

Solomon Islands: New coalition government formed

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Danny Philip was elected the new prime minister of the Solomon Islands last Wednesday. He won the support of 26 out of the 50 members of parliament who were elected or re-elected in the August 4 national election. Rival Steve Abana won 23 votes, with one informal vote, reportedly mistakenly cast by an Abana supporter.

The opposition is planning to force a no-confidence motion as soon as parliament resumes, threatening to unseat Philip if there are any defectors in the ranks of his disparate coalition. The government is already down to 25 MPs after one, Steve Laore, collapsed suddenly and died just days after the vote for prime minister. Laore was only in his 30s and the cause of death is not yet known, although police have insisted there were no suspicious circumstances. A by-election is yet to be scheduled.

This month's national election was only the second to be held under the watch of the Australian-dominated neo-colonial intervention force, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). There is mounting public opposition towards RAMSI, which was first deployed in July 2003 and ever since has maintained control over the country's state apparatus, including police and prisons, judicial system, central bank and finance department, and public service.

The national election and the nomination of the new prime minister was accompanied by a full mobilisation of RAMSI's military and police forces. In April 2006, riots erupted and RAMSI personnel were targeted after the post-election parliamentary vote for prime minister resulted in Snyder Rini being briefly installed in office through an allegedly corrupt process.

Local hostility to RAMSI was further inflamed when Tongan military personnel shot dead an unarmed man,

Harry Lolonga, on August 12 after they were called to a domestic disturbance in Titinge on the outskirts of Honiara. Like all RAMSI personnel, the Tongan soldiers involved have legal immunity and cannot even be questioned by local police unless their national government gives permission. The Tongan government has refused to do so, and last Friday withdrew all 32 of its soldiers from the Solomons. Tongan officials denied that the departure was bound up with the shooting and insisted that the troops' four month rotation with RAMSI had expired. Whatever the case, the culpable soldiers will now never be interrogated, let alone arrested and prosecuted, for their actions—establishing a precedent for further violence against Solomon Islands' civilians by RAMSI soldiers and police.

The Australian government and RAMSI officials are no doubt deeply concerned about the highly unstable situation in Honiara—and the failure for incumbent Prime Minister Derek Sikua to retain office.

Sikua was installed in December 2007 after Canberra waged a provocative campaign aimed at bringing down the previous government of Manasseh Sogavare, who had been critical of RAMSI. Sikua functioned as an abjectly pro-RAMSI and pro-Australian head of government, but now sits on the opposition benches alongside many of his former government colleagues.

The election demonstrated the deep opposition towards the Sikua government, and the entire political setup in Honiara. Half of all sitting MPs lost their seats. The longest serving parliamentarians were especially affected—of the 25 who had served for more than one term, just six were re-elected.

New opposition leader Steve Abana was one of several

MPs whose defection from the Sogavare government in December 2007 enabled Sikua to become prime minister. The exact circumstances of these events, including the question of RAMSI's involvement, remain to be fully explained. Abana went on to play a personal role in the extradition of Julian Moti, then the Solomons' attorney general, to Australia to face politically motivated statutory rape charges. On the basis of this record, there is little doubt that he was RAMSI's preferred candidate over Danny Philip as prime minister.

Philip was first elected as a MP in 1984 and previously served twice as foreign minister. He was formerly associated with the dominant post-independence Solomon Islands' nationalist leader Solomon Mamaloni. In his first statement as the new prime minister, Philip declared his support for RAMSI, insisting his government "will not put pressure on RAMSI; hence we will not talk about exit strategy". He added that "RAMSI is not an occupation force".

That such a statement is now seen to be necessary points to the escalating tensions beneath the surface of Solomons' society and the dominant role of RAMSI in the country's political life.

Despite his pledges of loyalty to the Australian intervention force, the new prime minister declared: "We all know there needs to be changes so that RAMSI's mandate can be more purposeful and relevant in line of the challenges facing Solomon Islands." It remains unclear what he means by potential changes to RAMSI's "mandate" and whether this would involve any revision of its legal immunity, a move that would be fiercely opposed by the Australian government.

In other comments sure to raise concerns in Canberra, Philip expressed differences with the Australian government's stance towards the Fijian military junta, insisting that his government would engage in direct talks and oppose efforts to diplomatically isolate Fiji. "As long as the military regime in that country is committed to returning their people to democratic rule, the question of timing should not be one of too much concern," he said.

Australian National University academic Jon Fraenkel told the ABC's "Pacific Beat" program: "I think there will be concern [within RAMSI] about the composition of the new government... The government that has now

come in is a loose grouping of independent politicians, a lot of wheelers and dealers, a lot of people looking for advantages with casino licenses and logging contracts possibly. And it also includes some of the ex-militants that bankrupted the country during 1998 to 2003 before RAMSI arrived including Jimmy Rasta Lusibaea, one of the notorious supreme commanders in the Malaita Eagle Force and as deputy prime minister we have Manasseh Maelanga who has also served a prison sentence for his activities during the troubles."

Maelanga is to serve as deputy prime minister and Lusibaea as minister of fisheries and marine resources. Senior members of the cabinet include Foreign Affairs Minister Peter Shanel and Finance Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo (both of whom previously served in the Sogavare government) and Minister for National Planning and Aid Coordination Snyder Rini. Media reports earlier this week claimed that Rini had defected to the opposition and would vote against the government as soon as parliament resumed because he was denied the finance ministry. But Rini has denied the allegations and was sworn into the cabinet on Monday.

Former Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare is currently aligned with the opposition after departing from Philip's camp the day before the vote for prime minister. Sogavare accused the majority group of seeking to advance the interests of "business cronies", while Philip declared that Sogavare was defecting because he had unsuccessfully sought the nomination as prime minister himself.

Further political manoeuvres will no doubt emerge ahead of the yet to be scheduled first sitting of the new parliament. Whatever eventuates, the next government confronts not only deep popular hostility towards RAMSI—which finds only the palest reflection inside the parliament—but a severe social and economic crisis for which none of the parliamentary factions has any solution.



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