

New Solomon Islands prime minister kowtows to Canberra

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The recently installed Solomon Islands Prime Minister Derek Sikua demonstrated his eagerness to comply with Canberra's regional diktats when he met with Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd last week. Sikua stressed his full support for the Australian-dominated occupation force, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), in discussions with Rudd and the leaders of New Zealand and Papua New Guinea.

In July 2003, the Australian government of former prime minister John Howard dispatched more than 2,000 soldiers and police, along with scores of bureaucrats, legal and finance officials, and other "advisors" to take effective control of the Solomon Islands' state apparatus. The neo-colonial operation was driven by Canberra's determination to shore up its domination of the South Pacific against rival powers, particularly China.

Sikua's predecessor, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, came into conflict with the Howard government shortly after he came to power in May 2006. The Sogavare government moved to reduce RAMSI's control of the treasury and finance department and also called for the development of an "exit strategy" for the Australian-led forces. Canberra responded by launching a protracted "regime change" campaign. The offensive against the Sogavare government—which featured a series of provocations, slanders, and dirty tricks—culminated in last December's parliamentary vote of no confidence.

Sikua, who had been Sogavare's education minister, headed a group of government parliamentarians whose defection gave the opposition the necessary numbers. The opposition group had openly aligned itself with the Australian government's moves to destabilise Sogavare's government and had consistently expressed

its full support for RAMSI.

Upon coming to power, the Sikua government rushed to reassure Canberra of its fealty. Its first act in office was the unlawful deportation to Australia of former Solomons' attorney-general Julian Moti. The international constitutional lawyer and academic is now awaiting trial on politically motivated charges under the Child Sex Tourism Act relating to statutory rape allegations that were thrown out of a Vanuatu court in 1998.

Sikua's visit to Canberra last week resembled nothing so much as a colonial satrap reporting for duty. On arrival in Australia on January 23, he first visited an Australian Federal Police (AFP) base in Canberra where officers are trained before their deployment overseas. He was told by assistant AFP commissioner Paul Jevtovic that more than 400 Australian police had already passed through the facility before being deployed to the Solomon Islands under RAMSI. According to the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation, Jevtovic "said the number of regional police officers coming through the base is expected to increase".

Sikua later arrived at Rudd's Canberra office in a motorcade with an AFP escort, but was left waiting outside for the Australian prime minister to emerge. A spokesperson for Rudd later denied that his failure to greet Sikua immediately was a diplomatic snub. The incident nevertheless indicated the contempt with which the Australian prime minister regards his Solomons' counterpart. After a brief lunch-time discussion, Rudd declined to hold a press conference, as is standard practice following bilateral diplomatic discussions.

Rudd's office subsequently issued a press release which consisted of little more than standard platitudes:

“Prime Minister Sikua’s visit is a welcome opportunity for Australia and Solomon Islands to re-establish a close and cooperative relationship ... I welcomed Dr Sikua’s statements about the value of the bilateral relationship and the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).”

Rudd said that he had accepted Sikua’s invitation to visit the Solomon Islands later in the year. No other concrete measures were announced.

The Solomons’ prime minister had made clear, however, that the sole purpose of the discussion was to assure Canberra of his reliability. He had earlier said that he would personally apologise to Rudd, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, and Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Michael Somare for the diplomatic tensions under Sogavare’s government. “I think for some time in the last 18 months, the Solomon Islands government was preoccupied with finding faults with RAMSI,” Sikua declared shortly before arriving in Australia. “The apology is to signify Solomon Islands wants to be a constructive and credible partner in the region.”

The Solomons’ high commissioner in Canberra earlier presented the parliamentary secretary for the Pacific, Duncan Kerr, with a traditional canoe as a symbol of the new government’s desire to begin “paddling in the same direction”.

Sikua stressed that he accepted the indefinite presence of RAMSI forces in his country. “I’ve assured the prime minister that my government can be trusted with RAMSI, but we would like to make RAMSI work for the long-term benefit of the Solomon Islands and its people,” he declared after meeting with New Zealand’s Clark on January 25.

Sikua’s commitment to the Australian-led occupation force was not limited to rhetorical declarations. Upon returning to the Solomons, he announced that his government wanted RAMSI to be expanded to cover more rural areas and said this had been discussed in Australia and New Zealand. According to the *Solomon Times*: “The key areas that were outlined [for RAMSI’s potential expansion] include the health sector, education sector, infrastructure and other sectors to do with income generation and economic activities.”

The Solomons’ prime minister also suggested that he might scrap a pending parliamentary review into RAMSI and the legal basis of its operations. This

review—initiated by the former Sogavare government—threatened to strip RAMSI personnel of their blanket immunity from the Solomons’ legal system, and was adamantly opposed by the Australian government.

Sikua also announced that he had designated Julian Moti a “persona non-grata”. He said that Moti would never be allowed back into the country as long as his government was in power, even if the former attorney-general were finally acquitted by the Australian judicial system. This statement underscores the fact that the statutory rape charges against Moti were never anything but a convenient pretext for Canberra’s drive to sideline someone it identified as a threat to its interests in the Solomons and the South Pacific.



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