

Solomon Islands government defeats no-confidence motion

Patrick O'Connor
25 August 2007

On August 17, the speaker of the Solomon Islands' parliament, Peter Kenilorea, ruled that an attempted no-confidence motion brought by the opposition against the government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare was inadmissible under parliamentary standing orders. The decision represents a significant blow to the Australian government-driven campaign to bring down the Solomons government, since it appears to have prevented another no-confidence vote until the next parliamentary session in 2008.

Canberra targetted the Sogavare government for removal soon after it came to power in May last year. The Howard government had dispatched more than 1,000 soldiers and police to the Solomon Islands in 2003, along with scores of bureaucrats, legal personnel, and other officials. The Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) took over the Solomons' state apparatus, including courts, prisons, police, finance department and public service. Sogavare came to be regarded as a threat to the Australians' indefinite occupation after he called for a RAMSI "exit strategy" and attempted to re-establish his government's control over public spending.

The Howard government's drive for "regime change" in Honiara has involved an extraordinary campaign of dirty tricks, provocations, and slander. The Solomons' opposition, led by Fred Fono, has closely aligned itself with this campaign.

Speaking in parliament on August 21, Sogavare made thinly veiled references to Canberra's role in the attempted no-confidence motion. "What is interesting, Mr Speaker, is the level of foreign interest in the motions [of no-confidence]," he declared. "For example, when the first one was defeated, certain factions of foreigners in this country expressed open disappointment, which is shocking. This is shocking because if such is the situation then we have foreign elements in this country that have ulterior motives that are potentially dangerous to the security of this country."

There is no doubt that Fono's parliamentary manoeuvres enjoy the backing of Canberra and are being accompanied by behind-the-scenes efforts to encourage government MPs to cross the floor. On August 4, Fono was arrested on two conspiracy charges relating to an alleged bribe of \$SI150,000 (\$A7,800) offered to government minister Severino Nuaiasi in June. Nuaiasi refused to join the opposition and turned the cash over to the police. Fono appeared in court on August 6 alongside the alleged financier of the bribe—a businessman known as Mataiwelli—and Wilson Maie Maie, the alleged middleman. Fono has admitted paying the money but

insists it was not a bribe, claiming it was instead an act of charity allowing the MP to send his son to school in New Zealand. Fono is due to appear in court later this month and will likely face additional charges.

Further allegations against the opposition were issued in parliament on August 20. Parliamentarian Charles Dausabea produced a letter, dated January 19, 2007, addressed by North Malaita MP Enele Kwanairara to former militants, encouraging them to expose parliamentarians previously involved in militia operations. Dausabea claimed the opposition was attempting to implicate him and Sogavare in illegal activities relating to the communal conflict between Guadalcanal and Malaitan militias which first erupted in 1998.

Sogavare served as prime minister for 18 months in the aftermath of a coup carried out by the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF) on June 5, 2000. While he has always denied foreknowledge of the coup or any involvement in militia activity, his political enemies have attempted to portray him as an MEF stooge.

If Dausabea's allegations are true, the opposition is now encouraging Australian authorities to arrest Sogavare on charges relating to this period. Dausabea told the parliament that he had information that two RAMSI officers had recently taken statements from imprisoned ex-militants. He said that one of these prisoners had made allegations to him of "carrying out orders from people in higher places". Dausabea called on the opposition to refrain from "unusual techniques" and "unwarranted schemes" aimed at bringing down the government.

Opposition leader Fono denied any involvement, while the author of the letter, Kwanairara, said he had done nothing wrong and had merely wanted to expose those behind the 2000 coup.

RAMSI officials have not publicly responded to Dausabea's allegations. Canberra, however, has already tacitly endorsed the highly provocative moves to destabilise the Sogavare government through the reignition of communal tensions. On February 9, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer issued an "open letter" to the people of the Solomons and accused the government of wanting "to get rid of RAMSI and to go back to the situation where the country was basically run by the Malaitan Eagle Force and people like that."

Despite its efforts, the opposition has so far proven unable to win sufficient support to challenge the government. Sogavare comfortably defeated a previous no-confidence motion last October, and several opposition parliamentarians have since joined

the government, giving it a large parliamentary majority.

Dausabea's statements in parliament came shortly after his acquittal, together with fellow government MP Nelson Ne'e and businessman and former foreign minister Alex Bartlett, on attempted murder, arson, and riot charges relating to the two days of rioting which destroyed much of central Honiara on April 18-19 last year.

Bartlett was acquitted of all charges on August 1. While three charges were dropped against Dausabea, he still faces one alternative charge of inciting riot outside the Solomons' parliament. Ne'e was found not guilty of four charges but the judge ruled a prima facie case had been established on one intimidation charge.

High Court Judge Justice David Cameron ruled that none of the three witness statements issued against Bartlett was corroborative and so could not support a conviction. One of the witnesses admitted to the court that he had previously lied while giving evidence and that he had been prepared to change his statement for money.

Following his acquittal, Bartlett condemned the Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers who had led the investigation against him and accused them of using "Solomon Islands comen" to frame him. "These comen were willing to tell lies," he declared. "AFP is supposed to uphold justice, law and order but they have acted unjustly, falsely accused people and put them behind bars."

Bartlett's allegations add further weight to earlier claims that Australian officials had offered key witnesses financial inducements. Last May the *Solomon Star* reported that it had seen a memorandum of understanding signed by two witnesses and the former police commissioner, Shane Castles. (Castles, an AFP officer, was subsequently sacked and barred from the country by the Sogavare government.) The document established that Australian police offered to pay the school fees of the witnesses' children, along with other costs, supposedly as compensation for the time spent by the witnesses in assisting the investigation.

The High Court acquittals raise further serious questions about the nature of RAMSI's prosecution of the three men and about Canberra's role in the April riots.

Why, for example, was the RAMSI prosecution case so weak—apparently resting on nothing more than the conflicting statements of unreliable or dishonest witnesses—despite a year-long investigation involving the use of considerable resources? What motivated the arrests of Dausabea, Ne'e, and Bartlett in the first place? Was the entire case politically driven?

AFP officers arrested Dausabea, Ne'e, and Bartlett within days of the riots. Australian judges repeatedly refused bail and held the two parliamentarians in prison for eight months while they awaited trial. This had the effect of narrowing the Sogavare government's parliamentary majority, as well as sidelining prominent critics of the Australian occupation of the Solomon Islands.

Dausabea and Ne'e had been elected for the seats of East and Central Honiara respectively in the national election that immediately preceded the April riots. Both men had appealed to mounting anti-RAMSI sentiment among the thousands of young unemployed people living in squalid squatter settlements in the capital.

Last June, Sogavare wrote a cabinet memo warning of the possibility of "collusion" between Australian-appointed prosecutors and judges. "According to reliable sources, the arrest and charges laid against the two MPs may have been politically motivated and influenced by the long standing desire of the system to arrest and convict them, especially the MP for East Honiara," Sogavare wrote.

Bartlett was similarly on record as being a RAMSI opponent. Australian prosecutors in Honiara had previously attempted to convict him on corruption charges relating to alleged crimes committed in 2000.

The arrest of Dausabea, Ne'e, and Bartlett provided RAMSI with convenient scapegoats for the April riots, diverting attention from its own role in the unrest. Considerable evidence exists suggesting that RAMSI personnel not only provoked the violence by firing tear gas at a crowd demonstrating outside parliament, but stood down their forces and did nothing to prevent the ensuing destruction. (See "The Howard government, RAMSI, and the April 2006 Solomon Islands' riots".)

After his acquittal, Bartlett accused RAMSI of responsibility. "They are the perpetrators of the riot in the Solomon Islands," he declared. "Our people and the world need to read all the evidence and the media presentations which points mainly to the unprofessional, illegal and negligible conduct of the AFP [outside] parliament [on April 18, 2006]."

Bartlett was referring to the interim findings of the Commission of Inquiry into the causes of the riots, which were released last month. The Howard government made every effort to sabotage the official investigation, fearful it would uncover evidence of RAMSI's responsibility for the riots. Attorney-General Julian Moti became the target of an extraordinary vilification campaign because of his central role in establishing the inquiry.

The interim findings failed to address the evidence that RAMSI personnel foresaw the riots and deliberately permitted them to proceed. Commission of Inquiry chairman Brian Brunton did, however, issue a number of sharp criticisms of the AFP's gross negligence. Hearings in Honiara are continuing and the commission's final report is due later this year.



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