

Solomon Islands' government invites Chinese riot police deployment

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The Solomon Islands' government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare last week announced that it was accepting China's offer of assistance in bolstering the country's riot police capacity. In a statement last Thursday, the Sogavare government explained that it "is mindful of the urgent need to strengthen Royal Solomon Islands Police Force capability and capacity to respond to future unrest..."

"The government has agreed to accept the People's Republic of China's offer of riot equipment and six police liaison officers to equip and train Royal Solomon Islands Police Force with the skill sets complementing ongoing training received under existing bilateral assistance. This riot equipment that will be flown into the country includes shields, helmets, batons and other non-lethal gear that will further enhance Solomon Islands Police ability in confronting future threats."

On November 24, anti-government forces attempted to storm the parliament and overthrow the government. When they were beaten back by riot police, they burned and looted much of the capital, Honiara, for three days, especially targeting Chinese-owned businesses.

The violence was the culmination of a US-backed anti-government campaign spearheaded by the premier of Malaita province, Daniel Suidani.

After the government switched the country's diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China in 2019, Suidani declared, on anti-communist and Christian fundamentalist grounds, that he would not recognise the decision. The premier subsequently declared that Chinese nationals were barred from Malaita, and that Chinese investment and aid would not be permitted in the province. He insisted that he would maintain an independent foreign policy, and has since welcomed Taiwanese aid that has been unlawfully delivered to the

island.

Washington rewarded these provocations with a delivery of \$US25 million in so-called aid, as well as the promise of additional capital for infrastructure projects in Malaita. USAID officials and others with the Republican Party-connected International Republican Institute are active on the ground in Malaita, including providing political "training" to Suidani's supporters.

Suidani and his supporters are Malaitan separatists. Washington's support for them threatens the breakup of Solomon Islands and the reignition of the 1998–2003 civil conflict between rival Malaitan and Guale militias that had a devastating impact on the country.

US policy in the Solomons is extraordinarily reckless. It represents a case study in imperialist *realpolitik*—the potential consequences of a violent breakdown of a small and impoverished country count for nothing when weighed against the prospect of undermining China's influence.

The Australian government deployed more than 100 soldiers and federal police to Solomon Islands last month, part of a regional intervention force requested by Sogavare. Last week most of the soldiers were withdrawn from the country, leaving around 15 troops and 40 federal police. Prime Minister Scott Morrison has insisted that the intervention force will last only weeks and is not a reprise of the 2003–2017 Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), the Australian-led operation that cost nearly \$3 billion.

The move has triggered alarm in Australian ruling circles. Ever since World War II, Australian imperialism has regarded the South Pacific as its exclusive "sphere of influence," despite this stance having no basis in international law.

Canberra has enjoyed US backing for its predatory

operations in the region, based on the understanding that Australian forces would be primarily responsible for shutting out rival powers. Now China's growing economic and diplomatic presence is threatening to undermine this status quo.

Several foreign policy commentators both in the US and Australia have accused Prime Minister Scott Morrison of undermining the drive against the Solomons' government. Pressure is clearly building within the Australian foreign policy establishment for the launching of a "regime change" campaign aimed at removing Sogavare.

ABC News reporter Andrew Green reported that while the government has made little public comment on the Chinese riot police deployment, "privately officials are fuming, fearing Beijing's security assistance could pave the way for a Chinese military presence in a fragile nation right on Australia's doorstep."

The *Australian* ran an editorial, "Beijing's Solomon Islands Foothold," declaring the riot police invitation "disappointing" and adding that "few would be surprised if the half-dozen Chinese officers are soon joined by others to help train local police in the riot equipment and gain influence in the country."

The Murdoch outlet added that "Sogavare is very much Beijing's man," and concluded by warning: "Given its port facilities, the Solomon Islands is a strategic target for Beijing's expansionism."

The New Zealand foreign affairs ministry issued a statement, formally acknowledging that the Sogavare government's acceptance of Chinese aid was a sovereign decision for the government to make. This, however, was immediately followed by the declaration that "we are not convinced a deployment of Chinese personnel is needed in the current context" and that "we are mindful of the long-standing approach of Pacific Islands Forum members in supporting each other's security needs."

The last time Sogavare was in office, 2006–2007, he was perceived by the Australian government as a threat to RAMSI and was subjected to a protracted destabilisation campaign. Australian officials working in Canberra and Honiara waged a series of provocations, including the illegal arrest and rendition of the country's then attorney general, Julian Moti. There is a very real danger that a similar campaign is

now being prepared in the impoverished Pacific state.



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