

Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" promotes scare campaign over China-Solomon Islands ties

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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) flagship current affairs program "Four Corners" last Monday purported to review recent developments in relations between China and Solomon Islands, while echoing US and Australian government propaganda over the impoverished island state.

As it professed to expose foreign interference in Solomon Islands' politics, the broadcast made no mention whatsoever of the most blatant violations of the country's sovereignty—US funding and political support for violent separatist organisations in the province of Malaita, together with Washington's threats to invade the country if it houses a Chinese military base. Remarkably, the United States was not once mentioned in the 45-minute program.

The broadcast, titled "Pacific Capture: How Chinese money is buying the Solomons," portrayed Beijing's aid and investments in the Pacific country in the darkest light.

Donations of a fleet of fishing motorboats, rubbish trucks, and a sports stadium, and investments in mobile phone towers, were all cast as mechanisms to expand Chinese influence. In areas including Latin America and Africa, this is a familiar line of the western media. Neglect and exploitation as orchestrated by the old imperialist powers is regarded as the normal state of affairs, with any Chinese aid and investment, however limited, portrayed as an intrusion into otherwise idyllic relations between the advanced capitalist countries and the former colonial world.

The responsibility of Australian imperialism for Solomon Islands' poverty and underdevelopment was nowhere acknowledged.

After achieving formal independence from Britain in

1978, Solomon Islands' political system and economy were heavily influenced by Australia. Canberra launched a neo-colonial takeover of the country between 2003 and 2017, spending \$2.6 billion on the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). The vast majority of this money went to police, security, and Australian companies and consultants. Virtually nothing was spent on health, education, and other basic services—a fact again not raised by "Four Corners" as it blamed Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare for shortages of basic supplies in Honiara's hospital.

One of the central aims of the program was to portray Sogavare as personally corrupt.

Ruth Liloqula of Transparency International Solomon Islands provided extensive comments denouncing the prime minister. "Four Corners" did not report the conflict of interest issues involved in her position.

Transparency International is provided with millions of dollars annually by government agencies around the world, including Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Moreover, Liloqula has personal ties with Australian interests in Solomon Islands, receiving a prominent award from RAMSI in 2012 and previously working for Australian mining company Allied Gold, when it operated the lucrative Gold Ridge mining site.

In the "Four Corners" story, Liloqula notably blamed Sogavare for the violent coup attempt against his own government in November last year. She insisted that had the prime minister met with the forces seeking his overthrow, the three days of arson and looting would not have occurred.

This absurd narrative served to divert any reporting

on the forces actually responsible for the failed coup attempt—violent Malaitan separatists enjoying US backing. The rioters were led by a now proscribed organisation called Malaita for Democracy (M4D), which is closely aligned with Malaitan Premier Daniel Suidani. He has received tens of millions in direct US aid, a payoff for his illegal maintenance of ties with Taiwan, in defiance of the country’s 2019 diplomatic switch to China.

US personnel are on the ground in Malaita, backing his administration and its supporters. In January 2020, for example, officials with the International Republican Institute (IRI), an organisation with close ties to the US intelligence agencies, met with Knoxly Atu, leader of M4D. Atu has since been arrested for his role in the November riots, and is awaiting trial. In 2020, however, the *Solomon Star* reported that IRI program officer Clare Hubbard said that her organisation “truly appreciates the efforts of the M4D advocating on behalf of the people and wish to encourage M4D to continue its good work.”

Another glaring omission from the “Four Corners” program was the Australian government campaign against Sogavare’s 2006–2007 government. After he was perceived to be a threat to RAMSI, Sogavare was targeted for removal in that period. “Four Corners” briefly reported one incident, the Australian Federal Police raid on the prime minister’s office in October 2006, but failed to place this in the context of the series of lawless provocations that Canberra orchestrated to destabilise the Solomons’ government.

This included a ruthless witch hunt against then Solomon Islands’ attorney general Julian Moti. Australia’s senior diplomat in Honiara dredged up false and long discredited sexual assault allegations, and authorities then abused Australian extra-territorial laws for child sex tourism to demand Moti’s extradition. This culminated in Australian police orchestrating Moti’s illegal rendition to Australia in December 2007.

The case was thrown out in a damning High Court ruling four years later, and the Australian government was compelled to issue an apology to the international lawyer and pay him compensation (see: “Australian High Court blocks frame-up charges against Moti”).

That none of these facts were mentioned by “Four Corners” broadcast reflects the program’s political agenda.

Basic context to multiple issues was not provided. This included the issue of the Sogavare government’s constituency fund payments to its parliamentarians. Chinese financing of these payments was portrayed as conclusive evidence of corruption—though unreported was Sogavare’s pledge to end the constituency fund system, as well as the history of these payments. Taiwan invented the mechanism of directly financing government members and for years, including during the RAMSI period, used the monies to ensure that Taiwanese logging companies encountered no obstacles to their predatory activities.

The conclusion of the “Four Corners” program left little doubt that it was aimed at helping prepare for a potential repeat of the RAMSI intervention.

In 2003, the neo-colonial operation was justified on the basis that Solomon Islands was a “failed state.” The ABC broadcast ended with opposition parliamentarian Silas Tausinga saying the country had become a “banana republic.” “Four Corners” reporter Angus Grigg asked if Solomon Islands was a “failed state,” and Tausinga replied, “We’re pretty much heading in that direction. Given the amount of foreign forces that was in the country, you could almost suggest that we are pretty much on the road to a failed state.”

The ABC and its “Four Corners” have a long record of promoting Australian government provocations in the South Pacific and South East Asia. In 2006, a lurid “Four Corners” program slandered then Timorese Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, bolstering Canberra’s drive to remove him and his Fretilin administration from office (see: “Australian government’s role in ousting East Timor’s prime minister Alkatiri”). In the Solomons now, the ABC is reprising its role as propaganda outlet for Australian imperialism just as the US is ratcheting up its war preparations against China.



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