

The Howard government, RAMSI, and the April 2006 Solomon Islands' riots

Part 1

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The following is the first of a two-part article. Part 2 will appear tomorrow, Thursday February 22.

The ongoing campaign by the Australian government against the Solomon Islands' government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare over the past several months has involved a series of extraordinary police provocations, media slander, and other dirty tricks and illegal manoeuvres. Its central focus has been to obstruct Sogavare's Commission of Inquiry into the causes of last April's riots in Honiara, the country's capital, and stop it from proceeding. The Howard government's unrelenting efforts to derail the investigation raise a series of questions regarding its own role in the riots.

A growing body of evidence suggests that Australian forces may have deliberately provoked the rioting and then stood down their security personnel for two days in order to allow the looting and violence to go unchecked. The crisis created the conditions for the Howard government to deploy hundreds more soldiers and police to the Solomons in the aftermath of a general election in which its favoured candidate, Prime Minister Allen Kemakeza, was defeated. Only in this way could Canberra ensure that its takeover of the Solomon Islands' administration, economy and state apparatus would be secure.

The Kemakeza government had played a critical role in facilitating the Howard government's intervention in the Solomons in 2003. In July that year, Canberra launched the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). More than 2,000 soldiers and police were deployed, backed up by naval warships and air force support. Scores of Australian legal personnel, economists, bureaucratic officials, and advisors were also sent in to take over the Solomons' state apparatus, including the police and prison systems, the judiciary, economic planning and finance departments, and the media.

The Howard government justified the intervention on the basis that the Solomons was a "failing state" that was at risk of becoming a regional centre of international terrorism and transnational crime. It also claimed that RAMSI was a humanitarian mission aimed at helping the Solomons' people. These cynical justifications were made under the convenient cover of Kemakeza's "invitation" requesting Australian intervention. Just before the Australian forces landed, the Solomons' parliament passed the Facilitation Act, a bill that made RAMSI personnel immune from Solomons' law and exempted them from all immigration and visa controls.

The Facilitation Act had in fact been drafted by Canberra, and Kemakeza's invitation to Australian forces came amid Howard government threats of an ongoing Australian aid embargo and other sanctions. The military-led intervention itself was a neo-colonial operation that had nothing to do with concern for the Solomons' people or potential terrorist threats. The real motivations were bound up with a major shift in

Australian foreign policy in the South Pacific, reflecting the changed international situation caused by the eruption of US militarism.

RAMSI came just four months after the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq, which was aimed at placing that country and its substantial resources under US domination and providing a staging post for further US interventions throughout the Middle East and beyond. The Iraq war demonstrated the Bush administration's contempt for international law and its willingness to utilise military aggression as a means of extending its global hegemony against its Asian and European rivals. The Howard government provided political and military support and, in return, received US backing for its own agenda in the South Pacific.

That agenda involves pushing back efforts by rival powers to encroach on a region Howard has dubbed Australia's "special patch". The growing economic and diplomatic influence of China is of particular concern, because it threatens vital financial and strategic interests of the Australian ruling elite.

The Solomon Islands operation has been merely the opening salvo in a long-term strategy of restructuring the entire region in the interests of Australian imperialism and locking out potentially hostile actors. RAMSI has been hailed as a model for further interventions, with Fiji and Papua New Guinea among the immediate targets. In a revealing interview published last December, Howard warned the Australian people to expect ongoing military operations for the next 10 to 20 years. At the same time he announced a major expansion in the size of the armed forces, and a campaign to enlist school leavers.

The Kemakeza government came to power in December 2001 and, from 2003, functioned as little more than a puppet regime for Canberra, providing a helpful fig leaf for RAMSI's domination. The government formally retained sovereign authority, allowing the Australian political and media establishment to portray its intervention as a cooperative mission in partnership with the Solomons' people. In reality Canberra called the shots.

Kemakeza remained obedient for good reason. Not long after arriving, RAMSI forces arrested and jailed a number of Solomons' politicians—including senior ministers in the Kemakeza government—on charges of corruption and connections with rival Guadalcanal and Malaita militias. It was widely known that if anyone were guilty of such charges it was Kemakeza—on both counts. Nevertheless, he remained the primary "big fish" who went unchallenged by Australia's legal authorities. The mutual understanding was obvious: Kemakeza would stay out of jail so long as he obeyed Canberra's demands.

Kemakeza's government was the first to survive a full term in office since the Solomons gained independence from Britain in 1978. The lack of any parliamentary tradition, combined with huge economic and social pressures and shifting political loyalties created deep-going instability.

But once RAMSI was on the ground, its personnel worked closely with Australian High Commission staff to stabilise the regime—encouraging opposition parliamentarians to join Kemakeza's coalition and pressuring them not to sponsor motions of no confidence.

Despite the appearance of political stability, however, opposition to RAMSI rapidly developed among ordinary Solomon Islanders. Canberra's promises of humanitarian assistance failed to materialise, and while tens of millions of dollars were poured into building the Solomons' police and prison systems, nothing was done to provide decent health and education services for ordinary people. Poverty and unemployment remained rife, particularly among young people living in Honiara's squatter settlements. Resentments also developed over the relatively lucrative salaries and living conditions enjoyed by RAMSI personnel, which pushed up rents and other living costs and deepened social inequality.

It was in this context that Canberra anticipated with trepidation the April 2006 elections, the seventh since the country's independence and the first under RAMSI rule.

In April 2005 the Australian Strategic Policy Institute had issued a report authored by Elsina Wainwright, "How is RAMSI faring?", which expressed concern over RAMSI's prospects. "The operation remains fragile [and is] vulnerable to shifting political alignments," the report stated. "A realignment of political forces in Honiara could see parliament's support for RAMSI evaporate."

Wainwright's warnings carried considerable weight, not least because her June 2003 report on the Solomons, "Our Failing Neighbour", became the blueprint for the RAMSI intervention.

The Kemakeza government was routed when the general election was finally held on April 5 last year. Nine of Kemakeza's twenty ministers lost their seats, as did the majority of government backbenchers. The vote expressed Solomon Islanders' hostility towards the administration's corruption and impotence, and deep dissatisfaction with RAMSI's broken promises, along with the government's failure to resolve any of the their social and economic problems.

No single party or faction came close to winning a parliamentary majority, making necessary the negotiation of a coalition government. On April 18, 2006 a parliamentary vote saw Snyder Rini, Kemakeza's deputy prime minister, installed as prime minister. All eleven Kemakeza ministers who had been re-elected joined the new government.

Solomon Islanders reacted to the announced outcome with outrage, generally believing it to have been rigged through corruption and bribery. An angry crowd converged on the parliament to demand Rini's resignation. Protestors faced off against a contingent of RAMSI and Solomons' police for three hours. Peter Kenilorea, the parliamentary speaker, pleaded with RAMSI to let him negotiate with the crowd, but instead the Australian police fired rounds of tear gas. Their actions sparked retaliatory violence and widespread looting, which continued into the following day. RAMSI vehicles and property were targeted and about 50 RAMSI and emergency services personnel were injured. One-quarter of Honiara's commercial centre, including Chinatown, was destroyed by fire, and numerous shops were ransacked by impoverished and desperate residents.

The University of Queensland's Dr. Clive Moore—a Solomon Islands' expert who supports RAMSI—witnessed video footage of the April 18 demonstration outside parliament. "Early on the crowd was rowdy but unthreatening, until the riot gear was handed out (only to RAMSI officers) and the tear gas began to fly," he explained. "Had senior political figures and senior police been allowed to talk the crowd down, Solomon Islanders feel sure the riots would not have occurred."

The Howard government, working with the New Zealand Clark government, responded to the riots by dispatching more than 350 Australian and New Zealand soldiers and an additional 120 police. These

forces began arriving on the evening of the 19th—by which time the rioting had ceased. Rini attempted to cling onto power, but resigned before an opposition-sponsored parliamentary vote of no confidence was held. On May 4, Sogavare was elected prime minister and formed a multi-party coalition government.

There has been no investigation into the events on April 18 and 19, and a series of questions remains unanswered.

Why were none of the standard security measures for elections in place? Who ordered tear gas to be fired into the crowd outside parliament? How was it possible for an unarmed crowd of protestors and looters to destroy much of Honiara over two days, with armed RAMSI police apparently unable to prevent the violence? Why did the Australian soldiers who were already stationed in Honiara do *nothing* in response to the unrest? Why was Police Commissioner Shane Castles not seen in public on April 18? Was he even in the capital and on duty that day?

Castles, a former Australian Federal Police (AFP) officer, was appointed Solomons' police chief in April 2005. The previous commissioner, British national William Morrell, had wished to serve another term, but Canberra declined to fund his salary. Australian "aid" money was instead used to install Castles, who had been the AFP's General Manager of International Operations. The appointment was widely regarded in the Solomons as a move by the Howard government to further extend its control over the country.

In an interview with the *Solomon Star* published on May 19 last year, Castles insisted that "at no time did we have intelligence to indicate or suggest the level of violence experienced in Honiara on 18 and 19 April, 2006". Asked if he had anticipated public hostility towards Rini after the parliamentary vote, the police commissioner replied, "No, and certainly not to the level of unexpected and unprecedented violence... There were in excess of 30 officers at parliament for the PM's election. The resources allocated were commensurate with the assessed low to moderate level of threat for this event."

Castles's account lacks all credibility. Everyone in Honiara knew that unrest was likely following the parliamentary vote. After the general election, parliamentarians divided into three different factions, each of which engaged in various manoeuvres aimed at garnering sufficient support to form government. Tensions escalated amid allegations that Taiwanese diplomats and ethnic Chinese businessmen were buying parliamentarians' votes in order to install their preferred candidates in power. In this context, Castles's assessment that the parliamentary vote represented a "low to moderate level of threat" beggars belief.

"There was clearly prior knowledge of what was about to occur," Clive Moore wrote in a paper presented at an academic workshop in May this year. "For instance, local police went door to door along the central Mendana Avenue shops fully two hours before the riot at the parliament, telling the Chinese shopkeepers to close their doors because they had prior intelligence of the coming attack."

"Local police were certainly expecting trouble," he added in another essay. "They were puzzled that no prior strategic plan had been issued to deal with the possible trouble, and decided not to wait for instructions... The size of the April 2006 riots was hard to predict, but violence was always a possible outcome of the parliamentary decision and all Solomon Islanders knew it."

Moore also pointed out that the violence witnessed in the April riots was not, as Castles claimed, "unprecedented". Social tensions in Honiara have periodically erupted into rioting—in 1989, 1993, 1996, and 1998—and ethnic Chinese businessmen have been consistently targeted.

Mike Wheatley, assistant police commissioner in the Solomons between 1995 and 2000, revealed that it has long been standard operating procedure for police to secure the parliament building and position officers on Honiara's main thoroughfares. Access to Chinatown is limited to two bridges over a river, allowing it to be defended even with only

limited police resources.

Wheatley described as “unbelievable” RAMSI’s failure to mount any of the usual preparations. “How can such a thing happen on RAMSI’s watch—with the region’s superpower, Australia, in charge?” he asked last May. “Where’s the stench of burning reputations to match the stench of burning Chinese stores? There was plenty of reporting by the media, some obfuscation by the usual suspects but no detailed commentary. Instead, there were claims by senior people that it was all a big ‘surprise’ (according to [Australian Federal Police chief] Mike Keelty) or an ‘intelligence failure’ (according to [the *Australian*’s foreign affairs columnist] Greg Sheridan) or that the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) were ‘overwhelmed by the numbers that they faced’ (according to Keelty again, and to [New Zealand Foreign Minister] Phil Goff).”

Wheatley explained why none of these accounts was plausible. “It is standard procedure for the disciplinary forces of Solomon Islands to be on alert during any national election, stepping up as parliament is convened for the election of PM,” he explained “If forces had been pre-deployed as per usual Solomon Islands procedures and operational experience, then there would not have been any surprises on ‘RAMSI Tuesday’ [April 18]... Their [i.e., the RAMSI forces’] failure on ‘RAMSI Tuesday’ was not the result of a lack of intelligence. At a tactical level, the debacle was caused by a failure in leadership. At the strategic level, it was an awe-inspiring mission failure with implications for the much-vaunted regional intervention model called RAMSI.”

Wheatley also questioned why Australian soldiers in Honiara were never mobilised, even as the Howard government sent hundreds more troops into the country. “Where was the infantry, the final arbiter when things get out of hand in the streets? Not seen or heard... Perhaps the real figure of 100 soldiers is wrong. Perhaps there was only a platoon of, say 30, men. Whatever their real strength, why weren’t they immediately deployed to the meat grinder in Chinatown?”

Taken together, what is known about the events of April 18-19, 2006 leaves little doubt that Australian forces were deliberately stood down in order to allow for an extended eruption of violence. Certainly the least plausible explanation is that offered by Castles and other Australian officials.

To be continued



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