

Solomon Islands prime minister bows to Australia's dictates

Will Marshall
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A visit by Australian Treasurer Peter Costello to the Solomon Islands last week highlighted Canberra's determination to dominate the South Pacific states, as well as the anxiety of the new Solomon Islands government to accommodate to these plans.

Arriving in the Solomons capital of Honiara for an annual meeting of Pacific finance ministers, Costello said failed states became "prone to organised crime, money-laundering and along with that comes the financing of terrorism". Similar unsubstantiated allegations were made when Australian troops were sent to the Solomons in July 2003.

Costello toured the headquarters of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which currently consists of about 300 police, 180 civilian "advisers" and "consultants" and a contingent of military personnel. RAMSI effectively controls all the key agencies in the tiny country—including the finance ministry, the courts and the prisons.

Almost 400 Australian troops were rushed to the Solomons to reinforce the RAMSI mission following rioting in Honiara on April 18 and 19, sparked by parliament's election of Snyder Rini as prime minister. Rini, previously the deputy prime minister, was widely regarded as part of the corrupt elite that had collaborated with RAMSI.

In an attempt to contain the discontent, Rini quit after eight days to make way for the election of Manasseh Sogavare, who postured as a critic of RAMSI, calling for an "exit strategy".

After a meeting with Costello, however, Sogavare said his government would like RAMSI to remain. "We are not looking at setting timetables here, we are looking at seeing the task completed. If it takes 10 years to do that, so be it," he said.

As proof of his readiness to cooperate with RAMSI, Sogavare said his government was working to stamp out corruption and had appointed two new cabinet ministers last month after their predecessors were arrested over the April riots.

On May 5, in a brief show of defiance, Sogavare appointed to his cabinet two MPs who had been detained by RAMSI. Sogavare named Charles Dausabea as National Security and Police Minister and Nelson Ne'e, Culture and Tourism Minister.

Both had been detained days earlier on flimsy charges of inciting the April 18-19 riots, even though all the evidence pointed to RAMSI officers provoking the riots by opening fire with tear gas on demonstrators outside parliament house.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer immediately denounced the appointments as a "disgrace" and issued an implied threat to cut off aid, saying the appointments "demeaned the integrity of the Solomon Islands locally and internationally".

New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clarke, whose government has strongly backed Canberra's intervention, joined in, warning: "There's going to be very strong views from New Zealand expressed that these appointments, if they go through, would have serious ramifications not only for the Solomon Islands but also for the Solomon Islands' international reputation."

Sogavare initially rebuffed these criticisms. On May 8 he described Downer's comments as a serious act of interference and a breach of the Vienna Convention that governs diplomatic relations between countries. Sogavare also referred to the dubious nature of the charges against the MPs, telling the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "We are aware of evidence taken in ways that are not acceptable in any court, and

our lawyers are working on that.”

Sogavare told the national parliament on May 12 that he wanted a commission of inquiry to investigate the relationship between the Australian-appointed Director of Public Prosecutions, John Cauchi, and the Australian-nominated magistrates who denied Ne’e and Dausabea bail. Sogavare said the judiciary’s independence had been “called into question”.

But Sogavare’s protestations were short-lived. Shortly before a visit by Downer and his New Zealand counterpart Winston Peters on May 19, he performed a backflip, appointing two acting ministers to replace Dausabea and Ne’e, who have been denied bail several times.

With the Solomon Islands parliament due to renew legislation by July 23 to legitimise the RAMSI intervention, Downer and Peters delivered a blunt message to Sogavare, who had also made a number of statements criticising RAMSI’s tight control over the country’s finances.

Downer declared publicly that if RAMSI’s grip were in any way loosened, Australia would leave the impoverished state to its fate and the result would be a “catastrophe”. While allowing Sogavare’s government the façade of a “review” of RAMSI’s terms, Downer said there would be no point in RAMSI staying if the government did not accept “the whole package”.

In a television interview on his return to Australia on May 21, Downer reinforced his ultimatum. He rebuked “some people in the Solomon Islands government” for “the idea that these people are a bit inconvenient in the Finance Ministry”. Downer expressed confidence that the issue was “likely to be resolved satisfactorily, but I just wanted to leave that marker there while I was in the Solomon Islands”.

Three weeks later, on June 12, Sogavare completed his about-face on the two jailed ministers, announcing permanent replacements—Isaac Inoke as police minister and Bently Ragosamani as tourism and culture minister.

As Treasurer Costello arrived in the Solomons last week, the Sogavare government was also hailing the commencement of new foreign investment laws, which were drawn up under the supervision of RAMSI’s “Economic Reform Unit” and its 17 other senior “advisers and in-line personnel” in the finance ministry.

The legislation has reduced the number of sectors protected from foreign investment from 83 to 14 and cut the deadline for approving foreign investment applications from three months to just five days. It will facilitate Australian and international involvement in the Solomons’ gold and other mineral resources, fisheries, plantations, forests and tourism projects.

The World Bank immediately welcomed the laws as a “significant step towards improving the investment climate in the Solomon Islands”. Russell Muir, lead economist for the Foreign Investment Advisory Service (FIAS)—a facility of the World Bank Group—said the Act was “an encouraging sign of the commitment of the new government to this program”.

The program of “economic reform” was outlined in a report, *Solomon Islands: Rebuilding an Island Economy*, launched by Alexander Downer in 2004, which insisted on the removal of “cumbersome investment regulations” alongside labour market deregulation to lower workers’ wages and conditions. It also called for the privatisation of basic services such as telecommunications, electricity and water, as well as the dismantling of communal land tenure.

This agenda may benefit a small layer of local business entrepreneurs but it will widen the gap with the vast majority of the impoverished population, who have no formal employment and depend instead on subsistence farming, village and communal relations, and kinship support.

Sogavare’s rapid accommodation to Canberra’s dictates underscores the neo-colonial character of the RAMSI operation and the organic incapacity of the local political elite to oppose it. For all the pretence of respecting the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands, Australia is tightening its grip over the island state.



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