

Solomon Islands' government defeats parliamentary no confidence motion

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Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare yesterday defeated an attempt to oust him via a no confidence motion, with US-backed opposition forces only able to muster the votes of 15 out of the 49 parliamentarians.

The parliamentary effort to remove the government came directly after an unsuccessful violent coup attempt instigated by opposition forces. Over three days between November 24–26, approximately 1,000 people burned and looted dozens of buildings in the capital, Honiara, killing three people.

The crowd attempted to storm the parliament and after being beaten back by riot police, razed to the ground a building next to parliament, a building at the prime minister's residence, as well as a police station, high school, and 60 other buildings, with ethnic Chinese-owned businesses especially targeted.

The country's central bank last week estimated that the rioting would see the national economy contract in 2021 by 0.6 percent, down from the already COVID-affected projected growth rate of plus 0.4 percent.

The destruction was the culmination of a US-supported, two-year campaign against the Solomon Islands' diplomatic recognition of China. The October 2019 switch from Taiwan to Beijing aligned the Pacific country with the vast majority of UN member states in recognising the Chinese government.

Washington, however, regarded this sovereign decision of the Solomons' government as an obstacle to its drive to counter China's challenge to its dominance of East Asia and the Pacific, including by boosting Taiwan.

Republican senator and Trump ally Marco Rubio publicly threatened to destroy the impoverished country's economy. A less prominent, but no less provocative, message was delivered to Solomon Islands by a team of US government officials that in late 2019 travelled to Malaita province and held secret talks with Premier

Daniel Suidani. The provincial leader subsequently denounced diplomatic ties with China, promoting anti-communist and Christian fundamentalist demagoguery. The US government funnelled investment money and \$US25 million in direct cash aid as an effective reward for Suidani's efforts to sabotage the national government's foreign policy.

Suidani is closely allied with a group promoting Malaitan independence from the Solomon Islands, Malaita for Democracy (M4D). This outfit led the violent rioting late last month. Hundreds of people were ferried from Malaita to the capital for the coup attempt, with others prevented by police from landing on an additional ferry on November 24. The government has since proscribed M4D, characterising its members as "domestic terrorists."

In the immediate aftermath of the coup attempt, Suidani has doubled down on his efforts to oust the government and instigate the reversal of the recognition of China. He addressed the Taiwan Foreign Correspondents Club on December 3, flaunting his US backing by wearing a polo-shirt with a prominent USAID logo. Suidani declared his support for ongoing anti-government protests and insisted that diplomatic recognition of China would end if the government was removed. These remarks were prominently reported in a *Washington Post* article.

Prime Minister Sogavare yesterday delivered a nearly two-hour long speech on the parliamentary floor opposing the no confidence motion advanced by the opposition leader Mathew Wale.

The address outlined important additional details on the planning and calculations behind the rioting. As the *World Socialist Web Site* analysed, the violence emerged not from any spontaneous uprising but rather was part of a reactionary coup attempt.

Sogavare characterised the riots as an "an attempted coup to overthrow the elected government." He said that

people travelling from Malaita to the capital on November 24 were given discounted or free ferry tickets, adding that the plan had been to “storm parliament and lock us [parliamentarians] in until I resigned.”

The prime minister accused opposition parliamentarians of conspiring with the Malaitan provincial administration and M4D. These forces gathered in Malaita on November 18, where Suidani had organised a public rally. Opposition parliamentarians were among those who delivered incendiary anti-government speeches. Sogavare quoted parts of these speeches, in the pidgin language in which they were delivered, and said they were an incitement for “people to take the law into their own hands.”

The prime minister added that Suidani had travelled throughout Malaita ahead of the riots, allegedly spreading “disinformation” and building support for an effort to overthrow the government, and had also met with Malaitan people in the settlements on the outskirts of eastern Honiara. Many of the rioters reportedly came from this area, an impoverished slum.

Sogavare told the parliament: “This [no confidence] motion was made against the backdrop of an illegal attempted coup. Violence, intimidation and fear—these actions are illegal and unlawful and were an attack on the principles of democracy.”

The WWSWS opposes the US-backed provocative efforts to destabilise and remove the Solomon Islands government, while at the same time extending no political support whatsoever to the Sogavare government.

The prime minister is now manoeuvring to curry favour with the US and Australian governments. His address to parliament notably failed to make any reference to Washington’s support for Suidani and the campaign to reverse the country’s recognition of Beijing. He carefully restricted his condemnation of foreign powers to Taiwan, accusing the opposition of being its agents.

Yesterday’s defeat of the no confidence motion will not resolve the political turmoil in the Solomons. It remains to be seen whether the Australian government will throw its weight behind the campaign to oust the government.

More than 100 Australian soldiers and riot police are now stationed in Honiara, after Sogavare invited the intervention force to halt the rioting. The Australian government has repeatedly insisted that this force will remain in Solomon Islands only for weeks, and Prime Minister Scott Morrison has insisted that Canberra would not take sides in any internal political disputes.

This stance is coming under mounting criticism from

within the Australian foreign policy establishment. Former foreign minister Alexander Downer last week wrote a comment piece for the *Australian Financial Review*, insisting that ending the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) intervention force in 2017 had proved a mistake. He stated that Australia should have a permanent military-police presence in the country, effectively calling for its conversion into an Australian semi-colony.

The Murdoch media has published a series of articles in recent days hostile to Sogavare and his government, including pieces recycling the Solomons’ opposition accusations of corruption. In 2006-2007, when a previous Sogavare government was the target of a protracted “regime change” operation orchestrated by Canberra, the Murdoch press functioned as a conduit for Australian government propaganda.

An article in the rightwing *Spectator* magazine on Saturday criticised the Morrison government for allegedly having “tipped the balance of favour toward Xi Jinping’s interests” by deploying an intervention force that it alleged has stabilised the situation in the Sogavare government’s favour. It continued: “Maybe it’s time Australia started ‘picking winners’ in the Pacific? If we don’t play the game, China will walk in a victory. The longer the communist nation is left to its own devices, the worse the inevitable conflict will be. Australia can’t outspend China’s magical wallet, but it can support grassroots rebellions when they occur.”

The fraught situation in Solomon Islands underscores the enormous stakes throughout the Pacific as US imperialism and its allies attempt to counter China’s growing economic and diplomatic influence. Washington and Canberra will not hesitate in promoting coups, riots, and state breakdown, if such methods are seen as the most effective means of advancing their geopolitical interests.



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