

US-backed provincial leader in Solomon Islands removed from office

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Yesterday a no-confidence motion in the provincial assembly ousted the premier of Malaita province in Solomon Islands, Daniel Suidani.

The development represents a blow to the United States government, which has funnelled so-called aid money into the island of Malaita and extended political support to Suidani and his backers as a reward for their vociferous anti-China and anti-central government stance.

Suidani's ouster comes just days after the US formally reopened its embassy in Solomon Islands, which had been closed in 1993 but was relaunched as part of Washington's drive to counter Beijing's influence in the South Pacific.

The national government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in September 2019, and in March 2022 developed a security pact with Beijing. The diplomatic switch was met with consternation and protests from powerful figures within Washington.

Republican Senator Marco Rubio threatened to crash the Solomons' impoverished economy. The security pact saw threats by the Biden administration to stage a military intervention in the event that a Chinese military base was opened in the small, strategic Pacific country.

These were blatantly illegal ultimatums issued against an elected government entering into relations with other states.

For US imperialism, however, everything—including basic precepts of international law—is subordinated to its war drive against China. Washington is attempting to diplomatically and militarily encircle China, while ratcheting up anti-China rhetoric within the US and internationally, most recently via the scare campaign over an apparently stray weather balloon. The

Solomons-China security pact cut directly across this agenda, while raising the spectre of an end to unchallenged American hegemony across the Pacific Ocean.

It was within this context that Malaitan Premier Daniel Suidani rose from the obscurity of Solomon Islands' village politics to become the US pointman within the country over the past four years.

On the eve of the 2019 diplomatic switch, a team of American officials travelled to Malaita, including members of the Department of State, Department of Defence, Department of Trade, as well as embassy and aid personnel. US intelligence operatives were undoubtedly also present. After this secretive trip—no press statements or social media posts accompanied the mission—Suidani declared that his provincial administration regarded as illegitimate the central government's recognition of Beijing.

The Malaitan premier insisted that he would maintain his own foreign policy relations with Taiwan—despite this being explicitly illegal under Solomon Islands' law.

Suidani sought to whip up Christian fundamentalist and anti-communist sentiment in Malaita and prohibited Chinese trade and investment in the province. His supporters in the now proscribed Malaita For Democracy outfit (M4D) issued a pogromist threat in September 2020 to ethnic Chinese residents, demanding they leave the Malaitan capital of Auki within 24 hours.

The US pledged tens of millions of dollars in so-called aid directly to Malaita, amounting to at least 50 times more money than the province receives from any other country. Suidani also enjoyed critical political backing—he and his colleagues have received “training” from personnel with the International Republican

Institute, an organisation with close ties to the US intelligence agencies.

As early as January 2020, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the US and its key ally in the region, Australia, were preparing a “regime change” operation against the Solomon Islands’ Sogavare government. This was borne out when Suidani’s M4D supporters travelled from Malaita to the capital, Honiara, in November 2021 and attempted to storm the parliament and take Sogavare hostage. When this proved unsuccessful, they burned and looted much of the city for three days, murdering three people.

Suidani’s removal as premier appears to reflect growing opposition to his rule in Malaita. Promised US investments have largely failed to materialise and desperate poverty and chronic infrastructure problems remain. Paved roads and bridges are either non-existent or in advanced disrepair, yet Suidani has blocked Chinese construction firms from doing work as they have in other provinces. Suidani also blocked the installation of Huawei mobile phone towers, limiting reception on the island. This issue was recently raised against Suidani by Malaita’s deputy premier, Glen Waneta.

Suidani and his executive failed to appear before the provincial assembly yesterday, apparently after learning they lacked the numbers. The provincial budget failed to pass the assembly last month, demonstrating growing defections to the opposition. Seventeen assembly members reached quorum yesterday and voted for the no-confidence motion, the text of which included allegations against Suidani of financial mismanagement and corruption.

Around 100 Suidani supporters reportedly clashed with police after the premier’s removal, with protestors throwing stones and officers firing tear gas. According to social media reports, the rioters attempted to enter the assembly building, reprising their previous occupation of the assembly building in October 2021. This anti-democratic incident resulted in an earlier no-confidence motion being unable to be heard.

The situation remains tense ahead of the scheduled assembly vote for a new provincial premier. Just before Suidani’s removal, a spokesman for a group of his supporters among Malaitan chiefs issued a provocative statement warning of violence unless the provincial government remained in power. Flex Fiumae told the

Solomon Star last Sunday: “If anything goes wrong, resulting in damages to properties and loss of lives, the mover of the [no-confidence] motion and the non-executive will be blamed for triggering the situation.”

Suidani’s removal will see no let-up in the propaganda campaign in the Australian and US media against the Sogavare government and China. Already, without a shred of evidence, Suidani’s ouster is being attributed to a corrupt conspiracy. Mihai Sora from an Australian corporate thinktank, the Lowy Institute, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that there is “speculation that Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare financed these motions against Suidani, backed by money from China, which would be glad to see the premier removed.”

This unsubstantiated speculation is being fuelled by the Australian and American governments as part of ongoing efforts to destabilise the Sogavare government.



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