

# New Solomon Islands prime minister maintains China alliance

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Following national elections held April 15, a new Solomon Islands prime minister, Jeremiah Manele, was sworn in Thursday.

Former Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare had reoriented the small Pacific country's foreign relations, recognising Beijing over Taiwan in 2019 and in 2022 negotiating a security pact with the Chinese government. These moves infuriated the US and Australian governments. In blatant disregard of international law, Washington and Canberra denounced China's alleged encroachment into its claimed sphere of influence.

Sogavare announced last Monday that he would not renominate as prime minister. He backed Manele, who is a member of Sogavare's Ownership, Unity, Responsibility (OUR) Party and who served as foreign minister in the previous government.

In resigning, Sogavare again denounced Washington, saying his government had been "under pressure from the United States and western allies—geopolitics is at play, after we made a very important decision in 2019." He added: "Prior to the elections, there were indications of extensive efforts by the United States to influence the outcome in East Choiseul [Sogavare's electorate]... This could have been a victory for the US allies. Thankfully, it turned in our favour."

Sogavare's announcement he would not renominate as prime minister was met with unconcealed glee by sections of the US and Australian foreign policy establishment. The *Australian's* foreign editor Greg Sheridan told Sky News that, "this is a good outcome from Australia's point of view."

The Sydney-based Lowy Institute more than a week ago declared the election result an "unexpected defeat for Sogavare."

Such commentary proved premature. The incumbent OUR Party suffered multiple constituency losses—18 ministers lost their seats, leaving OUR representatives

with just 15 of the total 50 seats in the national parliament. At the same time, however, the opposition parties failed to capitalise on widespread social and economic unrest that has been fuelled by three consecutive years of negative economic growth. Matthew Wale's Solomon Islands Development Party and Peter Kenilorea Jr.'s United Party lost 40 percent of their sitting parliamentarians.

The main opposition parties are closely aligned with Australian imperialism and suggested that the China alliance would be reviewed if not immediately terminated in the event that they formed government.

However, multiple parliamentarians from new and smaller parties won office, as well as 10 new so-called independent parliamentarians. Several of these backed Jeremiah Manele's nomination. He secured 31 votes in the ballot for prime minister, ahead of 18 for Matthew Wale.

Manele is expected to form a cabinet over the weekend, with Sogavare likely to receive a senior post.

In a speech delivered Thursday, the new prime minister suggested that a new "free market" economic agenda would be adopted, aimed at attracting corporate investors. Announced measures include the introduction of a new, regressive value added tax (VAT), which will increase costs of living for already impoverished workers and farmers in the country.

Manele has also suggested he will prepare a "Special Economic Zone Bill," likely involving massive tax breaks for corporate investors, and has said his government may revise the 2024 budget, potentially involving additional spending cuts.

On foreign policy, Manele has confirmed that he will maintain existing diplomatic, economic, and security ties with China. The prime minister told Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) News that he regarded China and Australia as "equally important" partners.

A comment published by the Lowy Institute, by former Australian diplomat and intelligence analyst Mihai Sora, responded: “That’s a far cry from saying that Australia is Solomon Islands’ ‘partner of choice,’ something Australian ministers seem desperate to hear. And it’s evidence of the rapid elevation in China–Solomon Islands ties, considering they only officially started in 2019.”

Manele is an ex-public servant and diplomat, who worked at the United Nations and in several western countries before entering the Solomons’ parliament in 2014.

Multiple Australian foreign policy commentators anticipate that he will maintain the former government’s orientation to Beijing, while eschewing Sogavare’s public denunciations of the US and Australian governments.

Mihai Sora told the *Washington Post*: “In Manele, you have a far less strident and polarising political figure. This may actually have dividends for China in the sense that they might continue to enjoy the privileged political access that they had with Sogavare, but there might be less international scrutiny on their activities.”

The threat of a US- and Australian-instigated destabilisation campaign in Solomon Islands remains a very real one.

In 2006–2007, Australian police and intelligence operatives deployed to the country with the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) orchestrated the illegal arrest and prosecution of Attorney General Julian Moti, and successfully triggered Sogavare’s removal from office in December 2007.

In 2021, US-financed separatist forces in the Solomons’ province of Malaita attempted to storm the parliament and then razed much of the capital. The following year, after the China security pact was announced, American and Australian officials suggested they would invade Solomon Islands in the event that the Chinese military established a base there.

This long track record of imperialist thuggery makes a mockery of efforts to portray discussion of a possible US-orchestrated “regime change” operation as nothing but Chinese- and Russian-concocted “disinformation.”

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute—a think tank funded by the government and weapons manufacturers—issued a paper the same day that Manele was elected prime minister, titled, “Russia and China coordinate on disinformation in Solomon Islands elections.”

“Both countries’ propaganda systems accused the United States, without evidence, of using its foreign aid and networks across the country to interfere in voting and

of preparing to foment riots and orchestrate regime change in response to an unsatisfactory election result,” it asserted.

The paper effectively called for better resourced US and Australian propaganda efforts, and censorship, “with better support [for] governments to take further steps to identify and combat false information online.”

The province of Malaita remains a potential flashpoint. In provincial elections that were held at the same time as the national ballot, Daniel Suidani won his ward election and has stated he will attempt to lead the next provincial government. When Suidani last held this position, he refused to recognise the country’s ties with China, blocked Chinese investment on the island, and maintained his own foreign policy connection with Taiwan. Suidani’s separatist allies on Malaita spearheaded the 2021 coup attempt in Honiara.

After being removed from office for illegal activities related to his Taiwan dealings, Suidani last year spent six months on an expenses-paid trip to the US, Canada, and Australia. His potential return to power in Malaita threatens further instability.

One of Suidani’s prominent supporters in the US is Cleo Paskal of the right-wing think tank, Foundation for Defense of Democracies. In 2021 she openly backed efforts to forcibly remove the Sogavare government. This week, following Manele’s election she told the *Washington Post*: “If you end up with basically Sogavare-lite, a kinder, gentler-looking but pro-[China] party, the people of the Solomons, who didn’t vote for that, will not be delighted. There’s concern about potential unrest.”



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