

Solomon Islands government ousted through parliamentary vote

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The Solomon Islands government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare was ousted yesterday after a no-confidence motion won the backing of 25 parliamentarians, against 22 on the government side. Sogavare remains caretaker prime minister pending a parliamentary vote, which is expected next week, to elect his successor. Opposition leader Fred Fono is one of several candidates vying for the job. Two former government ministers who were among those who defected to the opposition last month, Derek Sikua and Gordon Darcy Lilo, are also expected to nominate.

Sogavare's removal from power marks the culmination of a protracted destabilisation campaign, orchestrated in Canberra, aimed at installing a more pliant administration. Soon after he came to power in May last year, Sogavare was identified by the previous Australian government of Prime Minister John Howard as a threat to the ongoing occupation by the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Sogavare's 20-month term in office was dominated by a succession of provocations mounted by RAMSI and the Australian government.

The RAMSI operation in July 2003 involved the dispatch of more than 2,000 soldiers, police and officials to take control over the Solomons' state apparatus, including police, prisons, judiciary, public service, treasury and central bank. While launched under the pretext of a humanitarian intervention, the neo-colonial operation was driven by a concern to protect Australian corporate and strategic interests. Developments in the South Pacific, which Howard characterised as Australia's "special patch", have become increasingly bound up with escalating great power rivalries. RAMSI marked a shift within the Canberra foreign policy establishment toward the more open use of military force to maintain Australian regional hegemony. The operation was hailed as a forerunner for potential interventions in other Pacific states, most notably the resource-rich former Australian colony, Papua New Guinea.

The ferocity with which Canberra responded to Sogavare's limited moves to reduce RAMSI's control over public finance and economic policy can only be understood within this context. The Howard government's campaign was one of two regional "regime change" operations initiated in 2006. More than a thousand Australian troops were deployed to East Timor in May last year as part of a concerted campaign to oust the elected Fretilin administration of Mari Alkatiri. Fretilin fell foul of the Howard

government after resisting its demands for most of the multi-billion oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea, as well as for cultivating relations with Australia's rivals, particularly Portugal and China.

There are a number of significant differences between East Timor and Solomon Islands; the Solomons, for example, formally recognises Taiwan and has no diplomatic ties with Beijing. Canberra's drive against both the Sogavare government and the Fretilin administration, however, were driven by the same imperative—namely the exclusion of rival powers from its declared sphere of influence.

Sogavare's ousting demonstrates that this central strategy remains unchanged under the new Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. The Labor Party fully endorsed the RAMSI intervention when it was first announced in 2003. Rudd and his colleagues similarly backed the Howard government throughout its campaign against Sogavare. Following Labor's election win, however, Rudd and his parliamentary secretary for the Pacific, Duncan Kerr, made noises about establishing better relations with Pacific governments by dealing with them in a less abrasive fashion.

The Labor government nevertheless gave the green light for the Solomons' opposition and RAMSI authorities to continue their campaign against Sogavare. A clear signal was its refusal to respond to the Solomons' prime minister's public invitation for Rudd and Kerr to visit Honiara. It was not an accidental omission. Earlier this week, Rudd's office refused to return calls from the *World Socialist Web Site* enquiring about his attitude, while a spokesman for Kerr said he had not received a formal notification from the Solomons' government and insisted that it would be "inappropriate" to respond to Sogavare's public invitation.

While the full extent of the Australian authorities' behind-the-scenes involvement in the manoeuvres against Sogavare in the lead-up to the no-confidence motion is not known, there is no doubt that RAMSI played a central role.

Three former RAMSI leaders—Ben McDevitt, Nick Warner, and James Batley—were instrumental in ensuring that former prime minister Allen Kemakeza avoided being stripped of his parliamentary seat and sent to jail, despite being convicted on December 6 of serious charges, including intimidation and larceny. After receiving character statements from the three, the Australian magistrate adjudicating the case sentenced Kemakeza to just two months jail and granted bail pending an appeal. Kemakeza had

refused to commit to either the government or opposition side. After declaring himself to be happy with the court's "fair judgment", the former prime minister cast his vote against Sogavare in yesterday's no-confidence vote.

The court's decision proved crucial, as Kemakeza ended up holding the balance of power. Had he supported the government, Sogavare may have been able to claim 24 parliamentary votes against 24 for the opposition, thereby blocking the no-confidence motion. (The final vote of 25 to 22 reflected the absence of one government member who failed to attend parliament due to health reasons and has since died.)

After securing Kemakeza's support, RAMSI officials launched an extraordinary police and military operation in Honiara. Scores of heavily-armed Australian and New Zealand soldiers, along with Australian Federal Police officers, were deployed around Honiara on Tuesday. Australian troops in full camouflage gear remained on guard outside the Honiara Hotel, where opposition parliamentarians had gathered. While supposedly a security operation aimed at preventing violence, the show of force was clearly aimed at bolstering the opposition and stifling any protest. Government MPs, who received no similar protection, accused Australian forces of helping to isolate opposition parliamentarians so they would not have a chance to cross over to the government's side.

"Such a display of arms rather openly to members of the public is uncalled for and questions the very issue of RAMSI's independence and impartiality in dealing with law and order in this country," a government statement issued just before the no-confidence vote declared. "Now it is becoming very clear that RAMSI is working in tandem with Asian loggers who are alleged to have been providing financial support to the opposition in a conspiracy to oust the [Sogavare] government."

Rudd responded to the no-confidence vote by stressing his determination to see the Solomon Islands' attorney-general Julian Moti extradited to Australia. "This individual is the subject of criminal charges," he declared. "We have activated our extradition arrangements with the government of the Solomon Islands. Nothing has changed on that score."

Moti, a respected legal academic and practitioner specialising in constitutional and international law, became the subject of a vicious witchhunt orchestrated by the former Howard government. Moti was instrumental in establishing the Commission of Inquiry into the April 2006 riots in Honiara, which threatened to expose RAMSI's complicity in the violence. He further assisted a parliamentary review that threatened to strip RAMSI personnel of their blanket legal immunity from Solomons' law. Moti also threatened to challenge the legality of the entire RAMSI intervention before the International Court of Justice. In response to this threat, the Howard government mounted a bogus campaign for his extradition, based on trumped-up statutory rape allegations that had been thrown out of a Vanuatu court in 1998. The central aim was to undermine Moti through constant vilification in the Australian and Pacific press as a "child sex" perpetrator.

For Rudd to again solidarise himself with this vile campaign—even after Sogavare has lost power—speaks volumes about Labor's fundamental agreement with the former Howard

government's agenda in the Solomons. What happens next with Moti remains unclear, although Fred Fono has declared that the "first act" of the next government will be to have him arrested and extradited to Australia.

Yesterday's no-confidence vote effectively subverts the outcome of the April 2006 national elections. The elections were a massive repudiation of the Kemakeza government, which had been in power since 2001 and presided over the entry of RAMSI forces in 2003. Popular hostility toward the entrenched corruption of the prime minister and his colleagues combined with growing dissatisfaction and outright opposition toward RAMSI. Half of all parliamentarians lost their seats, including 9 of Kemakeza's 20 ministers.

Despite the result, horse-trading between the different factions and politicians saw all 11 surviving government ministers stay in power as part of a coalition government headed by Snyder Rini, Kemakeza's former deputy. The announcement of Rini's government sparked widespread outrage, which culminated in a two-day riot that was sparked by a clash outside the parliament between RAMSI police and demonstrators. Sogavare came to power soon after Rini was forced to resign.

The old guard of the former Kemakeza government is now back in the saddle. Kemakeza and Rini are likely to take up prominent positions in the new government, as is Laurie Chan. Chan's father, Tommy Chan, is a Honiara businessman who was alleged to have been involved in vote-buying deals that are widely believed to have been behind Rini's installation as prime minister in April 2006.

The defeat of the Sogavare government has not seen any protests or violence, though authorities remain on alert and RAMSI soldiers and police continue to patrol Honiara. Whatever the immediate outcome of the political crisis, the return of the old Kemakeza government forces will exacerbate tensions throughout the Solomon Islands.

The new government inherits a social crisis, marked by escalating poverty and social inequality throughout the country, for which it has no solution. The RAMSI intervention has involved the investment of considerable sums into the Pacific country's state apparatus, especially the prison system, police and judiciary, while a negligible amount has spent on health, education and other basic social services. The influx of hundreds of highly-paid foreign personnel working with RAMSI has led to a boom in the provision of luxury and high-cost products and services but has delivered nothing for ordinary Honiara residents except sharply rising prices, particularly for food and housing. Thousands of people, particularly frustrated young men, remain without work or decent housing in squalid squatter camps in the capital.

The situation will only worsen if the new government in Honiara delivers on its pledges to advance the "free market" economic reform agenda promoted by Canberra.



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