

Australian prime minister undertakes tactical shift in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

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Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd last week conducted a three-day tour of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Solomon Islands, aimed at shoring up relations with the South Pacific ruling elites that had fractured under the former Howard government. In a region critical to Canberra's economic and strategic interests, Rudd announced new aid packages and promised a "new era of cooperation between Australia and the Pacific Island nations".

PNG Prime Minister Michael Somare welcomed his Australian counterpart last Thursday with an elaborate reception featuring huge banners bearing the Australian leader's portrait.

"This is the beginning of our revised and new relationship; that [which] we've had just in the past few years things have not worked out as we've expected," Somare declared in a joint press conference with Rudd. "The relationship was more or less deteriorated for a little while because of what transpired at the time... But it's all water under the bridge—we are talking about a new beginning."

Somare was referring to the bitter conflict that erupted in 2006 between his administration and the former Australian government of John Howard. In September of that year, Solomon Islands' Attorney-General Julian Moti was unlawfully detained in Port Moresby on the orders of Australian Federal Police, who attempted to have him extradited on politically motivated statutory rape charges. Howard's reckless vendetta was bound up with Canberra's drive to oust the former Solomons' government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. Somare publicly denounced Moti's arrest and allegedly facilitated his flight back to the Solomons on a PNG military plane.

The Howard government retaliated by banning Somare and his ministers from visiting Australia, cancelling the annual joint ministerial forum, and threatening to cut off aid. For a time it appeared that Canberra was leaning towards "regime change" in Port Moresby as well. Under intense Australian pressure, a Defence Board inquiry was established to investigate the circumstances of Moti's departure from PNG. Somare later refused to publicly release the inquiry's findings, although a leaked copy published by the *Australian* concluded that a series of very serious criminal charges, including treason and violation of the constitution, should be brought against Somare. The Howard government insisted that the inquiry's findings be made public—a demand that was widely interpreted in Port Moresby as support for

Somare's imprisonment.

Canberra's provocations and dirty tricks were driven by a concern to preserve its strategic and economic domination over the South Pacific. While long regarded by the Australian ruling elite as its exclusive "sphere of influence", the region has become increasingly dominated by great power rivalries, largely fuelled by Beijing's rising influence. PNG, an Australian colony until 1975, lies at the heart of these conflicts. In terms of both population and natural resources it remains the most significant country in the region. It has recently been the recipient of considerable Chinese aid and investment, including an \$US800 million nickel mine, Beijing's largest direct overseas investment.

The new Labor government shares its predecessor's strategy of shutting out rival powers from the region and upholding Australia's domination through a combination of military, diplomatic, and aid measures. While in opposition, however, Rudd expressed certain tactical criticisms of Howard's approach, warning that the alienation of regional governments risked creating opportunities for rival powers to gain ground, and recommending a greater focus on diplomacy.

In line with this orientation, after his meeting with Somare, Rudd released the "Port Moresby Declaration", which stressed that the Australian government was "committed to working with the Pacific island nations on the basis of partnership, mutual respect and mutual responsibility ... Australia respects the independence of the island nations, and the diversity and complexity of development challenges across our shared region".

Notwithstanding this diplomatic verbiage, the Rudd Labor government will be no less ruthless than its predecessor in promoting Australian interests in the Pacific. For all its talk of respecting "independence", it is committed to maintaining indefinitely the Australian occupations of East Timor and the Solomon Islands and will ruthlessly suppress any popular opposition. Rudd's rhetoric nevertheless reflects a certain tactical reorientation.

The Port Moresby Declaration centred on the promotion of a closer relationship between Canberra and the Pacific states and included an announcement of new "Pacific Partnerships for Development" aid programs. Rudd announced an additional \$38 million in aid, including \$13 million on HIV-AIDS programs. This amount is a drop in the ocean compared to the scale of the AIDS

catastrophe that confronts PNG. Experts have predicted that as many as 500,000 people out of a total population of 6 million may contract AIDS by 2025.

Somare nevertheless showered Rudd with praise. The PNG prime minister, who was the first independence leader after 1975, has a long track record of manoeuvres and deals with Canberra. Now that Rudd has lifted the ministerial visit ban and tacitly agreed to forget about the Defence Board inquiry and its recommended criminal charges, Somare is keen to mend all fences.

In response to Rudd's visit, Somare has offered to allow up to 300 Australian Federal Police (AFP) to work in PNG. About 150 AFP officers were previously stationed in the country under the Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP) launched by the Howard government to gain direct control over sections of the country's state apparatus. In 2005, however, in a significant blow to Canberra's ambitions, the PNG Supreme Court ruled the AFP's immunity from the country's laws unconstitutional. The officers were subsequently removed.

Now Somare, who welcomed the police withdrawal in 2005, is encouraging Rudd to deploy a force twice as large as the one originally proposed under the ECP. The PNG prime minister has suggested that the officers involved be subject to local laws, but in the event of being charged, could be prosecuted in Australia. Details of the potential deployment will be considered by Australian and PNG ministers at a ministerial forum next month.

Discussions between Rudd and Somare also involved the dispute over the proposed opening of a gold and copper mine on a section of the Kokoda Trail. The track, a World War II battle site, has become an entrenched symbol of Australian nationalism and wartime heroism, and Rudd has appealed to such sentiments in publicly opposing the mine. Somare played down the conflict, however, and he and Rudd agreed to the drafting of an agreement balancing Australia's demands with the financial benefits of the mine before next month's ministerial meeting.

Another significant item on the agenda was the signing of a "Papua New Guinea-Australia Forest Carbon Partnership". This marks the first stage of the Rudd government's incorporation of PNG's vast forestry reserves into the Australian carbon trading scheme that is due to be enacted in 2010. Australia's corporate polluters will be able to continue their activities by purchasing and trading carbon credits generated through the supposed prevention of deforestation in PNG. The scheme is to be modelled on the corruption-riddled Clean Development Mechanism, which has generated enormous profits through the European Emissions Trading Scheme while doing nothing to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions in either advanced or developing countries.

In the Solomon Islands, where Rudd arrived last Saturday, the prime minister repeated his pledges of a "new beginning", and announced a small \$13 million increase in funding for reconstruction work following last April's tsunami.

Rudd's visit to Honiara highlighted the cynicism of the Labor government's rhetoric of "partnership" and "cooperation". The prime minister made clear that Australia's neo-colonial occupation of the Solomons would continue indefinitely. Duncan Kerr,

Labor's parliamentary secretary for the Pacific Islands, had earlier bluntly declared that there would be no discussion of an exit strategy for the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

In 2003 the Howard government deployed more than 2,000 soldiers and federal police, along with bureaucrats, legal officials, and other "advisors", who took effective control of the country's state apparatus, including its police force, prisons, courts, public service, central bank and treasury. The RAMSI operation marked a significant turning point, with Canberra moving to advance its interests through direct military-police interventions. RAMSI was hailed as an example for other countries, and the Enhanced Cooperation Program in PNG was modelled directly on it.

The former Sogavare government's limited moves to reduce RAMSI's domination of the Solomons drew a furious response from Canberra. Concerned that a setback to RAMSI would affect its interests throughout the region, the Howard government launched a protracted regime change operation, featuring a succession of dirty tricks and blatantly illegal provocations. This campaign, which the Labor Party fully endorsed, culminated in the ousting of the Sogavare government in a parliamentary vote of no-confidence last December, the coming to power of Prime Minister Derek Sikua and the illegal "extradition" of Attorney-General Julian Moti to Australia.

Sikua has cravenly aligned himself with Canberra's dictates and repudiated Sogavare's criticisms of RAMSI. During a joint press conference with Rudd in Honiara, Sikua declared that he hoped that "RAMSI will continue to assist the government in fulfilling its rural development priorities and goals". Rudd added that the occupation force "still [has] much work to do".

Sikua also expressed his support for the Australian government's proposal that it host next year's Pacific Islands Forum meeting. Rudd declared that this was intended to "send a clear message to our regional neighbours that Australia is back in business in Pacific affairs".



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