

Australian police raid office of Solomon Islands PM

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21 October 2006

Australian police yesterday raided the office of Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. The highly provocative action, which follows the arrest of the country's immigration minister last Wednesday, underscores Canberra's determination to remove the Sogavare government and re-establish its neo-colonial domination over the region. As the crisis in the Solomons has developed, the Howard government has made clear that it is prepared to use force against its political opponents.

Five police vehicles surrounded Sogavare's office while four Australian police officers conducted the raid. The police damaged a door as they forced their way into one room to seize a fax machine. Finance Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo, who was at the office when the raid took place, described the incident as "a slap on the face of this country" and accused the police of malicious damage. The Solomons government has launched an investigation into the incident.

The police acted just hours after Sogavare left the Solomons for Fiji, ahead of an annual meeting of the 16-member Pacific Islands Forum, which commences on Monday. There was nothing coincidental in the raid's timing. The Howard government is signalling to the Pacific states that it will brook no opposition to its agenda. Amid mounting resistance to Canberra's aggressive operations, Howard aims to strong-arm the Forum delegates into re-appointing Australia's Greg Urwin as head of the organisation for another three years.

Urwin's installation is seen as critical to the implementation of the so-called Pacific Plan, which outlines the Howard government's agenda for far-reaching economic and political regional reform under the aegis of Australian imperialism. The Pacific Plan, which was finalised last year, is designed to ensure

Canberra's domination of a region it claims as its "patch" and shut out rival European and Asian powers.

The Solomon Islands represents the keystone of the Howard government's manoeuvres. Canberra dispatched hundreds of soldiers, police, and legal and administrative personnel in 2003 after it labelled the Solomons a "failed state" and a potential threat to Australia's national security. The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) took over the country's key institutions, and was hailed by the Australian political and media establishment as a model for pre-emptive "humanitarian intervention". Announcing a major expansion of the Australian military last August, Howard named Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Fiji as potential targets.

Howard's conflict with the Sogavare government has thrown all this into question. Sogavare was targeted after he announced an official Commission of Inquiry into the causes of the riots that erupted in Honiara, the Solomons' capital, last April. The investigation threatened to expose both RAMSI's role in provoking the riots, and the mounting opposition among ordinary Solomon Islanders to the Australian occupying forces. Sogavare expelled Australian High Commissioner Patrick Cole last month after he conspired with the opposition in an attempt to derail the Commission of Inquiry.

The Howard government responded by attacking Attorney-General Julian Moti, who was centrally involved in setting up the inquiry. Canberra sought his extradition to Australia on spurious legal grounds and orchestrated his arrest in Papua New Guinea (PNG) on September 29 while he was en route from Singapore to the Solomons. After the PNG government rejected the extradition request, Moti flew back to the Solomons, where he was promptly arrested and detained by

Australian forces on illegal immigration charges. He was released on bail yesterday, though still faces prosecution and possible imprisonment for three years.

The Howard government, supported by the Labor Party and the media, has used the Moti case to berate the Solomons and PNG for alleged disrespect for the rule of law and “good governance”. This stands reality on its head. Canberra has openly trampled on the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands and manufactured trumped-up legal charges against senior figures in the Sogavare government.

Moti’s extradition order related to a 1997 child sex allegation in Vanuatu for which he had already been acquitted. Australia’s child sex tourism laws, which were never intended to be used in this manner, specifically forbid double jeopardy prosecutions. The entire case was nothing but a pretext seized upon by the Howard government to destabilise the Sogavare government. The illegal immigration charges laid against Moti after he departed PNG are similarly politically driven. As attorney-general, he was authorised to enter the country by the government, and Immigration Minister Peter Shanel issued the required documentation.

RAMSI authorities responded by targeting Shanel. Heavily-armed and camouflaged RAMSI officers arrested the minister on Wednesday. Shanel is accused of perverting the course of justice and misleading a police officer. The sole evidence for these extraordinary charges is the allegation by Shane Castles, the Australian commissioner of police in the Solomons, that Shanel told him on October 10 that Moti had not been issued with an entry authorisation. The immigration minister had apparently sent Moti the necessary paperwork two days earlier.

Sogavare condemned Shanel’s arrest. “The government will not tolerate the unnecessary arrest, detention and humiliation of a government minister duly exercising his powers and will take appropriate actions against those involved in this unwarranted action,” he declared in a statement issued from Fiji. Sogavare threatened to “deal with” Police Commissioner Castles and the country’s solicitor-general, Australian Nathan Moshinsky, who was also involved in the arrest.

Moshinsky responded by threatening to prosecute the prime minister on contempt charges, while Castles

cynically referred to a constitutional separation of powers. “Not even a prime minister can direct police operations in a democracy,” he declared.

In a move widely understood to be a precursor to Castles’ dismissal and possible expulsion from the Solomons, Sogavare instructed the Australian High Commission to redirect the police commissioner’s salary to the Solomons department of health. Castles has been paid with Australian aid money classified as “technical assistance,” which falls under the direction of the Solomons’ government. The prime minister issued the request for termination of Castles’ salary on Thursday, the day before RAMSI responded by raiding Sogavare’s office, on the pretext that Shanel had used his fax to communicate with Moti.

If Castles is successfully dismissed, the entire RAMSI operation will be thrown into question. Sogavare has already threatened to expel Australian personnel from the Solomons and replace them with forces from unspecified “other regions”. The Howard government is determined to prevent this outcome, which would be understood throughout the region and internationally as an unprecedented blow to Australia’s strategic interests in the south Pacific.

Sogavare and his ministers would like nothing better than to cut a deal with Australian imperialism and defuse the potentially explosive conflict. On Wednesday, just before RAMSI arrested Shanel, the Solomons’ Foreign Minister Patteson Oti declared that there were no plans to oust Australian personnel. The following day, Sogavare spoke of extending an “olive branch” to Canberra and said he was willing to talk with Howard at the Pacific Islands Forum.

The problem for the Sogavare government, as the latest developments demonstrate, is that there is no room for compromise as far as Canberra is concerned. The Howard government’s ultimatum to Solomon Islands and its similarly impoverished Pacific neighbours is straightforward—obey all our dictates or face continuing destabilisation and “regime change”.



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