

Canberra weighs up “regime change” in Papua New Guinea

Patrick O’Connor, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Grayndler

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The Howard government is continuing its dirty tricks against Papua New Guinean Prime Minister, Michael Somare, contemptuously defying the outcome of PNG’s August elections. Canberra had hoped the elections would result in a more pliant administration, and is now considering an unrestrained “regime change” operation, like the one it recently carried out in East Timor, and is currently orchestrating in the Solomon Islands.

The government’s manoeuvres in PNG have been completely ignored by the Australian media, and neither the Labor Party nor the Greens have raised a word about them in the federal election campaign now underway. Their unanimous silence once again demonstrates the complicity of the entire media and political establishment in Howard’s criminal South Pacific operations.

Australian ruling circles are increasingly concerned with the growing regional influence of rival powers. PNG, which was until 1975 an Australian colony, has the largest population of the Pacific states and the most lucrative natural resources, including oil and gas. In recent years other countries, especially China, have stepped up their aid, investment, and diplomatic activity in the country. PNG is home to the \$1 billion Ramu nickel mine, which is among Beijing’s largest overseas direct investments.

The new influx of aid and investment has provided the PNG ruling elite with more opportunities to manoeuvre against Australia’s dictates. Somare fell out of favour with the Howard government in 2005, after the PNG Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional the legal immunity granted to Australian police and other personnel stationed in the country under the so-called Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP). The decision, which the Somare government welcomed, led to the withdrawal of approximately 100 Australian police.

Under the ECP, Australian police, legal officials, economists, and bureaucrats took effective control of sections of the PNG state apparatus. The intervention was modelled on the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) which took over the Solomons in 2003. The 2005 police withdrawal marked a significant setback, although about 40 Australian bureaucrats and “advisors” remain in the country under the modified ECP. The Somare government has worked to minimise Canberra’s direct control and in June barred an Australian official from entering finance department offices after he was accused of spying.

The Howard government’s response to Somare’s acts of “independence” has been to orchestrate a campaign of destabilisation. It set in motion a witch hunt of international constitutional lawyer, and now Solomons’ attorney-general, Julian Moti, using this as a means of undermining both the Solomon Islands and PNG governments.

Last year, Canberra determined that Moti was a threat to Australia’s interests in the Solomons, and so statutory rape allegations, thrown out of a Vanuatu court in 1998, were dredged up against him. The government attacked Moti as a paedophile and manipulated Australia’s child sex tourism legislation to demand his extradition.

On September 29 2006, Australian police working with the

Transnational Crime Unit organised Moti’s arrest in PNG as he was en route from Singapore to the Solomons. The lawyer was arrested without a warrant, without the knowledge or authorisation of any senior PNG police or government officials, and despite the fact that he could not, under PNG’s “double criminality” legal provisions, be extradited to Australia on the basis of its child sex tourism legislation.

The entire operation, in other words, was in gross violation of PNG law as well as international legal and diplomatic norms.

After being bailed, Moti defied the extradition process and took refuge in the Solomon Islands’ High Commission in PNG’s capital, Port Moresby, before leaving for the Solomons on a PNG military plane on October 9. With characteristic cynicism and hypocrisy, Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer accused the Somare government of corruption and disregard for the rule of law because of its failure to cooperate with Canberra’s unlawful extradition order and arrest of Moti.

Under sustained pressure from the Howard government, PNG’s then defence minister, Martin Aini, announced last December that a defence department Board of Inquiry would be formed to determine who ordered the military flight. It remains unclear whether Somare authorised, or even knew about, the investigation. Shortly after hearings commenced he unsuccessfully tried to shut it down, and later sacked Aini as defence minister.

PNG Supreme Court judge Gibbs Salika acted as the Board of Inquiry’s commissioner and issued the report’s findings in March. They were not, however, released by the Somare government. The report was then leaked to the *Australian* newspaper in late July, just as the election results, which pointed to a Somare victory, were being finalised. It remains unknown who was responsible for the leak, although Australian intelligence operatives or “advisors” working in the military and defence department are the most likely culprits.

The front-page story in the Murdoch press amounted to an extraordinary intervention into the PNG elections. The Board of Inquiry had reportedly concluded that Somare had lied about his role and had in fact ordered Moti to be flown to the Solomons. It recommended that the prime minister be charged with a long list of crimes carrying lengthy jail sentences. Canberra immediately demanded that the findings be publicly released and the “rule of law” be upheld.

The meaning of this position was unmistakable. As far as the Howard government was concerned, if an election proved insufficient to dislodge Somare then other means, including his arrest and imprisonment, would be considered.

While the Board of Inquiry’s findings have not been publicly released, the *Australian* has published them on the Internet. (See: <http://archives.pireport.org/archive/2007/August/070802-pngr2.pdf>)

The leaked report goes to great lengths to implicate Somare, while simultaneously endorsing all of Canberra’s filthy operations and unlawful manoeuvres surrounding the Moti affair. From the outset the inquiry took for granted the Howard government’s accusation that Moti’s military

flight was improper and corrupt. Yet it must be noted that even if Somare did order the flight, he had every right to do so. Moti had been illegally detained and the Solomon Islands' prime minister had issued a formal request to allow his attorney-general safe passage out of PNG.

The report produced no direct evidence that Somare had ordered the military flight. Its conclusions rested on an assessment that the prime minister, together with senior government and military figures, had lied to the inquiry. Faced with contradictory testimony from different witnesses, Chairman Gibbs chose to accept the one version that implicated Somare—by Joseph Assagio, the director general of the Office of Security Co-ordination and Assessment. Assagio testified that he was ordered to “get rid of Moti” by Somare’s chief of staff, Leonard Louma, who was acting on the prime minister’s direct orders. He then contacted senior military figures and organised Moti’s flight.

Both Somare and Louma denied these allegations. The Board of Inquiry nevertheless rejected every witness statement that contradicted Assagio’s testimony. It recommended that perjury charges be laid against Somare and Louma, together with Somare’s chief secretary Joshua Kalinoe, diplomatic official Barney Rongap, Captain Tom Ur, Colonel Vagi Oala, Lt. Col. Chester Berbobero, and warrant officers Arua Ikupu and Wais Morap. Perjury carries a jail sentence of up to 14 years.

The report also accused Somare of violating the PNG constitution’s military call-out provisions and “organic law on the duties and responsibilities of leadership”, as well as perverting the course of justice and “conspiracy to defeat justice”.

After the report’s findings were finalised, the PNG prime minister condemned the Board of Inquiry and Justice Salika for bias. The nature of the findings lends credence to this charge. The report, for example, included the absurd claim that the PNG military plane returning Moti had breached international law by violating the Solomon Islands’ territorial integrity. Also significant is the report’s unusual praise for the media’s role in sustaining coverage of the affair: “A special word of thanks is extended to these journalists and reporters who made sure that Moti was never a ‘dead issue’ as alleged from the start”. A number of PNG and Australian journalists were named, including Lloyd Jones, who subsequently published the initial article revealing the leaked report findings.

Canberra is no doubt instigating many of the ongoing behind-the-scenes manoeuvres in Port Moresby. In one highly suspicious episode, the PNG and Australian press claimed in early October that sections of the PNG military were preparing to arrest Somare after he returned from Sydney, where he was attending last month’s APEC summit. A heavy police presence met the prime minister as he landed in Port Moresby on October 2 and escorted him out of the airport. PNG Defence Force Commander Peter Ilau angrily denied the allegations, labelling them “rubbish” and “irresponsible”.

The story may well have been an Australian plant aimed at destabilising the government.

It remains uncertain whether Canberra will ultimately opt for “regime change” in Port Moresby or will cut a deal with a suitably chastened Somare government. Throughout the standoff, the PNG prime minister has bent over backwards to defuse tensions and come to an arrangement with the Howard government. At last week’s Pacific Islands Forum leaders’ meeting in Tonga, Downter was reportedly very satisfied with Somare’s role. Among other services rendered, the PNG prime minister publicly backed the RAMSI operation and condemned the Sogavare government for boycotting discussions on the future of the Australian intervention. Downter later announced the lifting of a ban imposed last year on annual PNG-Australia ministerial discussions.

Tentative moves towards a possible rapprochement, however, could be easily blown up with the public release of the Board of Inquiry report.

In any case, the aggressive and interventionist strategy of the Australian

ruling elite in PNG and throughout the South Pacific will continue unabated. Irrespective of whether Labor or Liberal wins the November 24 election, the next government is set to step up the reckless and criminal drive to maintain Canberra’s domination over the region.

The Sydney-based Lowy Institute released an “Australian Voters’ Guide to International Policy”, making clear that there are no real differences between the major parties on this question. The paper noted the “bipartisan commitment to stay deeply involved in the regional and national affairs of the Pacific Islands for the long term” and recognised that “Kevin Rudd has committed a Labor government to an even more intimate involvement in states and societies of the Pacific”.

After warning of increasing “anti-Australian rhetoric” in the region, the Lowy Institute openly acknowledged the central impetus behind Canberra’s strategy: “China, Japan, France, the European Union and Taiwan have all upped their involvement in the region ... the growing role of others has already cut against Australian interests and policy”.

The re-emergence of regional tensions between the great powers has led to a discussion within Australian academic and foreign policy circles concerning the best means of asserting Australian control. Openly colonial methods are being considered. The latest issue of the *Journal of Pacific History*, for example, includes an article by the University of Queensland’s Clive Moore on developments in the Solomon Islands since 2003. Moore concludes his review by recommending the establishment of a “modern version” of the Australian School of Pacific Administration, which trained colonial officials to rule over PNG prior to independence.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party standing in the 2007 federal election that opposes Australia’s neo-colonial operations in the South Pacific region. We reject the cynical fraud upheld by the Liberal, Labor, and Green parties that its interventions have anything to do with humanitarianism. We insist that the peoples of the South Pacific have the right to determine their own future. The SEP demands that adequate resources be deployed throughout the region to abolish poverty and construct decent social infrastructure—including housing, schools, and hospitals—for the local population.

Authorised by N. Beams, 100B Sydenham Rd, Marrickville, NSW
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