Canberra maintains aggressive stance toward Solomon Islands government

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The tense standoff between the Australian and Solomon Islands governments is continuing. After his efforts to defuse tensions were rebuffed by Canberra, Solomons Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare made a new threat to curtail the Australian-led the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

On November 14, Sogavare accused Australian personnel of involvement in prostitution with local women and pledged to rescind RAMSI's legal immunity. He also issued a statement the day before, instructing Solomon Islanders to "watch out for Australian agents in the country; to watch out for dirty manipulative words to oust the current government".

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer immediately dismissed the allegations, and suggested that Sogavare would prove unable to alter RAMSI's legal status. For this to occur, the Solomons' parliament would have to revise or scrap the 2003 Facilitation Act, which gave foreign forces sweeping powers, including immunity from prosecution under local law.

The legislation, which preceded Australia's military deployment, was initially passed amid intense pressure and threats from the Howard government. About 700 RAMSI personnel, including more than 200 soldiers and 250-300 police, now control the Solomon Islands' state apparatus, including the police, prisons, legal system, government media, finance department and banking system.

Sogavare's latest accusations come amid growing hostility from ordinary Solomon Islanders toward the Australian forces. The Howard government launched the military intervention in 2003 under a humanitarian banner, and even labelled the mission "Helping a friend".

Three years later, however, it has done nothing to alleviate the wretched social conditions faced by the majority of the population. A recent survey found that of the 50,000 people living in the capital, Honiara, 17,000 live in impoverished illegal squatters' camps on government land. Numerous Solomon Islands media reports have described the intense anti-RAMSI sentiment among unemployed youth living in the squatter settlements.

The hostility has been fuelled by the vastly superior pay and conditions afforded to Australian and other foreign personnel in the country. RAMSI personnel live in isolated and relatively lavish surrounds, reminiscent of those enjoyed by the country's former British colonial officials, and contribute nothing toward the economy except artificially inflated property prices and a boom in luxury items.

The heavy-handed operations of Australian police have also antagonised the population. RAMSI personnel were targeted during riots that erupted in Honiara in April over attempts to thwart the outcome of national elections. Amid corruption allegations, the parliament chose Snyder Rini as prime minister despite the electoral routing of the previous pro-RAMSI government, in which he had been deputy prime minister. The violence broke out after Australian police fired tear gas into a demonstration outside parliament.

Anger has continued to mount. In a revealing incident on November 11, a crowd in Honiara attacked two Australian police who had attempted to arrest a local man on assault charges. The group bombarded the police with rocks, and were only deterred when the Australians fired warning shots. "I am very concerned that if people continue to put the police into life threatening situations it will only be a matter of time before someone is seriously injured or even killed," police commissioner Shane Castles declared.

Sogavare, who came to power within days of the April riots, is highly conscious of the social powder keg he is sitting upon. Once in office, Sogavare attempted to placate the Howard government while simultaneously working to channel anti-RAMSI sentiment behind his government. He called for an "exit strategy" for the occupying forces, and initiated a Commission of Inquiry into the causes of the April riots, including RAMSI's role in instigating the unrest. The commission was also to examine political factors behind the detention of two parliamentarians, Nelson Ne'e and Charles Dausabea, on incitement charges.

The inquiry threatened to shed light on anti-RAMSI sentiment in Solomons—an issue that the Australian media

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has deliberately suppressed—and further upset the stability of Canberra's operations in the region. The Howard government responded by moving to sabotage the inquiry and destabilise the Solomons' government. The conflict escalated after Sogavare retaliated against Canberra's dirty tricks by expelling Australian High Commissioner Patrick Cole in September.

The Howard government then launched a witchhunt against the Solomons' attorney general, Julian Moti, on a 1997 rape charge in Vanuatu for which he had already faced court and been acquitted. Moti was arrested in the Solomons on October 10 by Australian police on trumped-up immigration charges, and will soon face trial before an Australian judge. RAMSI police also arrested Peter Shanel, the country's immigration minister, on charges relating to the Moti case, and in yet another provocation, raided Prime Minister Sogavare's office on October 20.

Despite these measures, the Sogavare government has made overtures toward Canberra in recent weeks. It offered to hand over Moti to authorities in Australia on condition that he be granted bail, and announced that the Commission of Inquiry would no longer investigate the arrest of Ne'e and Dausabea. These measures again demonstrated the venal character of the Sogavare government and its incapacity to mount any principled challenge to Australia's neo-colonial operations.

Sogavare's problem is that Canberra is unwilling to negotiate a compromise, and demands complete compliance. With little room to manoeuvre, the Solomons' prime minister has refused to withdraw the Commission of Inquiry. He continues to insist that the pending Pacific Islands Forum review of RAMSI's activities be based on his government's "six point plan", which includes a RAMSI exit strategy and a reduced Australian influence over the nominally regional mission.

The Howard government calculates that any concession in the Solomon Islands would undermine its authority throughout the region. In PNG and Fiji the crisis has already emboldened elements of the ruling elite who are looking to China and other powers for aid, investment and political assistance to offset Australia's domination. Canberra's increasingly aggressive actions are in turn driven by the fear of ceding geo-strategic influence to rival regional powers in what Howard has designated "our patch".

The New Zealand Labour government has distanced itself somewhat from Canberra's approach. "The consent environment for the [RAMSI] regional mission is not what it was," New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark admitted on November 13 in a speech delivered in Germany. "I believe [RAMSI] can be secured if the mission has a broader Pacific flavour about it, and if clear benchmarks towards an exit strategy can be set."

Clark senses in the mounting regional hostility to Canberra an opportunity to advance New Zealand's independent interests. While the New Zealand government has been an active accomplice of Canberra's neo-colonial interventions in the region, it has long sought to gain regional advantage by portraying itself as a sensitive ally of the Pacific states.

"We cannot act effectively without the agreement of our partners in the region," Clark explained. "A hallmark of New Zealand's diplomacy in the south Pacific is our commitment to seeking a strong consent environment for what we do."

The Howard government has not backed down, however. "I think inevitably there are going to be moments of tension with some of the political elites," Downer declared on November 15. "When we embarked on this change of policy in 2003 we did it very much with our eyes open. We knew that it would be resisted by some people, particularly by some of what you might call the political elite, in some of the countries of the region.... We are a very big country by the standards of the south Pacific and I suppose you put up with a modicum of criticism."

The Howard government's stance has led to calls within Australian ruling circles for an open discussion of the implications of the re-emergence of regional colonial rule. "If the job [in the Solomons] is to be done properly, Australia is unmistakably launching a new form of colonialism, the nature of which is not yet fully understood or developed but which is none the less real," Michael O'Connor writes in the latest edition of *Quadrant*. "If we are to understand this reality—and support the commitment it deserves—it may be first necessary to abandon the shibboleth that colonialism is irredeemably bad."

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