

Solomon Islands' foreign minister condemns Australian occupation at UN General Assembly

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The protracted conflict between the Solomon Islands and Australian governments escalated earlier this month when the Pacific country's foreign minister Patteson Oti denounced Australia's "occupation" before the UN General Assembly. Oti's strident speech marked a significant ramping up of the increasingly hostile exchanges between the two countries.

Tensions have been building for more than a year, as the Australian government of Prime Minister John Howard has attempted to destabilise and overthrow the Solomons' administration led by Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare.

Oti's characterisation of Australia's presence in the Solomons as an occupation force is entirely accurate. In 2003, more than 2,000 soldiers and police were deployed under the banner of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Scores of Australian bureaucrats, legal officials, and other personnel effectively took control of the country's state apparatus, including its police, prisons, judicial system, public service, and finance department.

The neo-colonial operation is of indefinite duration and the Howard government has made clear that it will brook no interference from the Solomon Islands' government. Responding to Oti's speech, Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer accused the Sogavare government of trying to destroy RAMSI. The media has effectively buried the story, while the Labor Party and the Greens have kept their mouths tightly shut.

This silence—after a senior representative of a neighbouring government has issued an extraordinary denunciation of Australia's intervention into the region before a major forum of world leaders—provides a revealing demonstration of the support extended to the Howard government's Solomons operation by the entire political and media establishment.

The drive to forcibly assert Canberra's direct control, in violation of international law and the democratic right of ordinary Pacific Islanders to determine their own future, will be one of the great unmentionables in the upcoming election campaign. Irrespective of which party wins office, the filthy manoeuvres and dirty tricks that have characterised the Howard government's operations in the region will continue unabated.

On October 1, Oti addressed the UN General Assembly, declaring that "our sovereign right to determine the terms on which the government of Solomon Islands will permit our continued occupation by the visiting contingent cannot be undermined by any member of the United Nations." He continued, "however dressed and rationalised, intervention and occupation allow 'assisting' nations to spend and earn substantial revenue for their supporting businesses and industries. Mine is too nationalistic a government to become captive to the fortunes which justify our perpetual retention under siege."

Sogavare and his supporters represent a layer of the Solomons' elite which, while having no principled opposition to the Howard government's intervention, is seeking to manoeuvre between rival powers and pressure Canberra to recast RAMSI's mission on a new basis more favourable to its interests. After coming to power in May last year, the Sogavare government attempted to reduce RAMSI's control over the country's finance department and end its effective veto over public spending. The prime minister has repeatedly insisted that he is not seeking to expel RAMSI and that he wants an accommodation with the Howard government.

Oti's speech before the UN included an appeal for the international body to act as a counterweight to Canberra. Greater UN involvement, however, would alter nothing. In East Timor, to take just one example, the international body has rubber-stamped the Australian-dominated intervention force and said nothing as Canberra conspired to oust the Fretilin government of Mari Alkatiri.

The Solomons' government nevertheless hopes to win support from other powers to pressure the Howard government. So far, Canberra has refused to compromise. Sogavare and his senior ministers have been targeted, along with attorney-general Julian Moti, who is still being pursued on a trumped up extradition request relating to statutory rape allegations that were thrown out of a Vanuatu court in 1999. On August 4 the Sogavare government formally rejected the extradition request, describing the attempted prosecution as "nothing more than a political witchhunt".

The Howard government's effort to politically destroy Moti has been especially driven by its determination to derail a Commission of Inquiry into the causes of the April 2006 riots, which destroyed much of the Solomons' capital, Honiara. Substantial evidence indicates that RAMSI police and troops were deliberately stood down to facilitate the destruction triggered by widely anticipated post-election unrest.

Foreign Minister Oti referred to Canberra's efforts to halt the inquiry in his UN address, noting that the investigation "finally became functional this year after the failure of externally-orchestrated manoeuvres to derail it". He insisted that "my government is determined to delve deeper into the historic causes of the friction between our peoples".

The Solomons operation forms the lynchpin of Canberra's strategic ambitions in the South Pacific. Great power rivalries are intensifying as Beijing's economic and diplomatic influence increases. The Howard government's expenditure of more than one billion dollars on RAMSI since 2003 is regarded as a critical long-term investment, with the operation hailed as a model for potential takeovers of other Pacific states. A setback would have far reaching consequences.

The Howard government is particularly concerned by the Solomons' parliament August 26 decision to review the 2003 Facilitation of International Assistance Act. It drafted this legislation and forced its ratification ahead of the initial intervention. The Facilitation Act grants Australian personnel sweeping powers, including complete immunity from local law and exemption from all immigration and visa controls. It also exempts foreign corporations connected to RAMSI from many business registration and tax obligations.

Attorney-general Moti drew up a memorandum detailing the dubious character of the Facilitation Act in relation to both international law and the Solomon Islands constitution. Moti noted that the so-called regional assistance mission, RAMSI, is not even mentioned in the Act. This leaves unclear the "precise nature of its legal personality". The Act similarly includes no reference to the Pacific Islands Forum or any other regional or international organisation, making a mockery of the Howard government's efforts to cloak its takeover as a multilateral and regional operation.

Moti also raised a number of questions regarding Section 24 of the Facilitation Act, which prevents the Solomons parliament from passing subsequent legislation "amending or repealing, or otherwise altering the effect or operation of, this Act or subsidiary legislation made under this Act". This proviso, which contradicts long established constitutional and parliamentary norms, was meant to ensure that the parliament remained a toothless facade for the Australian occupying authorities.

RAMSI chief Tim George last month called a press conference in Honiara to denounce the pending review. Without attempting any specific rebuttal of Moti's legal analysis of the Facilitation Act, George described the attorney-

general's memorandum as "a very flawed and muddled document" which "reveals a negative mindset towards RAMSI".

George's outburst underscores Canberra's entrenched opposition to any modification of the terms of the operation. The insistence that Australian police, soldiers, and bureaucrats remain unaccountable and above the law exposes the fraudulent character of the Howard government's claims that RAMSI is a "humanitarian" operation. RAMSI wants legal immunity to allow it to operate without restraint in defence of Australian corporate interests. It will certainly ferociously repress any oppositional movement that develops within the local population.

The Solomons remains among the most impoverished countries in the world. Virtually no Australian aid money has been spent on health and education, while the presence of hundreds of highly paid RAMSI personnel has inflated rental rates and other costs of living. Amid growing resentment and frustration, particularly among unemployed youth living in Honiara's squatter settlements, a social time bomb is ticking.

The Howard government continues to insist that RAMSI enjoys the support of the vast majority, and has effectively claimed the right to disregard the Solomons parliament and government on the basis of a popular "mandate". A RAMSI-sponsored survey released last month purported to show that 90 percent of the population supported RAMSI's presence and a majority thought that communal violence would re-emerge if foreign forces were forced out. Predictably, Downer and George seized upon the conveniently-timed release of the survey findings and claimed vindication.

Serious questions have been raised, however, about the survey. Finance Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo has ordered a criminal investigation into the alleged secret payment of \$SI100,000 (\$A16,000) to statisticians in the finance and treasury ministry, who used publicly owned resources and information for the RAMSI survey. "These officials are paid salaries to work for government," Lilo declared. "They are supposed to safeguard our national intelligence information and not sell it for their private gain.... This is probably just the tip of the iceberg. Who knows what else is going on in this country without our knowledge or approval?"

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