

Solomon Islands PM condemns Australian “re-colonisation”

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In a speech to the Solomon Islands’ parliament on Wednesday, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare denounced the Australian government’s attempt to oust him from power and condemned its neo-colonial manoeuvres. The defiant address was delivered before the defeat of an opposition motion of no-confidence in the government by 28 votes to 17. The Howard government now confronts a major crisis, with the development of unprecedented resistance to its agenda in the South Pacific.

Sogavare began his condemnation of the Howard government by quoting several passages of a *World Socialist Web Site* article published on October 2. He told the parliament: “The involvement of Canberra and John Howard personally in this motion is no longer a secret, and I would like to quote from Rick Kelly’s article, ‘Canberra’s dirty tricks ahead of Solomon Islands no-confidence vote’.

“I quote as follows, ‘Whatever the outcome of this week’s parliament session in the Solomon Islands, the Howard government has made clear that it will stop at nothing to oust Sogavare and impose a government more in tune with Australia’. He went on to say, ‘The Australian government has stepped up its campaign to unseat the Solomon Islands’ Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, and strengthen its neo-colonial grip over the country. Canberra orchestrated the provocative arrest of Julian Moti, the new Solomons’ new Attorney-General, in Papua New Guinea on Friday, and has issued a series of threats ahead of today’s reconvening of the Solomon Islands Parliament’. End of quote.

“The report also places beyond all shadow of doubt that the political crisis that Solomon Islands is currently experiencing is engineered by the Australian Prime Minister. I quote, ‘The political crisis has been engineered by the Australian Prime Minister and his government, which targeted the Solomons’ government after the Australian High Commissioner Patrick Cole was expelled earlier this year for meddling in the country’s internal affairs’. End of quote.

“This is a very serious situation and it calls for a concerted effort by all Solomon Islanders to protect our country from the grips of re-colonisation. We must not allow this Parliament to be used as a tool to undermine the democratically elected government of the people of Solomon Islands. In case we forget, this parliament belongs to the people of Solomon Islands and it is their concerns and aspirations that take precedence over any other concerns. It is treason to conspire with aliens to overthrow an elected government

of the people.”

Under the banner of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), hundreds of Australian police, soldiers and administrative personnel were dispatched to the Solomons in 2003 as part of a neo-colonial operation aimed at securing Canberra’s direct control of the country’s key institutions, including the police, courts, prisons, finance department and economic planning. The Howard government deployed additional forces last April, when riots erupted in Honiara, the Solomons’ capital. Sogavare came to power in early May, after his predecessor Snyder Rini was forced to resign despite a RAMSI operation aimed at propping up his deeply unpopular government.

Sogavare, who has a long track record of manoeuvring within the Solomons’ political elite, attempted a precarious balancing act after coming to power. On the one hand, he tried to placate Canberra and accommodate its demands, while on the other he made a number of limited appeals to anti-RAMSI sentiment and attempted to reduce RAMSI’s control over the country’s economic policies. The Howard government, however, has increasingly made clear that it is not prepared to brook any opposition to its agenda in the region. Tensions erupted last month after Australian High Commissioner Patrick Cole was expelled from the Solomons for collaborating with the opposition and speaking out against the government. Canberra denounced the expulsion and has since agitated for Sogavare’s removal.

Sogavare defended Cole’s expulsion in his parliamentary speech and highlighted the Howard government’s hypocrisy. The Solomons’ High Commissioner in Australia, Sogavare pointed out, “did not make any fuss over the children overboard issue, the AWB scandal, the abuse of Aborigines in prison cells, the mishandling of the East Timor intervention, lawlessness in the streets of Sydney and the list goes on. Just imagine how Australia would have reacted if we had asked our High Commissioner in Canberra to go around in Australia and campaign against these issues. He would be sent home on the first available flight.”

The Solomons’ prime minister denounced the Howard government’s selective demands for “good governance” and hinted that RAMSI feared having the details of its activities exposed. “It becomes a situation where if the exercise of good governance would expose foreign interests’ weaknesses in this country it is considered an unfriendly act and therefore must be discontinued immediately,” Sogavare declared. “[Previous Solomons’ governments] were careless to the extent of giving the

full authority to run this country to foreign governments who hide behind the guise of having concern for the welfare of Solomon Islanders when in fact they were really concerned about their own strategic interests.”

Sogavare suggested that the parliament should review RAMSI’s operations and consider replacing Australian personnel either with UN forces or those from “other regions”. Yesterday he added that the government had “contingency plans” in place for this to proceed. A formal request from the Solomons’ government for the removal of Australian forces would be the Howard government’s worst nightmare. This would remove the fig-leaf of the Solomons parliament’s forced “invitation” in 2003 to Canberra’s intervention, and expose RAMSI’s real character.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer’s recent threats to cut aid to the Solomons were rebuffed by Sogavare. “If aid donors think that Solomon Islands will be blackmailed ... then they better think again,” he told the parliament. “We are not that cheap... Aid is becoming an effective instrument of foreign control—you do as we say or lose aid.”

Sogavare’s defence of his attorney-general Julian Moti on Thursday raises a series of questions regarding the Howard government’s role in the Solomons prior to RAMSI. Currently imprisoned in Honiara by Australian-RAMSI authorities, Moti has been targeted ostensibly for an alleged child sex offence dating back to 1997 in Vanuatu for which he has already been acquitted. The Solomons’ prime minister insisted that as far as the Howard government is concerned, Moti’s real crime is that he has been centrally involved in the official investigation into last April’s riots.

Moti helped Sogavare establish the Commission of Inquiry which was to investigate the causes of the riots and RAMSI’s role in provoking them, as well as examining RAMSI’s ongoing detention of two anti-Australian parliamentarians, Charles Dausabea and Nelson Ne’e, who were arrested in April and made scapegoats for the riots. The Howard government has attempted to derail the commission, which threatened to investigate RAMSI’s role in triggering the disturbances when Australian police provocatively fired tear gas into an anti-government demonstration outside the parliament. In examining the events of April 18, the commission would also have exposed the widespread hostility to Canberra’s neo-colonial operations in the country.

The Solomons’ prime minister suggested that the Howard government’s campaign was also intended to suppress scrutiny of its role in the events prior to the 2003 intervention. “[Moti] is determined, like the government, to go to the underlying issues that caused this country to collapse in year 2000, which to date have yet to be fully addressed by the Solomon Islands government in partnership with RAMSI,” Sogavare told the parliament. He insisted that the inquiry into April’s riots formed one aspect of the government’s broader investigation into the country’s civil unrest preceding the RAMSI operation.

In late 1998 and 1999, fighting erupted between rival militias based on neighbouring Malaita and Guadalcanal islands, and in June 2000 a Malaitan militia, working with sections of the police, launched a coup. Deepening social tensions underlay the political crisis, with the 1997 Asian financial meltdown exacerbating

poverty and unemployment throughout the Solomons. None of these social and economic problems were resolved by an Australian-brokered “peace agreement” in 2000, which only entrenched the militia leaders’ power. Amid ongoing disorder, Canberra sent in the troops in 2003 after declaring the Solomons a “failed state” and potential terrorist haven.

In the light of Sogavare’s recent statements, the question must be raised: did the Howard government foment communal divisions in the Solomons and deliberately destabilise the country in order to create the conditions for an Australian intervention? Is this why Canberra is so determined to stymie any official investigation into the origins of the Solomons’ crisis?

These questions are particularly pertinent in the context of recent developments in East Timor. The Howard government engaged in a series of dirty tricks aimed against former prime minister Mari Alkatiri, who was targeted for removal after he failed to satisfy Canberra’s demands regarding the country’s oil and gas resources and attempted to counter its influence by cultivating relations with rival powers such as Portugal and China. An important aspect of the destabilisation campaign was the whipping up of dissent within the military and police, and the fomenting of divisions between “westerners” and “easterners”.

The Solomon Islands is of major strategic significance for Australian imperialism. Ever since the founding of the Australian state in 1901, the ruling class has attempted to ensure its domination of the region and shut out rival powers in Asia and Europe. The Solomon Islands saw some of the fiercest World War II battles between Japan and the US, and its geographic position has ensured it an enduring significance in the Asia-Pacific region. With the backing of the Bush administration, Canberra now aims to maintain its domination of the region and minimise the influence of powers such as France, China, and Taiwan.

The stakes are immense. Prime Minister Howard announced a major expansion of the military in August, and openly nominated Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Vanuatu as potential targets for Australian military intervention. The RAMSI operation has been hailed, within Australia and internationally, as a model for intervention in “failed states”. Any setback in the Solomons will be seen as a major blow to the Australian ruling elite’s wider agenda in the Pacific.

Foreign Minister Downer, who has played the leading role in the Howard government’s blustering denunciations of the Solomons’ government, today issued a statement saying he would maintain a “dignified silence” in response to Sogavare’s threat to expel RAMSI. Notwithstanding this public reticence, there is no question that behind closed doors, the Howard government, backed up by the entire Australian political and media establishment, is preparing ever more aggressive and reckless actions.



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