

Solomon Islands' government survives no-confidence vote

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The Solomon Islands' government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare yesterday defeated a no-confidence motion tabled by opposition leader Fred Fono. Following a ten-hour parliamentary debate, 28 MPs voted against the no-confidence motion versus 17 in favour. The vote is a blow to the Australian government, which has mounted an aggressive campaign to depose Sogavare and his administration.

In 2003, the Howard government launched a neo-colonial takeover of the Solomons, with hundreds of troops and administrative personnel dispatched through the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). RAMSI controls the state's key institutions, including the police, courts, prisons, and finance department.

After riots erupted last April in the Solomons' capital, Honiara, Australia dispatched an additional 300 heavily armed police and soldiers. The operation, which was aimed at suppressing the local population and propping up Sogavare's predecessor, Snyder Rini, shattered the myth that the 2003 deployment was a humanitarian operation aimed at helping the Solomons people. Amid ongoing poverty and unemployment, opposition to RAMSI has continued to mount.

Sogavare fell foul of Canberra after he made a number of limited appeals to this sentiment. Last month, he expelled Patrick Cole, Australia's High Commissioner, for meddling in the country's internal affairs, whereupon the Howard government began pressing in earnest for "regime change".

The Solomons' prime minister denounced Fono and the opposition in parliament yesterday. "They have sold themselves to Canberra; this is a foreign influenced motion of no-confidence," he declared, adding that the vote had been "engineered and devised" in Canberra. "The motion is an invasion of the sovereignty of this nation.... Canberra has hated the guts of this prime

minister and are hanging on this motion to get rid of his face."

Sogavare has a long track record of issuing demagogic appeals to anti-Australian sentiment in order to advance the interests of a section of the Solomons' ruling elite. After coming to power in May, he attempted to simultaneously placate Canberra while playing to anti-RAMSI feeling. This strategy has proved untenable, however, as the Howard government has made crystal clear that it will not tolerate even the slightest opposition to Australia's neo-colonial agenda in the Pacific region.

In yesterday's parliamentary debate, Sogavare compared his situation with that of former East Timor prime minister Mari Alkatiri, who was forced to resign in June. The comparison is entirely apt. Alkatiri was removed after a sustained campaign by the Australian government and media, involving unfounded allegations of criminality and corruption. As far as the Howard government was concerned, however, the Timorese leader's real offences were his failure to satisfy Canberra's demands over Timor's oil and gas resources and his attempts to balance between Australia and other competing world powers, including Portugal and China.

In Alkatiri's case, the Australian government and media seized upon allegations that he had formed a "hit squad" to murder political opponents. In the Solomon Islands, criminal allegations against attorney-general Julian Moti have played an analogous role in relation to Sogavare. The prime minister has opposed Canberra's demand for his attorney-general's extradition to Australia on 1997 child sex allegations in Vanuatu for which Moti has already been acquitted. For this Sogavare has been accused of protecting a sex offender and perverting the rule of law.

Moti was arrested by Australian police in the Solomons on Tuesday after he entered the country from Papua New Guinea (PNG). He had previously been arrested by PNG

police but skipped bail and took refuge in the Solomons' High Commission. PNG Prime Minister Michael Somare infuriated the Howard government after he condemned Moti's arrest and refused to cooperate with the extradition request. The Solomons' attorney-general reportedly left the country on a PNG military plane.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer responded by issuing a thinly veiled threat to cut Australian aid to both the Solomon Islands and PNG. "There are serious problems with upholding the rule of law in some parts of the Pacific," he declared yesterday. "We have spent around \$800 million of taxpayers' money on the Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands initiative to help ... the ordinary people of the Solomon Islands. The ordinary people of the Solomon Islands, they know what's right and what's wrong [and] they deserve a good and decent government."

Moti's arrest underscores both the extent of RAMSI's domination of the Solomons and the Howard government's contempt for the country's sovereignty. After being arrested by Australian police, Moti faced an Australian magistrate in court yesterday, at the same time as the no-confidence motion was being debated in parliament. The judge, John Myers, rejected Moti's demand that he disqualify himself from the case because his salary is paid by the Australian government.

Howard has targeted Moti not only to destabilise the Sogavare government, but also to derail the official Commission of Inquiry into last April's riots in the Solomons' capital, Honiara. The inquiry, which Moti helped set up, threatens to shed light on RAMSI's role in provoking the two-day disturbances and expose the growing anti-Australian sentiment in the country.

Canberra is preparing for further anti-RAMSI unrest. A large RAMSI operation was mounted in Honiara yesterday, focussed on the parliament and the court where Moti was charged. Australian forces erected roadblocks around the city and searched vehicles for weapons, while an Australian-chartered helicopter hovered overhead.

Any violent incident will likely be seized upon as a pretext by the Howard government to dispatch more troops. According to a TVNZ report yesterday, New Zealand Defence Minister Phil Goff has announced that a platoon of soldiers, based at Burnham Army Camp, has been placed on standby for deployment to the Solomons. The New Zealand government has played an important supportive role in RAMSI and, if it is preparing to send in additional troops, the Australian military is undoubtedly doing likewise.

A renewed intervention would be aimed at overthrowing the Solomons' government. With Sogavare's defeat of the no-confidence motion, the Howard government may conclude that military force is the only means left of propping up RAMSI and securing Australia's hold over the Pacific country.

Any such operation would be welcomed by the entire Australian political and media establishment. The opposition Labor Party has backed all of Howard's manoeuvres, while the media's campaign against Sogavare and Moti is aimed at conditioning the Australian public for further military interventions. All the major newspapers, from the Murdoch stable to the "liberal" *Sydney Morning Herald*, have backed the Howard government's attempt to prosecute Moti, and Sogavare is increasingly being portrayed as a dangerous madman.

The Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* published a bizarre rant by Piers Akerman today titled, "Threat of poisonous pygmies", in which he made an amalgam of the North Korean and Solomon Islands governments. "Australians have every reason to feel angry that their tax dollars are supporting the people of nations like North Korea, PNG and the Solomons while the leaders of those nations abuse international obligations and insult their benefactors," Akerman declared. "But we have little choice if we are to maintain a humanitarian approach to those suffering under evil regimes."

Akerman's expression of concern for the people of the Solomons and support for a "humanitarian approach" is nothing but a cover for his real agenda—promoting the overthrow of Sogavare's "evil regime".



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