

Australian government targets Solomon Islands for “regime change”

The Editorial Board
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The diplomatic row that has erupted this week between the Solomon Islands and Australia demonstrates once again the neo-colonial character of Australia’s intervention into the small Pacific Island state since 2003.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare announced on Monday that his government intended to expel Australian High Commissioner Patrick Cole for meddling in his country’s internal political affairs. Cole had been holding closed-door meetings with opposition politicians as they prepared to mount a challenge to the Sogavare government.

Far from apologising for Cole’s blatant interference, Australian Prime Minister John Howard defended the ambassador and went on to denounce Sogavare’s rather timid assertion of national sovereignty and to threaten unspecified “consequences” if the expulsion proceeded. In a letter, later released by the Solomons government, Howard described Sogavare’s decision as an “unfriendly and unwarranted act” and warned, “your action will oblige us to review our bilateral relationship”.

Canberra, however, is not about to end the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), under which hundreds of troops and police, accompanied by a small army of officials and lawyers, have taken over the country’s key levers of power, including the courts, prisons, prosecuting authorities, finance office and economic planning agencies.

The Howard government’s threats are aimed at destabilising the Sogavare government and installing a regime more amenable to Australian interests. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer denounced Sogavare’s action as “outrageous” and “abominable” and, as a first step, imposed travel restrictions on Solomon Island members of parliament, preventing them from visiting Australia on multiple-entry visas. In a country where political loyalties are notoriously fluid, Downer has calculated that threats from Canberra and the loss of privileges could well be sufficient to encourage a few MPs to join the opposition.

On Thursday, Howard warned that Australia would consider cutting aid, insisting “we have to see some improvement in growth and some reduction in corruption and some improvement in government.” Echoing the prime minister, the Australian media is now prominently featuring stories of the Sogavare government’s alleged corruption. Just months after a sustained—and successful—Australian campaign to oust East Timor’s prime minister Mari Alkatiri, “regime change” is now on the agenda in the Solomons.

Opposition leader Fred Fono immediately aligned himself with Australia, calling Cole’s expulsion “regrettable” and declaring Sogavare had become “an embarrassment to the country”. Fono tabled

a no-confidence motion in parliament, which resumes on October 2—a sure indication that his backroom discussions with High Commissioner Cole went beyond polite formalities.

As well as shoring up his government, Sogavare’s expulsion of Cole was designed to head off growing popular discontent with RAMSI’s reign. Sogavare went out of his way, however, to emphasise that he was not challenging RAMSI. In a letter to Howard on Tuesday, Sogavare said he hoped that, despite his move against Cole, relations between the two countries could be “further strengthened”.

Sogavare has been performing a desperate balancing act since he was elected prime minister in the aftermath of the anti-government and anti-RAMSI unrest that erupted in Honiara, the capital, on April 18-19. The rioting was triggered by parliament’s initial election of Snyder Rini as prime minister, following a general election that saw the defeat of the pro-RAMSI government of Allan Kemakeza. Rini, previously Kemakeza’s deputy prime minister, was widely seen as a member of the corrupt elite that had collaborated with RAMSI since 2003.

In an attempt to contain the protests, which continued despite the rapid arrival of 400 Australian troop reinforcements, Rini quit after eight days to make way for Sogavare, who postured as a critic of RAMSI. Once in office, however, Sogavare quickly accommodated himself to Canberra’s dictates. He dropped his calls for a RAMSI “exit strategy” and moved to adopt new foreign investment laws to facilitate Australian and transnational exploitation of mineral and other natural resources.

Nonetheless, the RAMSI authorities ramped up the pressure on Sogavare. Two key members of his precarious parliamentary coalition—vocal anti-RAMSI politicians, Nelson Ne’e, the MP for Central Honiara, and Charles Dausabea, the MP for East Honiara—were framed up on charges of inciting the April riots. They were arrested at gunpoint by heavily armed officers and denied bail by Australian-appointed prosecutors and magistrates.

The two MPs became Canberra’s scapegoats after eyewitnesses, including the official parliamentary speaker, accused RAMSI officers of provoking the rioting by opening fire with tear gas on demonstrators outside parliament. Sogavare sought to maintain his anti-RAMSI reputation on May 5 by appointing the two jailed MPs as cabinet ministers, only to back down on May 19 by replacing them. Downer had denounced the appointments as a “disgrace”.

On July 13, in a bid to appease local resentment, Sogavare announced a four-member inquiry, chaired by former Australian Federal Court judge Marcus Einfeld, into the causes of April’s “civil unrest”. One of the inquiry’s 11 terms of reference asked whether the MPs’ continued detention was “reasonably justified and not

politically motivated so as to deprive them and their constituents of their constitutional rights and responsibilities”.

For the Howard government, such an inquiry poses an unacceptable risk. Apart from the immediate questions over the actions of RAMSI officers, broader questions are clearly posed. Most obviously, why was there such hostility not only to Rini’s government, but to RAMSI as well?

Moves began to derail the inquiry. On August 4, Attorney-General Primo Afeau, whom Sogavare later sacked for working closely with Canberra, took court action against the inquiry being held. But a local High Court Justice, John Brown, dismissed the legal challenge on September 6.

In the meantime, the Australian media provided another means of stopping the inquiry by launching a witch hunt against Einfeld, ostensibly over an unpaid \$77 speeding fine. Sensationalised newspaper reports began just five days after Afeau initiated his legal action.

On August 29, RAMSI authorities raised the stakes by charging former Solomons foreign minister Alex Bartlett with conspiring with Dausabea and Ne’e to plan the April 18-19 violence, kill members of the former government, including Kemakeza, and wipe out Chinese businesses. Conspiracy to murder is a serious charge that could lead to lengthy imprisonment.

Sogavare declared that the country’s judicial system was “systematically falling into the control of foreign governments” and accused the Australian-appointed Director of Public Prosecutions, John Cauchi, of misconduct. “Locking Solomon Islanders up on allegations that are based on shaky evidence is akin to pursuing a strategy of legalised slavery and clearly not in the best interest of peace and national unity.”

Howard’s latest threats are yet another attempt to stop the commission of inquiry at all costs. He and Downer accused Sogavare of “subverting the legal process” by establishing the inquiry while the two MPs face trial, even though Justice Brown declared it to be perfectly legal.

Sogavare moved to expel Cole just after Downer announced he would send a special envoy to the Solomons—his departmental deputy secretary David Ritchie—to register his “serious concerns” over the inquiry. New Zealand diplomat John Larkindale joined Ritchie’s mission, displaying the New Zealand Labour government’s close collaboration with the Liberal-National coalition in Australia in the RAMSI operation.

Warning of aid cuts on Thursday, Howard declared: “I have no doubt that the people of the Solomon Islands want Australia to remain involved and committed.” The truth is that ordinary Solomon Islanders have become increasingly hostile to RAMSI’s occupation of the country. An Oxfam report issued in July warned of “a pervasive sense of exclusion from government processes and decision-making”. Oxfam reported “simmering dissatisfaction evident among both rural and urban communities in the Solomon Islands” toward the pro-market “economic reform policies” being implemented by RAMSI.

The report, *Bridging the gap between state and society. New directions for the Solomon Islands*, also punctured the Howard government’s claims, repeated ad nauseam in the Australian media, to have brought “security” to the population. One woman interviewed said: “Peace and security for women means that ...women and their children are free to move around at any time, day or night [but] even if we have peace if we can’t feed our family, it is still not balanced, if we can’t pay our school fees we still struggle”.

After more than three years of the Australian intervention, the Asia Pacific Report Card on Education ranked the Solomon Islands among the worst in the Asia-Pacific region. Less than 40 percent of children complete primary school while functional adult literacy is as low as 22 percent. The country has one of the worst infant mortality rates—66 per 1,000 live births—while its under-5 mortality rate, 73 per 1,000 live births, is second only to Papua New Guinea.

As these statistics demonstrate, the purpose of the RAMSI operation is not to uplift the living standards and safeguard the well being of ordinary people. The Howard government dispatched troops to assert its military, diplomatic and economic hegemony over the Solomons and the Asia-Pacific region. As part of its involvement in Washington’s global agenda, Canberra is also acting as a regional policeman for the US, warding off potential rivals.

The real calculations behind the confrontation with Sogavare were acknowledged in the pages of the *Australian Financial Review* on Thursday. Political correspondent Geoffrey Barker noted that Australia could not pull out of the Solomons “without leaving a vacuum to be filled by a potential regional competitor”. Barker complained that Sogavare “knows that other powers—China, Malaysia, Taiwan—would be eager to expand their influence if Australia abandoned the Solomon Islands”.

Sogavare has made no secret of his government’s relations with Taiwan. Despite initially supporting a shift of diplomatic recognition to China, he has twice visited Taipei since becoming prime minister. He is due to fly to New York next week where he reportedly will speak at the UN General Assembly in favour of admitting Taiwan as a member state. As they compete for influence in the Pacific, China and Taiwan have each offered substantial financial inducements.

The Asia Pacific region is rapidly becoming another battleground of major and minor power rivalries. The Australian government’s response has been to threaten and bully to assert its interests, followed, in the case of the Solomons and East Timor, by the deployment of troops. Howard’s decision last month to expand the Australian army to deal with “increasing instances of destabilised and failed states in our own region” indicates that more such neo-colonial interventions are already being planned.



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