paying their taxes, duties, customs and licensing fees, the government is receiving more revenue, which should translate into the provision of better services to the people of the Solomon Islands—better schools, doctors and supplies for clinics, and repair and building of roads, wharves and bridges."

Far from alleviating the social crisis, the three-year-old occupation has exacerbated poverty and widened the gulf between ordinary people and the elites associated with RAMSI. According to relief agencies, the Solomons' people remain among the poorest and most deprived in the world. Less than 40 percent of students complete primary school, functional adult literacy is as low as 22 percent, and 38 out of 1,000 babies die before their first birthday, mainly from preventable diseases.

Although cynically labelled Operation Helpem Fren (pidgin for "Helping Friend") the Australian intervention in 2003 was never aimed at helping the Solomons' people. Rather, it was part of a wider assertion of Australian hegemony over the South Pacific.

The Lowy Institute report reveals that RAMSI is set to become the blueprint for future interventions. In all but name, the Australian ruling class, which ruled Papua New Guinea until 1975, is back in the business of colonialism in the Asia-Pacific region, from East Timor to the Solomon Islands and beyond.



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