

WikiLeaks cables reveal US role in Australia's "regime change" in Solomon Islands

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US diplomatic cables from 2006, recently published by WikiLeaks, have pointed to Washington's involvement in the Australian government's campaign to oust Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. The episode sheds light on the crucial role played by US imperialism in backing Canberra's aggressive operations across the South Pacific.

The 2006 cables begin with the Solomon Islands' elections in April, the first national vote that was held under the watch of the Australian-led intervention force, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

In July 2003, the Australian government dispatched soldiers, federal police and officials to take over the Solomons' state apparatus, including the police, courts, prisons, central bank and finance department. The US-backed RAMSI operation was part of Canberra's drive to defend its economic interests and geo-strategic dominance in the South Pacific amid heightened concerns about the influence of rival powers, including China.

The Australian government anticipated the April 2006 elections with some trepidation. Opposition to RAMSI among ordinary people was increasing—poverty and social inequality had worsened under the intervention, exposing its "humanitarian" pretext—and the pro-Australian government of Prime Minister Alan Kemakeza was widely despised.

A large number of government ministers lost their seats in the elections, but subsequent coalition negotiations saw the remaining "old guard" form a government headed by Snyder Rini, previously Kemakeza's deputy prime minister. This announcement was met with angry opposition. Riots erupted outside the parliament, with RAMSI police targeted. For two days, April 18 and 19, unarmed youths were able to loot and arson throughout much of Honiara, despite the presence of heavily-armed Australian soldiers and police.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has previously raised the question as to whether Australian forces were deliberately stood down in order to create the conditions for an expanded RAMSI presence in the Solomons ("The Howard government, RAMSI, and the April 2006 Solomon Islands' riots").

The US cables refer to the rioting as a "surprise" but one dispatch

also noted that on April 19, after additional Australian troops landed in Honiara: "Resident Americans tell us that troops did not deploy to the areas affected by rioting until the late hour and general exhaustion had quieted the havoc." Another cable added: "One foreigner, with no brief for the [anti-Rini] opposition, contacted us to express outrage that, to her observations, RAMSI officers were protecting the hotel of Tommy Chan [a businessman linked to Kemakeza and Rini] while allowing the rioters [a] free hand among the smaller establishments in Chinatown."

Robert Fitts, the US ambassador to the Solomons who is based in Papua New Guinea, concluded that the riots demonstrated that: "A strong outside hand will be needed for a long, long time."

Snyder Rini was forced to resign, and parliamentarians elected Manasseh Sogavare prime minister. This was met with alarm in Canberra. Sogavare represented a layer of the Solomons' elite that resented RAMSI's determination of all important economic and political policies in the country. He called for a RAMSI "exit strategy," suggested that RAMSI personnel be stripped of their immunity from Solomons' law, wanted to put an end to the intervention force's control over the finance department and government spending initiatives, and also proposed an official inquiry into the April riots. Each of these proposals was bitterly denounced by the Australian government. Almost immediately, a provocative campaign was initiated to destabilise and remove the Sogavare government.

The US actively backed Canberra from the outset.

On April 26, eight days before Sogavare was elected prime minister, a cable titled "Solomons gets dicey—time for a US statement," warned that following the riots, "the worrisome outcome could be a government incorporating figures tempted to undercut RAMSI." Leading figures in the next government, the cable elaborated, could "have a real agenda of trimming RAMSI's authority." Under the subheading, "USG [US government] can make a difference," Ambassador Fitts urged that "a senior US official make a statement designed to reinforce the population's support for RAMSI assistance," adding that "a statement would be most effective if it became public before new nominations for prime minister."

Like their Australian counterparts, US embassy officials responded

to Sogavare's election with hostility. The day after the new prime minister was installed, a cable was dispatched with the title, "New Solomon Islands PM walks on the wild side." It warned that "RAMSI, and Australia, may well find its role in Solomon Islands more complicated in the months to come."

Three days later, another cable, titled "Tougher times for Australia and RAMSI," declared that Sogavare's "actions and newly-announced cabinet all auger for tougher times for Australia." A cable sent on June 9 reported that "in private, Australia does feel a bit beleaguered." The US ambassador said: "Both RAMSI officials and the Australian High Commissioner have since explained to me how useful US gestures of support might be."

The 2006 cables include several expressions of concern about mounting public opposition toward RAMSI. One dispatch acknowledged that "some of the bloom has worn off the rose [i.e., the intervention] as the public has not seen a quick pick up in the economy (beyond the bubble in the capital due to the large number of RAMSI expats)." Another cable noted that "there is sentiment that some RAMSI officials/contractors have been heavy handed, not sensitive to cultural issues and at times patronising in their treatment of Solomon Islanders." The cable reported on a comment privately made by one unnamed RAMSI official—reflecting the colonial and racist mindset of those enforcing the intervention: "I've worked in the Northern Territory [which has a large Aboriginal population] and I know how to deal with these people."

A lengthy cable dispatched on August 22, 2006, "RAMSI faces a bleak time," pointed to Washington's and Canberra's contempt for the nominal sovereignty of the Solomons' government. The US ambassador outlined proposals advanced by ministers in the Sogavare cabinet—including a constitutional change, legislative reforms to have "traditional communal concepts reinforced over private property" and a "rural development plan which would identify crops and industries appropriate to each micro-community rather than a national strategy". Each was summarily dismissed as either too expensive or incompatible with "a key RAMSI concern, effectiveness of government."

The colonial character of US-Australian activities in the South Pacific emerges clearly in a cable sent on September 13, titled "Solomon Islands: PM kicks Australia in the shin." The dispatch reported on Sogavare's expulsion of Australian High Commissioner Patrick Cole for his active collaboration with the parliamentary opposition as it worked to bring down the government. For Ambassador Fitts, there was no "rational political motivation for Sogavare's action" and the expulsion was "a reflection of his personal (and rather adolescent) frustration over the large RAMSI role in Solomon decision making."

The cable concluded with the following assessment of the prime minister: "The main impression we gained from his demeanour is that of a frustrated adolescent, dependent and resenting that dependence; wanting to go on an all night binge without anyone telling him he shouldn't."

Following Cole's expulsion, the Australian government became openly menacing. One US cable notes that Prime Minister John

Howard telephoned Sogavare and told him, "I will make things very difficult for you and your government."

A US cable sent on September 14, "Solomon Islands: Expressing USG concerns," demonstrates that Washington, like Canberra, was working to ensure that Sogavare was removed via a parliamentary no-confidence motion being prepared by the cravenly pro-RAMSI opposition. After warning of "many bumps in the road ahead for RAMSI and for good governance," the cable concluded: "The no-confidence vote now scheduled for October 2 could provide a turning point."

A follow-up cable sent eight days later, "Time to speak on Solomon Islands," urged that a US statement "be issued prior to October 2 so as to register with parliamentarians as they weigh the worrisome performance of the current government."

Despite the US-Australian campaign, the no-confidence motion failed. It was only more than a year later, in December 2007 that the "regime change" operation finally succeeded in removing Sogavare. For reasons that are not clear, the WikiLeaks cables release does not include any diplomatic documents relating to the Solomons throughout 2007.

From a review of the 2006 cables, however, there is no question that Washington would have been closely monitoring and backing the Australian government's provocations against Sogavare and his colleagues.

As part of this operation, the Solomons' then attorney general, Julian Moti, was extracted from the Solomons in late 2007 and arrested in Australia on child sex charges that he maintains are false and politically motivated. The Australian High Court is soon due to issue a ruling on Moti's appeal to have the attempted prosecution struck down on the grounds that it is an abuse of judicial process. In the US cables, embassy officials privately echoed Canberra's defamatory statements against the international and constitutional lawyer, falsely representing his legal record in the Pacific and describing him as "particularly odious."

In a cable sent ahead of the unsuccessful no-confidence motion in October 2006, the US ambassador warned that Moti had "declared his readiness to give his all to combat what he terms as Australia's racist and colonialist policies in the Pacific." The cable said Sogavare's appointment of Moti as attorney general had "shown that his recent expulsion of the Australian High Commissioner was not a one off event."



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