

Solomon Islands holds national election as US confronts China in the Pacific

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Solomon Islands is staging a national election tomorrow, the first since it switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019, and signed a military pact with Beijing in 2022. The election is being held under the shadow of Washington's highly provocative moves to counter China's influence in the strategically significant South Pacific region.

Within the Solomons, these manoeuvres have involved the preparation of a "regime change" operation directed against Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. US-financed forces staged a violent coup attempt in November 2021, and the following year American officials issued open threats of military intervention after the signing of the China security pact.

Sogavare is campaigning to be the first Solomon Islands' prime minister to serve concurrent terms in office since formal independence from Britain in 1978.

The Pacific state has a highly unstable parliamentary system. Members of the 50-member parliament are typically elected to office not on the basis of party allegiance but rather through local tribal and clan loyalties. Parliamentarians frequently switch from opposition to government and back again. The 2024 election, however, has seen a clearer divide between government and opposition politicians, with US-China competition the overriding demarcating issue.

Sogavare's coalition government included 33 parliamentarians who were members of his Ownership, Unity, Responsibility (OUR) Party. The OUR Party is fielding 43 candidates in the election. Among its central policy "pillars" is a pledge to "strengthen relationships with China through a 'look North' foreign policy." On economic policy, the party has committed to "continue with transformative infrastructure developments by tapping opportunities offered through China's Belt and Road Initiative."

Sogavare's bourgeois nationalist government has sought to utilise China's growing economic, military, and diplomatic influence in the Pacific to leverage concessions from US imperialism and its allies, including Australia. His OUR Party manifesto outlined hopes to "nurture ties with other traditional partners such as Australia" and develop a "friends to all and enemies to none" approach.

At the same time, however, the incumbent prime minister is clearly aware that he remains in Washington's crosshairs.

Last month, the *Solomon Star* published a front-page story claiming Sogavare gave an inflammatory address to US officials at a reception for the recently appointed American ambassador to Solomon Islands, Ann Marie Yastishock. An unnamed government "insider" told the *Star* that Sogavare stated "according to the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force, foreign forces are intervening in the country's national general election this year," and "foreign forces may fund some political parties and plan to stage another riot during the election to disrupt the electoral process and undermine social stability."

Also last month, Sogavare protested a mass phone text message sent by the Electoral Commission, which encouraged people to vote by stating: "You are never too little to make a CHANGE... Make that CHANGE."

The incumbent prime minister correctly noted that this clearly aligned with the opposition's campaign slogans, violating the Commission's responsibility to be politically impartial. An OUR Party statement suggested the incident was due to Australian and United Nations financing of the Electoral Commission. "This then raises the issue that would such [sic] messages be the result of the influence of a donor partner," the statement read. "If this is so, then clearly,

this is a blatant campaign for regime change advocated by a foreign power and its agents.”

There is no question that US- or Australian-driven provocations may follow the national election in the event that Sogavare remains in office.

Developments in the Pacific state are being closely monitored. On March 14, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a public hearing titled “US Strategy in the Pacific Islands Region,” involving senior Democrat and Republican senators and officials with USAID and the state and defence departments. The entire discussion centred on China’s growing influence in the region and what the US could do to challenge this.

“They [China] have a comprehensive plan to replace us,” Republican senator and previous presidential candidate Mitt Romney complained to the Committee. “It appears to be a very effective strategy... If we have strategy to counter China, it’s not working.”

The Solomon Islands opposition has formed the CARE (Coalition for Accountability, Reform and Empowerment) coalition, led by long-standing partners of Australian imperialism Matthew Wale and Rick Hou.

Wale and Hou have stopped short of pledging to cancel the military pact with China and reverse diplomatic recognition back to Taiwan. Both figures, however, have repeatedly denounced Beijing. In 2022, Wale stated that he had forewarned Australian officials about the military pact and complained that they had failed to sabotage it.

Also prominent within CARE is US-allied Daniel Suidani. He is contesting a provincial assembly ward in the province of Malaita (tomorrow’s election is a joint national, provincial, and council poll). When Suidani previously held office, he maintained his own diplomatic relations in Taiwan and barred Chinese investment on Malaita. He has long aligned with Malaitan separatists, hundreds of whom staged an unsuccessful violent coup attempt three years ago. Suidani enjoys the closest of ties with the US and its allies—last year he spent six months on an expenses-paid trip to the US, Canada, and Australia.

The CARE coalition is attempting to win support through populist appeals, including promising free schooling, improved healthcare, cuts to politicians’ salaries and a 15 percent wage rise for public sector

workers.

Few if any of these policies will actually be implemented in the event that the opposition wins the election. No section of the Solomon Islands’ ruling elite has any solution for the enormous economic and social crisis that continues to wrack the impoverished Pacific country.

Solomon Islands was hard hit by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the destruction of much of central Honiara with the failed coup attempt in 2021. The economy has only emerged this year from a deep recession, with negative economic growth recorded in 2020 (-3.4 percent), 2021 (-0.6 percent), and 2022 (-4.1 percent).

The country ranks 156 out of 193 states on the United Nations Human Development Index, sliding four places in the last seven years. Young people are especially affected—70 percent of the population is under 35 years of age, and employment and education opportunities are highly limited.



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