

Solomon Islands government accuses Canberra of destabilisation drive

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Solomon Islands Prime Minister Danny Philip has accused the Australian Labor government of plotting to bring down his government in order to prop up the Australian-dominated neo-colonial intervention force, Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Earlier this week, Philip's office publicly released a six-page "intelligence report", purportedly detailing alleged Australian government and RAMSI bribery of government parliamentarians to induce them to defect to the opposition, and Australian interference in the judicial process to have key government MPs prosecuted and imprisoned.

Much remains unclear in the affair, including who prepared the report. The prime minister's spokesman, Alfred Sasako, has said it was a "collaborative effort" with the police, but acting Police Commissioner Walter Kola has denied the claim. The source of the purported intelligence has yet to be clarified, and therefore how credible the specific allegations are. The Philip government's release and public defence of the intelligence report nevertheless points to the enormous political and social tensions in the Solomons, and the increasingly tenuous character of the RAMSI operation.

In a section of the intelligence report headed, "Identification & Strategies for the Formation of an Alternative Government", deputy opposition leader Mathew Wale is described as "their man to become Prime Minister ... RAMSI & Australian Embassy [are] not interested in any other MP now joining the Opposition to be their Prime Minister". The document alleges that Wale is to receive "monetary benefits", including access to imported vehicles brought in under RAMSI's duty free tax exemption privileges. A budget of \$SI20 million (\$A2.5 million) has allegedly been allocated "for activities in connection with the downfall of the NCRA gov't", including a sum of \$SI200,000 for each government MP who backs the opposition.

Rushing to deny the allegations in the past days have been the Solomons' opposition, senior legal personnel in Honiara, the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard and RAMSI officials. On Tuesday, the Solomons' high commissioner in Canberra was summoned to the office of Labor's parliamentary secretary for Pacific Islands affairs, Richard Marles, for a dressing down. Mathew Wale has threatened a defamation suit.

Prime Minister Philip has not publicly spoken about the matter, but has sought to go on the offensive through his spokesman Sasako. "A denial by both Mr Wale and the Australian High Commission is not good enough and won't do," a statement from the prime minister's

office released on Wednesday declared. "Mr Wale must disclose the details of his dealings with Canberra, because it is public knowledge that he has engaged with Canberra since last year about his ambition to be prime minister ... Now that his involvement with a foreign government to topple a legitimately elected government has been exposed, the onus is now on him to disclose to us the details of the deal. [The opposition] are pushing a foreign agenda which has little or no benefits at all to the people of Solomon Islands. Politicians are reminded that by following the deputy leader of the opposition, they are in fact selling the sovereignty of Solomon Islands."

The Solomons' opposition and the Gillard government have suggested that the Philip government has concocted the intelligence report in an attempt to strengthen its position ahead of an opposition no-confidence motion that parliament is expected vote on when it sits again, possibly next month.

Several Solomons' government MPs have reportedly defected to the opposition over the past fortnight. No policy issues have been raised amid the political wrangling—various personal business interests and opportunist political calculations will likely determine whether Philip's disparate coalition government can hold onto office. None of the various cliques and factions within the Solomons' ruling elite, whether in government or opposition, represents the interests of the country's impoverished working class and rural masses.

Whatever the veracity of the government's intelligence document, there is no doubt that Philip hopes to win support by portraying himself as the target of an Australian-RAMSI plot. This itself reflects the widespread opposition in the tiny island state to the intervention force—contrary to the claims of mass support by the Australian government and media.

The Philip government has raised the precedent of 2006-2007, when the Australian government manoeuvred to bring down Manasseh Sogavare's government. "It's not the first time it's been done," Sasako told SBS Radio. "It was done before when former Prime Minister Sogavare was in office, Canberra through its then High Commissioner [Patrick Cole] was openly lobbying for a candidate of their choice, and you know the consequence was that that top diplomat was not only expelled but he was given persona non grata status."

In 2006-2007, the former Australian government of John Howard targeted Sogavare after he announced plans for a RAMSI "exit strategy", attempted to wrest control of the country's public finances

from the intervention force, and prepared an official inquiry into RAMSI's failure to prevent two days of destructive rioting in Honiara in April 2006. Each of these measures was bitterly opposed by Canberra. The Australian government then orchestrated a series of reckless and unlawful provocations. Julian Moti, the Sogavare government's appointed attorney general, was targeted by RAMSI and Australian Federal Police after Patrick Cole dredged up old and discredited sexual assault allegations as a means of derailing the career of a known opponent of the Australian intervention.

Prime Minister Philip now claims that the Gillard government is trying to remove him because shortly after he was elected last August he proposed a five-year RAMSI exit strategy. According to the intelligence report, this "sparked off a negative reaction from the Australian Govt, RAMSI and business entities connected with the RAMSI programme ... Plotting for the downfall of the NCRA government immediately began."

There are grounds for scepticism about these claims. Philip's very first statement as prime minister included a message that his government "will not put pressure on RAMSI; hence we will not talk about exit strategy". His later references to a five or six year exit strategy were never actively followed up. Moreover, until now Philip has not appealed to anti-RAMSI sentiment within the Solomon Islands population—unlike Sogavare, who denounced the intervention force for its violation of Solomons' sovereignty, its immunity from the country's legal system, its delivery of enormous profits for selected Australian contracting companies, and for the alleged involvement of Australian personnel in prostitution and other illegal activities.

The sections of the intelligence report that have a ring of truth about them are those alleging the fixing of legal cases involving figures targeted by RAMSI.

Under the subhead, "Plans for Destabilisation and Downfall of NCRA [National Coalition for Rural Advancement] Government", the intelligence report outlines an alleged RAMSI plan to "fast track criminal prosecutions of criminal cases of MPs with NCRA gov't". Those named included former fisheries minister Jimmy Lusibaea—who was prosecuted on a legally dubious basis and sentenced last November to nearly three years jail for violent crimes committed in 2001, only to be released last month by the parole board. According to the intelligence report, Lusibaea was "perceived as a threat to the continuity of the RAMSI programme". The document also maintained that cases against government MPs were fixed between the police commissioner, the Director of Public Prosecutions, and Australian magistrates working in Honiara, with jail sentences arranged to be at least six months, so as to disqualify those targeted from sitting in parliament.

RAMSI chief Graeme Wilson has denounced the Philip government's "very serious allegations of interference in the Solomon Islands judicial process" as an "insult to the hundreds of men and women of the Solomon Islands police and justice sector, who, together with RAMSI advisers from throughout the Pacific, uphold the rule of law in Solomon Islands".

This is an absurd protest. The entire legal system in the Solomons is still effectively operated by RAMSI and its Australian-based corporate

subcontractors. From the very beginning of the Australian intervention force, the courts have been used as an instrument to sideline those regarded as potential opponents of Canberra's agenda. Everyone in Honiara has long understood that decisions to charge or not charge particular figures on various matters relating to the 1998-2003 communalist tensions were based on the political calculations of senior Australian personnel. In the first few years, RAMSI arrested many people who were then denied bail, detained for as long as four years, only to be acquitted when a trial was finally convened. At the same time, several notorious criminals, known to locals as the "big fish", were left alone because of their loyalty to RAMSI.

Prime Minister Philip was elected to office with the slimmest possible parliamentary majority, 26 MPs out of 50. Moreover, one of his government's members died last year, further reducing its numbers pending a by-election. In these circumstances, the prosecution of Jimmy Lusibaea had an immensely destabilising impact on the government.

RAMSI and Australian government officials were displeased when Lusibaea—a former militant with the Malaitan Eagle Force—was elected to parliament last August after making a definite appeal to anti-RAMSI sentiment in his electorate. According to former attorney-general Julian Moti, there was no basis for Lusibaea's prosecution, since his actions were committed in a period covered by a general amnesty, which was issued as part of an Australian-brokered "peace agreement" prior to RAMSI's arrival. "It doesn't seem to matter what the law says in the Solomons," Moti told the *Solomon Star* last December. "People can be kidnapped and deported by the Police Commissioner in defiance of legislation and court orders. As long as RAMSI reigns there, the tail will always wag the dog."

Lusibaea's later release by the parole board was strenuously denounced by the opposition. RAMSI personnel did not comment publicly, but were no doubt furious with the decision. According to the government's intelligence report, Australian personnel are preparing a High Court challenge in an effort to put Lusibaea back behind bars, and they "are very certain about their success because they already have their judge in place". Under the subhead, "Legacy of the Julian Moti Saga", the document added that "in the minds of RAMSI and the Australian Embassy in Honiara they connect Julian Moti to the release on parole and granting of remission to Hon. Lusibaea".



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