

Solomon Islands government in crisis after parliamentarians join opposition

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The Solomon Islands government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare has been thrown into crisis by the defection of 12 parliamentarians to the opposition last month. Among them were nine ministers, including Deputy Prime Minister Toswell Kaua and Finance Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo, who triggered the political turmoil by quitting the government after he was demoted to the justice ministry on November 8. Sogavare has since accused Lilo of corruption and mismanagement of public funds.

While opposition leader Fred Fono claimed he had the numbers to force a vote of no-confidence and form a new government, some of the 12 MPs have since switched back to Sogavare, along with other opposition members who have accepted government positions. The prime minister now says he has a 25-23 majority in the 48-member parliament, though Fono disputes this. It remains unclear when the parliament will next meet. The governor-general has ruled that it is to be convened tomorrow while Sogavare has insisted that government members will not attend until December 24.

Australian police and heavily-armed soldiers were deployed yesterday and today to strategic locations around Honiara. The authorities claimed that this was for security reasons but there is little doubt that the show of force is intended to strengthen the opposition. Australian troops wearing camouflage gear are currently guarding the gated entrance to Honiara Hotel, where opposition parliamentarians have based themselves. Government MPs earlier accused opposition leaders of locking away their supporters to prevent them switching over to the government side.

The Solomons' government has been the target of a long-running "regime change" campaign orchestrated in Canberra. The former Howard government first targeted Sogavare for removal in mid-2006 after he was identified as an obstacle to Australia's ongoing military-police occupation of the impoverished Pacific country.

In July 2003, more than 2,000 soldiers and federal police were dispatched under the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), along with scores of bureaucrats, legal officials, and financial "advisors" who took effective control of the country's state apparatus, including its police force, prisons, courts, public service, central bank and treasury. The neo-colonial takeover was driven by Canberra's concern to safeguard Australian corporate interests and maintain its regional domination amid intensifying great power rivalries that have been stoked by China's growing economic and diplomatic influence in the South Pacific. RAMSI was hailed as a model for future interventions in neighbouring countries such as Papua New Guinea.

Sogavare came to power in May 2006 and moved to wind back certain aspects of RAMSI's control, especially over public spending and economic reform. The Howard government responded by orchestrating a series of filthy operations—involving lies, dirty tricks and provocations—against the prime minister and senior government members.

Attorney-general Julian Moti was targeted on the basis of a trumped up extradition order relating to statutory rape charges that were thrown out of a Vanuatu court years earlier. Moti had been centrally involved in

establishing the still ongoing Commission of Inquiry into the April 2006 Honiara riots. Australian officials adamantly opposed the inquiry, fearing any examination of RAMSI's responsibility for the disturbances. Significant evidence indicates that RAMSI police and soldiers were deliberately stood down to allow the destruction to proceed. (See "The Howard government, RAMSI, and the April 2006 Solomon Islands' riots") Moti also played an important role in establishing a pending parliamentary review, which threatens to strip RAMSI personnel of their blanket immunity from Solomons' law.

Opposition leader Fono has aligned himself with Canberra and pledged to satisfy RAMSI's demands, including the extradition of Moti. Two opposition attempts to unseat the government through no-confidence motions, in October 2006 and August this year, failed, despite enjoying the support of the Howard government and RAMSI authorities.

Government minister Charles Dausabea has claimed that RAMSI is directly backing the opposition in its third no-confidence attempt. "They want to topple the government led by Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare," he said on December 3. "I appeal to RAMSI to stay out of politics and let the leaders of the country solve this issue. We are the people ... mandated by the people to run this country and not RAMSI."

Dausabea said he had lodged a formal complaint to police after two officers, one a Solomon Islander and the other a New Zealand national working with RAMSI, followed him as he was driving around Honiara on government business. "They said that they received information from their special unit that I was planning another riot," he told a press conference. "This is just unbelievable. I told them straight that they have no solid evidence to justify their allegations." Dausabea alleged that the police national intelligence unit told the prime minister's office he was planning to stage a riot if the government were removed.

Dausabea, who has opposed RAMSI, was arrested by Australian police immediately after the April 2006 riots and charged with incitement and related offences. The parliamentarian was repeatedly refused bail by Australian judges working in the Solomons' court system and held in prison for eight months, before being acquitted of the central charges last August. If it is true that RAMSI personnel are now spreading rumours that senior government figures are preparing violence, this represents another provocative intervention by Australian authorities.

The full extent of Australian involvement in behind-the-scenes manoeuvring against the Sogavare government cannot yet be determined. There is no doubt, however, that the RAMSI leadership wants a more compliant administration. In a revealing episode, senior RAMSI personnel directly intervened in the trial of former prime minister Allen Kemakeza to ensure he evaded imprisonment despite being found guilty on December 6 on charges of demanding money with menace, intimidation, and larceny.

Kemakeza was prime minister in 2003 and played a critical role in facilitating Canberra's takeover. His government acceded to Howard's demands that the Australian-led forces be formally invited to intervene

and also approved the Facilitation Act, which granted RAMSI legal immunity and is now under parliamentary review. The Kemakeza government functioned as little more than a fig-leaf for Canberra's control. While RAMSI authorities arrested and charged a series of senior Solomons' politicians for alleged corruption and complicity with rival Guadalcanal and Malaitan militias, Kemakeza was never investigated despite being widely suspected of involvement in criminal conduct. The quid pro quo was obvious—Kemakeza did RAMSI's bidding in return for avoiding imprisonment.

National elections in April 2006 saw the Kemakeza government thrown out of office amid overwhelming opposition to his government's corrupt record, as well as growing dissatisfaction with RAMSI's presence. Kemakeza subsequently joined the anti-Sogavare opposition after he retained his seat. Last month, however, the government claimed that the former prime minister had switched sides and accepted a government post. Opposition leader Fono has denied this and insists Kemakeza remains on board. According to some calculations, government and opposition MPs are evenly divided, with Kemakeza holding the deciding vote. The *Solomon Star* reported that the former prime minister earlier declared himself neutral, pending the outcome of his court case.

Kemakeza was found guilty of ordering members of the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) militia to destroy and steal equipment from Australian-run law firm Sol Law in May 2002. He reportedly told the militants that the firm had too much influence over the country's financial institutions. While four members of the MEF pleaded guilty and received prison sentences of up to 30 months, Kemakeza, who denied the charges, was sentenced to two months jail, with another three months suspended and a fine of \$S17,500 (\$US1,100). Under Solomons' legislation, parliamentarians lose their seats only if sentenced to six months imprisonment or more—leaving Kemakeza free to continue as a MP. In addition, the court granted bail pending an appeal, allowing him to participate in upcoming parliamentary sessions.

According to an AAP report, Australian magistrate Chris Vass "said he was lenient in his sentencing and took into account referees' accounts of Kemakeza's service to the nation... He particularly cited Kemakeza's role in helping restore peace to the Solomons after years of ethnic unrest and his role in inviting in the Australian-led regional assistance mission."

Among the "referees' accounts" were those from Australian Federal Police officer Ben McDevitt, who headed RAMSI's policing component when the intervention was first launched, and former RAMSI chiefs Nick Warner and James Batley. "The improvements that have taken place in security and economic well-being is due to the work of RAMSI members from Pacific countries in partnership with many Solomon Islanders," Warner and McDevitt declared in a joint statement to the court. "But without Sir Allan Kemakeza's vision and support, it is likely there would not have been a RAMSI."

As well as again demonstrating the hypocrisy of Canberra's claim to be advancing the rule of law in the Solomons, the political character of Kemakeza's sentencing suggests that a deal may have been done whereby Australian authorities ensure that the former prime minister stays out of jail in return for his political support against Sogavare.

The Solomon Islands prime minister has responded to the latest political ructions by redoubling his efforts to reach an accommodation with Canberra. For all his anti-colonial rhetoric, Sogavare has no principled opposition to RAMSI and Australian imperialism. He represents a layer of the Solomons' ruling elite which has grown dissatisfied with aspects of the Australian intervention, hopes to recast RAMSI on a new basis more favourable to its commercial and political interests and is looking to other powers for support.

Throughout the period when the Howard government was seeking to destabilise and overthrow his administration, Sogavare repeatedly pleaded for negotiations. Howard, however, had too much at stake politically to

compromise. His government's entire strategic orientation in the South Pacific was tied up with RAMSI's fortunes; it was feared that any concession to Sogavare would weaken Canberra's position by emboldening other regional leaders, such as PNG's Michael Somare, who were similarly looking for more room to manoeuvre with other powers.

Last month's defeat of Howard has raised hopes in Honiara for an end to hostilities. Sogavare quickly extended his congratulations to new Prime Minister Kevin Rudd after the November 24 vote and has since said he intends to invite both Rudd and Duncan Kerr, Labor's parliamentary secretary for the Pacific, to visit the Solomons. "I would like to see all the issues clouding our relationship to be dealt with as quickly as possible so we can move on with our lives and get on with the business of development," Sogavare declared.

The Rudd government will be no less ruthless than its predecessor in prosecuting Australian interests in the South Pacific. The Labor Party fully supported all the Howard government's manoeuvres in the region, including its military-led interventions in East Timor in 1999 and 2006 and in the Solomons in 2003. It encouraged the Howard government to move toward a "Pacific Union" that would systematically integrate the region's economy and administrative apparatuses under Canberra's domination. More recently, however, Labor criticised the former government for an over-reliance on military force and a failure to utilise diplomatic, aid and other instruments to advance Australian corporate interests. These tactical criticisms reflected concerns within the foreign policy establishment that the Howard government's approach was generating too much opposition from both ordinary people and the political elites of the South Pacific countries.

Kerr, who was dean of law at the University of Papua New Guinea before entering the Australian parliament in 1987, said he hoped to establish better relations with PNG and the Solomon Islands. "We are not big brother," he declared the day after being appointed parliamentary secretary. "We can't demand outcomes that are always in accordance with Australia's view of the world, but we can do everything possible to get us outcomes that are consistent with the national aspirations... I think there is no doubt that at least some of the leaders of our neighbours have seen Australia as somewhat too ready to use instruction rather than a partnership relationship."

Such remarks may foreshadow the negotiation of a new arrangement between Canberra and the Solomons' government. Whatever adjustments may be made to RAMSI, however, there is no doubt that the Rudd government will insist that Canberra retains control over the indefinite intervention.

For his part, Sogavare has again stressed that his attempts to reduce RAMSI's influence and review its operations are not intended to force the Australian personnel out. A number of the recent parliamentarians' defections, both to and from the government, may strengthen calls from within Sogavare's ranks for a complete capitulation to Canberra's demands. Significantly, Peter Boyers is among those opposition parliamentarians who have recently joined the government. Boyers was finance minister under the previous government and has now been appointed to the same post by Sogavare. He has been among the most vociferous pro-RAMSI parliamentarians. A leaked email written by a RAMSI finance official in April 2006 described Boyers as RAMSI's "effective voice in cabinet".

Boyers only left the opposition after the prime minister gave him a written guarantee that the government would "uphold the existing arrangements" with RAMSI.



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