

# Solomon Islands: Former target of Australian regime-change operation re-elected prime minister

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Manasseh Sogavare was nominated as the prime minister of Solomon Islands on Tuesday, following national elections held last month. Sogavare is returning to office seven years after he was removed from office through a lawless, dirty-tricks campaign waged by the Australian government.

The November 19 election resulted in the ousting of incumbent Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo, a trusted ally of Canberra, after he failed to win his own electorate. Candidates declaring themselves independents won 32 of the 50 parliamentary seats—reflecting the absence of any conventional political party system in the Solomons, and new legislation restricting the ability of parliamentarians elected as party members to switch sides between the government and opposition.

Sogavare was subsequently nominated as PM by a loose alliance of parliamentarians, describing itself as the Democratic Coalition for Change. He is yet to announce ministerial positions in the new government.

Last in office between May 2006 and December 2007, Sogavare was targeted by Canberra after being identified as a threat to its neo-colonial intervention force, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which remains in the country, ostensibly primarily as a policing agency. About 90 extra police, mainly from Australia and New Zealand, were deployed for the election.

Launched in 2003, on a bogus “humanitarian” pretext, RAMSI involved Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers and soldiers occupying the Solomons, while Australian personnel took control of the country’s legal system, prisons, central bank and other governmental institutions. The Australian government

has spent more than \$2.5 billion on RAMSI operations, while investing almost nothing on basic services for the impoverished local population.

Backed by Washington, Canberra sought to bolster its geo-strategic domination of the entire South Pacific. For a period, RAMSI was heralded as the new model for imperialist interventions, to be potentially emulated in Papua New Guinea, Fiji and other small island states in the region.

The overarching goal was to shut out China, whose growing influence threatened to undermine the Australian ruling elite’s economic and strategic interests in what it regarded as its “backyard.”

In 2006, Sogavare raised limited criticisms of RAMSI. He proposed stripping RAMSI personnel of their immunity from Solomons’ law, ending Canberra’s control over the country’s finance department and developing an “exit strategy” for the intervention force.

At the same time, Sogavare’s attorney general, international lawyer Julian Moti, prepared an investigation that threatened to expose RAMSI’s complicity in riots that destroyed much of the Solomons’ capital, Honiara, in April 2006. Moti later prepared to contest the legality of the entire RAMSI intervention before the International Court of Justice.

The Sogavare government found itself the target of an extraordinary campaign of threats and dirty tricks. Australian authorities dredged up false statutory rape allegations against Julian Moti, and orchestrated his illegal rendition from the Solomons to Australia immediately after Sogavare lost office through a parliamentary no-confidence motion. Moti later defeated the frame up in the Australian High Court.

Sogavare has since sought to curry favour with the Australian government.

Last July, Sogavare publicly backed the appointment of another AFP officer, Frank Prendergast, as Solomons' police commissioner. In 2007, Sogavare sacked the AFP's Shane Castles as commissioner and expelled him from the country for his provocations during the "regime change" campaign. The incident, Sogavare told Radio New Zealand International earlier this year, was a mere "misunderstanding."

Sogavare added: "I've thought through a lot of things since I was forced out of government—of course very heavily (through) Australia's involvement—and I've thought it through. There are certain facts that we need to accept as a small regional country, that when the country is threatened by serious security issues we can only call on Australia and New Zealand. That, we need to accept."

This craven acceptance of Australian and NZ dominance underscores the inability of any section of the Solomon Islands' ruling elite to oppose imperialism. Sogavare, like his fellow bourgeois nationalists in the other Pacific countries, instead hopes to manoeuvre between the major powers that are active in the region.

Solomon Islands is one of 21 states that extends diplomatic recognition to Taiwan rather than the People's Republic of China. Under the previous Sogavare government, there were discussions with officials from Beijing about changing this recognition. Remarks by Sogavare outside the parliament after being elected PM on Tuesday were interpreted by sections of the local media as pointing to renewed efforts to develop closer ties with China. While calling for a "collective effort" with "our traditional partners and overseas friends and RAMSI," Sogavare declared that there were "new enterprising players" in the region, and "opportunities lie abundant with the old and new."

Since Sogavare was last in office, US imperialism's "pivot" to Asia has radically altered the geo-strategic situation in the Pacific.

Together with its allies, including Australia and New Zealand, Washington is attempting to maintain its strategic post-World War II domination of the region through a comprehensive diplomatic offensive and military build-up, directed against China in particular.

Sogavare could again find himself targeted for removal from office if the US and Australia conclude that his government is moving too close to Beijing.

For now at least, both Washington and Canberra appear willing to do business with the reinstalled prime minister. RAMSI and the Australian government issued formal congratulations. The American ambassador to Solomon Islands, Walter North, who is based in Papua New Guinea, travelled to the country to monitor the election campaign and selection of the prime minister. "We are very interested of this election outcome," North declared, while also referring to Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to the country last August.

During his trip, Kerry met with senior government figures, while also visiting several World War II commemoration sites in Guadalcanal, where some of the fiercest fighting between American and Japanese troops occurred. Underscoring the contemporary significance of these commemorations, amid Washington's preparations for war against China, Kerry flew straight from the Solomons to inspect the US Pacific Command in Hawaii.

In a cautionary note to the new government, the Obama administration's formal congratulations, issued yesterday, urged Sogavare to deepen "cooperation on a wide range of issues, including international security" with Washington and, by implication, to keep his distance from Beijing.



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