

Bush administration backs Canberra's campaign against Solomon Islands' government

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In a rare direct intervention into South Pacific affairs, Washington has thrown its weight behind the Australian government's provocative efforts to remove the Solomon Islands' government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. On March 15, US Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Glyn Davies testified before the House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Asia subcommittee. "We are seeking to expand our engagement and reverse any perception that the US has withdrawn from the Pacific," Davies explained. "We are labelling 2007 'The Year of the Pacific'... We are, and will remain, a Pacific power."

Davies visited the Solomon Islands in February and met with senior government ministers and officials. "My message on behalf of the US government was very clear," he told the Congressional subcommittee. "We strongly support the efforts of Australia, New Zealand and other countries in the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) as they work to promote stability, rule of law, and economic development.... The bedrock of our relations in the region remains, of course, our treaty alliance with Australia. We simply have no more steadfast partner in the region and in the world today. Our tactics are not always the same, but we share the same broad objectives."

The Bush administration's intervention on behalf of its regional "deputy sheriff" underscores the extent of the crisis facing the Howard government. In 2003, Howard dispatched more than 2,000 troops, police, and officials to take over the Solomons' state apparatus, including the legal, police and prison systems, the media, and economic and finance departments. This neo-colonial intervention was driven by the Australian ruling elite's determination to maintain exclusive control over the markets and natural resources in what it has long regarded as its particular sphere of influence. The Bush administration backed the Howard government's aggressive new South Pacific strategy as part of the quid pro quo for Canberra's support for Washington's illegal interventions in the Middle East.

The RAMSI operation, however, faces an escalating crisis, with the Sogavare government demanding an Australian "exit strategy" and attempting to wrest a measure of control from RAMSI personnel over economic policy and some other areas. Canberra has rejected out of hand these limited demands, initiating, in response, a series of efforts to destabilise the Sogavare

government.

"Regime change" was made the order of the day after Sogavare announced the formation of an official Commission of Inquiry into the causes of rioting which erupted in Honiara on April 18 and 19 after national elections. The Howard government has been determined to block any investigation into the riots. There is significant evidence that Australian authorities anticipated the violence and allowed it to proceed in order to create the conditions for the dispatch of hundreds more soldiers and police required to shore up RAMSI's control (see "The Howard government, RAMSI, and the April 2006 Solomon Islands' riots").

Amid mounting hostility among ordinary Solomon Islanders to RAMSI's presence, the Sogavare government has refused to accede to Canberra's dictates. Australian High Commissioner Patrick Cole was expelled in September last year and Police Commissioner Shane Castles removed from his post last December. Both men played leading roles in Canberra's dirty tricks campaign against the Solomons' government. In recent weeks Sogavare has accused RAMSI personnel of involvement in prostitution and of covering up vehicle accidents in which they damaged property and injured Solomon Islanders. He has also halted RAMSI's "outreach" program in rural areas on the grounds that it constitutes "Australian propaganda".

Sogavare even accused the Howard government of attempting to assassinate him. In a murky incident, a 61-year-old Australian Vietnam war veteran was arrested in Honiara on January 30 on charges of plotting to kill the prime minister in return for a \$50,000 bounty. Howard denied that his government was involved in any plot, and a Solomons' court later dropped the charges for lack of evidence. Sogavare, however, accused legal officials of buckling to behind-the-scenes RAMSI pressure.

Whatever the truth of the alleged conspiracy, there is no doubt that the Solomons' prime minister has made use of the episode for his own purposes. Ever since coming to power in May last year, Sogavare has stressed that he is not opposed to RAMSI's presence and merely wants the Solomons' political elite to have a greater say in national affairs. The Howard government's refusal to compromise and relinquish any aspect of RAMSI's control has forced Sogavare to go on the offensive and appeal for popular support on the basis of a nationalist and anti-RAMSI pitch.

It remains to be seen what Washington's "expanded

engagement” in the Pacific will mean for the Solomon Islands. The first step may well be for the Bush administration to place more pressure on Taiwan to toe the line in the Pacific. The Sogavare government’s ability to manoeuvre against Canberra has only been possible because of assistance received from rival powers, especially Taiwan. The Solomon Islands is one of six Pacific countries that extends diplomatic recognition to Taipei rather than Beijing, in exchange for large Taiwanese aid and economic assistance packages.

US Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Glyn Davies told the Foreign Affairs subcommittee that China and Taiwan’s “chequebook diplomacy” was “undermining good governance” and distorting political processes. These accusations are utterly hypocritical. The greatest practitioners of “chequebook diplomacy” in the Pacific are the US and its ally, Australia. Washington’s concern is not with the integrity of democratic forms of rule but rather with the undermining of its influence in the Pacific, an area it claimed as an “American lake” in the aftermath of World War II.

The economic rise of China in particular has led to a new influx of investment and aid money into the South Pacific. Established diplomatic relations have been rapidly destabilised as Pacific Island ruling elites have utilised Chinese patronage to manoeuvre against powers such as the US and Australia. These developments have alarmed foreign policy strategists in both Washington and Canberra, who have warned that the Pacific Island states may assist China counter US naval dominance of the strategically-critical Pacific Ocean. However far-off this possibility may be, any diminution of Washington’s control over the Pacific would seriously undermine US imperialism’s global hegemony.

The Howard government is now desperate to reassure the Bush administration that it is a reliable US partner in the region and can be trusted to maintain control. In January, Canberra pressured Taipei into withdrawing its offer to train and arm a new Solomon Islands’ security force for Prime Minister Sogavare. Washington no doubt also threw its weight behind the Australian demand. The only armed personnel in the Solomons, including the government’s security detail, are RAMSI forces.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer seized upon Sogavare’s attempted arming of a section of the Solomons’ police as a pretext for issuing an extraordinary “open letter” to the people of the Solomon Islands on February 9. The letter condemned Sogavare for undermining RAMSI and effectively called on the people to overthrow the government. Four former Australian diplomats—Tony Kevin, Bruce Haigh, Alison Broinowski, and Richard Broinowski—publicly condemned Downer’s “unprecedented action” as a “crude attempt to undermine the national sovereignty of the Solomons [which] amounts to a cowardly act of bullying”.

In his letter, Downer raised the possibility of a return of the communalist violence between rival militias from Guadalcanal and Malaita provinces that wracked the country from 1998 to 2003. “To reintroduce guns, I think Mr Sogavare wants to take Solomon Islands back to where it was before RAMSI went in,” he declared. “I think Mr Sogavare’s view is to get rid of RAMSI and to go back to the situation where the country was basically run by the

Malaitan Eagle Force [militia] and people like that.”

Downer’s extremely provocative statement was intended to justify the ongoing and indefinite presence of RAMSI personnel in the Solomons on the basis that the only alternative to the Australian occupation was civil war.

The Howard government, however, bears direct responsibility for the communal violence that erupted in 1998 in the immediate aftermath of the Asian economic crisis. The Solomon Islands was badly hit by the crisis and suffered a severe recession that exacerbated poverty, unemployment and social inequality. Acting as the regional enforcer of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund’s dictates, Canberra backed Honiara’s austerity measures, which included the sacking of thousands of public sector workers. As the ensuing social tensions were channelled into Malaita and Guadalcanal communal chauvinism—divisions which had previously been whipped up and manipulated by the British colonial authorities—the Howard government did nothing to help the Solomons’ people. Instead, in 2002 Canberra imposed a devastating aid embargo, which effectively bankrupted the country.

Questions remain unanswered as to whether the Howard government played an even more direct role in instigating the communalist violence in order to destabilise the Solomons and create the conditions for the 2003 RAMSI intervention. No proper investigation has ever been undertaken into the forces behind the militia violence. But if RAMSI were to be asked to leave the country now, it cannot be excluded that Canberra would be prepared to rekindle the internecine conflict.

Honiara’s parliamentary opposition has openly aligned itself with Canberra and RAMSI against Sogavare, but has failed to unseat the government. Sogavare easily defeated a parliamentary no-confidence motion last October, and the opposition unsuccessfully attempted to move another vote before parliament adjourned in February. The opposition—whose ranks are largely drawn from former members of the despised Kemakeza government, which acted as a corrupt fig-leaf for RAMSI’s control from 2003 to 2006—has been unable to rally any significant support.

Despite the Howard government’s numerous setbacks, it is preparing to ratchet up its campaign against the Sogavare government. Australian imperialism has far too much at stake to allow RAMSI’s domination of the Solomons to falter. With the operation previously hailed as a model for potential interventions in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and other South Pacific countries, failure in the Solomons would seriously undermine Canberra’s role throughout the region and damage its standing in Washington.



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