

Solomon Islands Update: Crisis and Intervention

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Ways Forward – Rebuilding

Sinclair Dinnen, SSGM

(Speaking Notes)

A. The armed intervention in the SI was necessary because:

- The paralysis of the SI government, collapse of the police force, and the violence and intimidation of ex-militants and criminal elements, required an external circuit breaker to restore peace and stability and stop the downward spiral;
- The SI is technically bankrupt, government services have collapsed in most places, and hardship and suffering among the ordinary population had risen to unacceptable levels;
- Ex-militant leaders, such as Harold Keke, have been able to operate with impunity and engage in reigns of terror in selected areas of rural Guadalcanal and Malaita;
- The fragile national integrity of the SI has been under mounting threat as island provinces become increasingly frustrated with the stalemate at the political centre;
- The SI government and clear majority of the population wanted external assistance to help restore some semblance of normalcy and calls for assistance had been made since early 2000;
- It was clearly in Australia's interests to assist SI out of its predicament.

B. Australian decision makers no doubt had a whole range of strategic considerations in mind when they decided to intervene. Significant shifts in foreign and defence policies have occurred as a result of the 9/11 attacks in the US, the Bali bombing, and the US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. These shifts in strategic thinking provide the broader context for Australia's decision to act now after having declined earlier requests. There is also the intriguing allegation made recently by SBS reporter Mark Davis that Australia acted in order to pre-empt armed assistance offered by the Indonesian government. Whatever the real reasons for the change of mind, it is now important to move forward and focus on the specific characteristics of the SI Crisis in order that external assistance facilitates a sustainable process of peace, reconciliation and recovery. A better understanding of how the SI Crisis developed will indicate that the kind of assistance required is not simply a return to those programs and projects that were in place prior to, say, 1999. What is needed is a complete reappraisal and the formulation of an assistance package designed to avoid the distortions of development and governance processes that have contributed to the events of the past 4 years. It is not just a question of doing the same things better but of doing many things differently. This requires a long-term engagement on the part of Australia and other donors and an appreciation of the complexities and challenges facing the Solomon Islands.

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It goes without saying, that a fundamental condition for the success of such an engagement is genuine ownership and participation by SI stakeholders.

C. The intervention and its positive reception by most Solomon Islanders present a unique window of opportunity. Few dissenting voices have been raised against the intervention and the need for fundamental reform. This window, however, will not stay open indefinitely and it is important to move quickly to facilitate a program of longer-term reform agreed to by all key stakeholders. Such a program should aim to cover, at least, the next 5-10 years. The immediate focus of RAMSI (Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands) on security issues has been absolutely necessary in order to restore peace and stability. Significant progress has been made in a short period of time, notably in the area of disarmament. It is nevertheless important to move on to the more pressing issues of governance that underlie the current crisis as soon as possible.

D. At the heart of many of the difficulties experienced in the SI lies the uneasy fit between the institutions and ideas of the modern nation-state and the patchwork of semi-autonomous indigenous micro-polities they strive to encompass. The present intervention provides a timely opportunity to re-visit fundamental issues of governance and, in particular, the issue of what kind of political system is most appropriate for SI's socially diverse and geographically fragmented environment. On gaining independence in 1978, the SI inherited the institutional framework of the modern-nation state. This comprised a centralised state and a Westminster system of parliamentary democracy. While this system of governance may have been familiar to a small educated elite, that was not the case for most 'citizens' of the new nation. It bore little resemblance to the system of colonial administration that preceded it, and differed profoundly from the indigenous systems of governance that had evolved over thousands of years of pre-colonial history. The latter provided for the ordering of the numerous small-scale, and relatively insular, self-regulating societies scattered throughout the archipelago. These local systems have proved to be remarkably resilient and adaptable in the face of colonial and post-colonial change, and continue to provide the primary frame of reference for most Solomon Islanders. Around 80 languages are still spoken among an overall population of approximately half a million people, with at least 7 spoken on Guadalcanal and about 10 on Malaita. The state constitutes a weak presence in the everyday lives of most Solomon Islanders who continue to live in rural villages, surviving through a combination of traditional agriculture, fishing and cash-cropping. There is still little sense of a unifying national identity. Primary allegiances are implanted in local language groups, kinship relations, and patterns of communal land ownership, rather than in abstract notions of 'nation' and 'citizenship'.

The centralisation of political power in the SI remains partial and incomplete. It is a process that has generated resistance at local levels since the beginning of colonial rule. Dissatisfaction with centralised government, and a desire for greater recognition of indigenous systems, contributed to the emergence of the two best known resistance movements during the colonial period, namely Maasina Rule (or Marching Order) on Malaita in the 1940s and 50s and the Moro Movement in south Guadalcanal in the 1950s and 60s. Just before independence in 1978, several districts sought to loosen or sever ties with the political centre in Honiara. The most serious case at that time was the 'breakaway' movement in what is now Western province. Despite the establishment of a system of provincial government in 1981, discontent with the configuration of political power in SI has remained a recurring issue in post-independence politics. Wealthier provinces, in particular, have

expressed great resentment at what they view as the meagre benefits they receive from central government in return for their substantial contribution to national revenues.

As in other parts of Melanesia, incompetent and corrupt governments have contributed significantly to the legitimacy crisis of the weak post-colonial state. In the rich forestry sector, which in the mid-1990s contributed to approximately half of government export earnings, corruption and mismanagement have been rife, and logging has proceeded at an unsustainable rate with little benefit to traditional landowners. Limited employment and other economic opportunities have contributed to growing levels of marginalisation among a youthful and rapidly increasing population. The playing out of national-level politics has been characterised more by localism rather than any clear conception of, or credible commitment to, broader national interests. Many leaders appear to have used their access to state power primarily as a means for personal enrichment and as a way of supporting patron-client relations with the quasi-traditional micro-constituencies on whose votes they depend. Not surprisingly, this pattern of 'national' politics has led to rising levels of popular disenchantment with the formal political process and, in some places, to growing autonomy sentiments.

Reforming the political system and, in particular, reconfiguring the relationship between the political centre and the periphery is critical to the survival of the Solomon Islands as a nation.

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