

Canberra presses its agenda at Pacific Islands Forum

Rick Kelly
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The annual three-day meeting of the 16-member Pacific Islands Forum commenced on Monday in Fiji, amid aggressive efforts by the Australian government to remove the Solomon Islands government and place growing pressure on Papua New Guinea (PNG). Canberra intends to bully the tiny Pacific states into accepting its plans for political and economic reform which will augment its domination over the region.

The Howard government, however, faces a growing crisis as opposition to its agenda mounts. The governments of the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and PNG issued a joint statement yesterday, condemning last Friday's raid on the office of Solomons' Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare by Australian police. The four countries described the raid as "provocative, uncalled for, and unnecessary" and "a serious violation of Solomon Islands' territorial sovereignty and integrity".

PNG Prime Minister Michael Somare spoke out against the Howard government's recent decision to ban him and his ministers from entering Australia. "It is a real insult to me personally and to someone who has known Australian people for all these years," he declared. "It is typical of the arrogant attitude of your leaders, treating the leaders of the region with contempt."

Howard arrogantly dismissed these criticisms when he arrived in Fiji yesterday. "I'm quite sure, as so often is the case with these things, that some gentle discussion in the balmy breezes of the Pacific can do wonders to soothe nerves and reconcile differences," he said. "We'll have a nice chat and see how it all works out."

The Howard government had earlier warned the impoverished Pacific states that it would cut Australian aid unless there was an "improvement in governance standards". Canberra's demand for "good governance" is nothing more than a code-word for "obey our dictates". As the cases of the Solomons and PNG demonstrate, "anti-corruption" campaigns are only ever mounted by the Australian political and media establishment when neighbouring governments fail to toe the line.

The hypocrisy of Canberra's demand for good governance has been exposed by its extraordinary manipulation of the Solomon Islands' state apparatus against the elected government. In the past month, Australian police and legal officials in the Solomons have raided Prime Minister Sogavare's office, arrested the country's Attorney-General Julian Moti and Immigration Minister Peter Shanel, and threatened other government ministers.

These increasingly reckless provocations against the Sogavare government are aimed at shoring up the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) which took over the country's key institutions—including police, courts,

prisons, media, and finance department—in 2003. Amid rising opposition to RAMSI's neo-colonial operations from ordinary Solomon Islanders, Sogavare has threatened to replace Australian police and officials with personnel from other countries.

Much of the discussion at the Pacific Islands Forum is expected to centre on RAMSI's future and the stand-off between the Australian and Solomon Islands governments. The New Zealand Labour government of Helen Clark will play an important role in working with the Howard government to intimidate and browbeat the Pacific states. In previous Pacific Islands Forum meetings, Clark has played the "good cop" to Howard's "bad cop", and the routine looks like it will be repeated this year. The New Zealand prime minister criticised "the maligning of Australia's intentions" and backed the Australian police actions.

Howard will also be supported by US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, Christopher Hill. As part of the quid pro quo for Canberra's support for the Bush administration's interventions in the Middle East, Washington has backed the Howard government's manoeuvres in the Pacific.

The Howard and Clark governments have attempted to cloak their agenda in "humanitarian" and "anti-corruption" garb. The real motivations behind the deepening conflicts in the Pacific, however, have been openly identified by the Australian Labor Party.

"There's been a general meltdown on Australia's overall political relationships in the south Pacific," Labor's foreign affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd declared last Sunday. "What I'm concerned about overall is a total strategic drift whereby Australia's overall strategic position in the south Pacific has been weakened over the last 10 years. I'm concerned that over time other countries will move in to fill that void."

Rudd's attempt to attack the government from the right by condemning it for incompetently advancing Australia's strategic interests highlights the mounting regional rivalries. Canberra is determined to shut out its Asian and European competitors from an area it regards as Australia's "patch".

The Pacific states have significant natural resources and are located in a strategically important part of the world. France, Britain, and Germany have long colonial histories in the region, while Japan and the US fought major battles on a number of Pacific islands in World War II. More recently, Asian countries including Japan, Indonesia, and Malaysia have developed important economic ties with Pacific states, and China and Taiwan have conducted an aid bidding war to win diplomatic recognition and crucial UN General Assembly votes from the region. At present, most countries formally recognise Beijing, while six are aligned with Taipei.

The growing great power rivalry is reflected in the increasing frequency of international meetings being held to court Pacific governments. China organised an economic development and cooperation conference of allied Pacific states in Fiji in April. In May this year, Japan held the Pacific Island Leaders Meeting, where former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi pledged \$45 billion yen (\$US380 million) in aid and grants. France hosted its own Pacific summit in June, while Taiwan met its diplomatic partners in Palau last month.

“Regional leaders haven’t received this much attention since the days when the Soviet Union and the United States squared off, using the Pacific Islands as a diplomatic battle ground in the Cold War,” the *Pacific Magazine* recently noted. “Regional leaders are giddy with anticipation of new sources and levels of financial assistance.”

These developments have set off alarm bells in Canberra. Ever since the Australian nation-state was formed in 1901, dominating the south Pacific and excluding rival powers from the region was one of the central goals of the new national ruling class. After the Pacific states were granted independence in the 1970s, Canberra used aid and its regional position to dominate the region. Now, however, the Howard government faces the threat of being outmanoeuvred, as Pacific governments play off rival powers against Australia.

The Australian establishment’s response has been to aggressively advance its interests through the Pacific Islands Forum. One of the Howard government’s central aims at this year’s Forum is to ensure that member states adhere to the so-called Pacific Plan. The Plan, which was finalised last year by the Forum’s Australian secretary-general Greg Urwin, lays out a ten-year schedule for economic and political reforms that are designed to ensure Canberra’s direct domination over the region.

Urwin was first appointed at the 2003 Forum, after Canberra strong-armed the Pacific governments into voting for its man. This came just weeks after RAMSI forces were first deployed to the Solomons, and followed an intense discussion within Australian ruling circles over the future of its role in the Pacific.

A Senate inquiry in Canberra had released a report advocating a Pacific “economic and political community” which would see a regional free trade zone and a common labour market, and make the Australian dollar the single regional currency. While Howard distanced himself from the report, saying the Pacific should “crawl before we walk”; he backed the central strategy of integrating the region under Australia’s hegemony.

The Pacific Plan’s various components are deliberately vague, but nevertheless make Canberra’s dominant role clear. The document lists a series of departments and projects that are to be regionally integrated, including education and training, health programs, energy policy and oil purchases, and natural resource management. These reforms are designed not to develop rational and democratic transnational planning in the interests of ordinary Pacific Islanders, but rather to increase Australia’s leverage over the region.

Sections of the Plan also leave room for further RAMSI-like Australian takeovers. Under the banner of “good governance” for example, by 2008 there is to be “regional support to consolidate commitments to key institutions such as audit and ombudsman offices, leadership codes, anti-corruption institutions and departments of attorneys general; including through judicial training and education”.

Another central aspect of the Pacific Plan is the implementation of the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER), a free trade deal covering Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific countries. During the initial negotiations on the agreement between 1999 and

2001, the Howard government bullied and intimidated the Pacific governments to sign up to the free trade deal. Canberra eventually won a commitment to initiate PACER by 2011 at the latest, but has demanded that trade liberalisation commence immediately.

The Pacific governments are highly reluctant to do so, and for good reason. Exports from thirteen Pacific Island countries already receive special access to Australia and New Zealand, and so a free trade deal essentially means giving free rein to large transnational corporations. Without tariff protection, the minimal industry that exists in the Pacific would be quickly wiped out, exacerbating poverty and unemployment.

Tariffs comprise an average of 40 percent of Pacific countries’ tax revenue. Together with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, Canberra has demanded that this revenue be replaced by large increases in value-added taxes and other regressive taxation affecting the working class and rural poor. PACER also demands large government spending cuts and reduced public sector employment. Pacific Islands Forum research documents blithely refer to PACER’s potentially devastating consequences as “adjustment costs” and “evolution of the labour force”.

Pacific Island governments are also highly reluctant to agree to Canberra’s demand to attract more international investment by scrapping the traditional communal land holding arrangements which predominate in the region. Proposals to resolve what PACER documents refer to as “land tenure issues” by privatising tribal and communal land holdings are deeply unpopular in the Pacific.

Much is at stake with the Pacific Plan and the future of the Pacific Islands Forum. If it were to fail over the next period, Australian imperialism would face an unprecedented setback in the region. Not only would rivals in Europe and Asia advance their interests at the expense of Australia, but its value as an ally of Washington would be placed into question. After all, a “deputy sheriff” unable to secure its control over a group of tiny neighbouring island nations would hardly be seen as dependable.

As the crisis develops, the Howard government will increasingly rely on political dirty tricks and direct force in order to maintain its position. Its treatment of the Solomon Islands is just a foretaste of what is to come.



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