

# US-backed forces in Solomon Islands continue campaign to remove government after anti-Chinese riots

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US-supported opposition forces in Solomon Islands are preparing a parliamentary no-confidence motion for December 6, aimed at removing the government and reversing its diplomatic recognition of China.

The attempt to oust the government through a parliamentary vote follows the failed coup that saw violent rioting in the country's capital, Honiara on November 24–26. A mob of about 1,000 people attempted to storm the parliament and were blocked by riot police firing tear gas and rubber bullets. A hut adjacent to the parliament was razed, as was a police station and Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare's residence.

In three days of violence, a total of 56 buildings were burned to the ground, some of them housing multiple small businesses. Chinese-owned shops and outlets were targeted. Three people were murdered, one adult and two children. Police found their charred bodies in the attic of one of the torched buildings.

The government estimates that 1,000 people have lost their jobs as a direct result of the destruction. More than 100 people have been arrested over the violence and looting.

The rioters were led by a separatist group called Malaita 4 Democracy that is closely connected with Daniel Suidani, the provincial premier of Malaita. Over the last two years, Suidani has promoted anti-communist and Christian fundamentalist demagoguery against the national government and its 2019 decision to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to Beijing.

Suidani has received crucial political support and funding from Washington. In August 2019, just weeks before Sogavare announced the country's diplomatic

recognition of China, a team of US officials travelled to Malaita and met with Suidani. The *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time: "The contingent included members of the Department of State, Department of Defence, Department of Trade, as well as embassy and aid personnel. US intelligence agencies were no doubt also represented in the group. Unusually, the visit to Malaita was not accompanied by a single press release or social media post."

The US subsequently pledged investment money for the construction of a new port in the province, and \$US25 million in direct funding to Suidani's administration. USAID officials are active in Malaita, as are others with the Republican Party-connected International Republican Institute, who have conducted "training" sessions for Suidani's political allies.

Flouting the national government, Suidani has maintained independent ties with Taiwan and insists that no Chinese investment is permitted in Malaita. Suidani's supporters last year issued a pogromist threat, demanding that all people of Chinese background leave the province within 24 hours.

Washington's support for these forces is being suppressed in the Australian and Western media in the aftermath of the violent riots.

Several reports have suggested that the violence was spontaneously triggered by young people affected by poverty and unemployment. There is no question that the Pacific state is wracked by an enormous economic and social crisis. Its lucrative natural resources, including gold and timber, have been looted for decades by transnational corporations. A tiny elite layer have been enriched in the process, while much of the working class and rural poor lacks access to basic

infrastructure such as electricity, running water, and public education.

The rioting, however, was not a spontaneous protest but part of a planned coup attempt. More information is emerging on how this was organised.

The day before the violence erupted, government ministers from Malaita issued a public statement warning of what was being prepared and calling on Suidani to “refrain from inciting Malaitans to engage in unlawful activities.” The statement also demanded that opposition leader Mathew Wale “refrain from fanning the flames of violence and incitement.” The government ministers urged Suidani and the opposition to act to prevent “our brothers and sons from carrying out such potentially dangerous and violent actions.”

One can imagine the howls of outrage that would emerge from the US and Australian media and political establishment if China were to act in a manner comparable to Washington in the Pacific. What would be the response if, within a country that recognises Taiwan, Beijing established diplomatic relations with a rebel province and then funded forces that staged a violent coup attempt? The Chinese government would be roundly denounced for violations of international law, and the issue would be made headline news.

It remains to be seen how the “regime change” drive in Solomon Islands will proceed. Prime Minister Sogavare insists that his government retains a parliamentary majority and will defeat the no confidence motion.

More than 100 Australian police and soldiers are now in Honiara, together with additional forces from Papua New Guinea and Fiji. The Australian-led intervention force was invited in by Sogavare, and their deployment ended the three days of rioting.

Suidani has bitterly complained about this, effectively criticising Canberra for interrupting efforts to overthrow the government. “Australia can help but not like this, through an intervention force, it’s not helpful,” the Malaitan premier told ABC News. “This intervention isn’t good because it’s keeping a corrupt prime minister in power... Australia should not be keeping this guy in power.”

While Suidani is publicly complaining about the Australian-led intervention, behind the scenes Australian officials are likely to be undermining the Sogavare government and encouraging defections to

the opposition.

In 2006–2007, when Sogavare was previously in power, his government was the target of a sustained destabilisation drive orchestrated by the Australian government. The prime minister was regarded as a threat to the neo-colonial RAMSI operation (Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands) that had been launched in 2003.

Canberra’s ultimately successful campaign to remove Sogavare from office involved a series of provocations, including the illegal arrest and rendition to Australia of the Solomon Islands’ Attorney General Julian Moti, on trumped up charges. After this case was thrown out by Australia’s High Court, the Australian government was forced to issue a formal apology and pay compensation.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has declared that Australian forces are only in the Solomon Islands to maintain security, will remain only for “weeks,” and will play no role in the country’s internal political disputes.

No credence whatsoever can be lent to these assurances. The Australian ruling class has longstanding and significant economic and geostrategic interests in the country, and in the wider South Pacific region. More broadly, Canberra is an intimate partner in Washington’s aggressive drive to maintain its hegemony in the Asia-Pacific and to counter China’s growing economic and diplomatic influence.



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