



# **SSGM WORKSHOP PAPERS**

## Regional Politics in Solomon Islands

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This paper was presented at the *Solomon Islands Workshop: Building Peace and Stability*, 24-26 October 2001 at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia. The workshop was organised by the State Society and Governance in Melanesia Project.

## Regional politics in Solomon Islands

Happening right now are the most significant developments in Solomon Islands politics since Independence was attained in 1978. The coup in Honiara of June last year and subsequent work toward a peaceful outcome has driven the Government to finally consider granting more autonomy to the rural provinces. This call for more autonomy has historical roots and is bound to concepts of identity which sit awkwardly with a nation-state model of governance. But while movement in the direction of state government may satisfy underlying needs to give independent political expression to sub-national identities, the result in terms of service provision and development is likely to be uneven.

The question of regional autonomy has been a significant sub-text to the civil war between Malaita and Guadalcanal in Solomon Islands in 1998-2000. As with that conflict, the current regionalist movement initially arose in reaction to the structural reforms of the Ulafa'alu Government, which re-ignited older fires. How the issue is resolved is not only important to the Solomons, but is of interest to Australia in terms of foreign policy and delivery of aid. Will new arrangements provide the kind of stability that will rule out ethnic conflicts like the one just seen? What will be the consequences for PNG and Solomon Islands if their adjoining provinces of Bougainville and the Western Solomons both have greater autonomy over trade? Could a new regionalism serve to develop the economy, or will a multiplicity of poorly-resourced centres of governance hinder it? And how does Australia usefully deliver aid to a decentralised Solomon Islands?

### **The provinces of Solomon Islands**

Solomon Islands has nine rural provinces, and Honiara, which is statutorily a Town Council separate from Guadalcanal (Fig 1, province map). Production from primary resources is almost the sole means of the nation for earning money from exports. The resources are not evenly distributed (Figs 2 and 3, timber and copra by province). At the same time, population is also not evenly distributed (Fig 4, population by province). Particularly in the case of Malaita, there is a mismatch between a high population and poor export resources.

All provinces in Solomons are undergoing the effects of pressure on land tenure systems due to high population growth. Since 1970, the country has experienced a population growth of 254%. In Malaita, the growth has been 237% over that period. In Guadalcanal, 251%. In west, 259%. There is evidence of a variety of responses to land pressure, and some of these have fuelled conflict. In particular, there has been the diaspora of Malaitans throughout Solomons, with some of these people ending up in 'New Mala' settlements, which are located on old plantations and unoccupied customary land.

Besides these land pressures, there has been a set of underlying resentments, differing depending on province, that the national government is not properly balancing revenue generation from land resources with service delivery to rural people. For example, people

in the West think they are being ‘ripped off’, and people in Temotu think they have been forgotten.

### **A very quick history**

In the dim past before white people arrived in Meso-Melanesia, say around the 17th and 18th centuries, the entire archipelago from PNG through Solomon Islands and on to Vanuatu was composed of small polities (numbering in hundreds of people) in relations of exchange and enmity with their near neighbours. Those who lived on the coasts and lagoons were sea-farers, and enjoyed inter-island ranging often up to 100 km away; more in some areas. High-value goods such as obsidian and decorated fighting-spears could be traded over hundreds of kilometres from their source through this continuous network. Significant cultural variation existed across the region in terms of marriage arrangements and relationships to ancestors. While the extent of such cultural traits was rarely coterminous, thus defining neat ‘culture areas’, there was nevertheless a certain clumpiness’ to the continuum of the exchange network in which particular currencies were circulated over a more limited range.

Over this system the colonial territorial boundaries were dropped in the late nineteenth century, separating (in the colonial administrator’s minds) dominions of a size compatible with the activities of Europe’s colonial enterprises. The Western Solomons went to the Germans, who named the features of the French-named island of Bougainville in honour of their own aristocracy, while the British took the rest under names given two centuries earlier by passing Spanish explorers. None of this exercise in cartography had any relation to indigenous systems. If it had, the mariner’s map may have shown instead myriad tiny lands, assembled into only slightly larger countries and language areas.

In the early 1920’s, the British Solomon Islands Protectorate government set up a District Headman system to aid tax collection. This was the culmination of both mission and government policies over the one or two previous decades to gather people into villages. At this point governance found its way to the grassroots, although with varying success. This system was maintained up to independence in 1978, while self-government was gradually introduced from 1944 onwards, first at the District level and then at the Protectorate level. The British recognised cultural differences across the Solomons, and to some extent the division of Districts represented their understanding of the ethnic variety they saw. It is hardly worth mentioning that the British never considered any form of autonomy for these districts.

In the lead-up to independence, the indigenous point of view asserted itself, and there was a challenge to the idea of a central government controlling the resource base of the of the proposed new Provinces. The old BSIP Western District, which was to become the Western Province, instead thought of independence. In August 1977 a motion was moved in the Legislative Assembly that the central government ‘amicably agree’ to the West becoming a separate nation.<sup>1</sup> Makira-Ulawa too called for a ‘full devolution of power’ to each province in June 1978, a month before National independence.<sup>2</sup> Although the

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<sup>1</sup> News Drum, 28 August 1977.

<sup>2</sup> News Drum, 16 June 1978.

Makira-Ulawa call did not gather much momentum, the political situation in the west developed into a crisis for the government, with a very serious 'breakaway movement' developing which led to the Western Province boycotting the Solomon Islands' independence, although it eventually stopped short of declaring its own.

What is interesting at this point is to reflect on how, from the indigenous point of view, the region had become defined in political terms by 1978. The thinking of the Western leaders at the time provides insight. Recall that in the deep past, the west, like any part of island Melanesia, was a mass of small polities tied by exchange and alliance, but not under any wider form of authority. It was the British who defined the Districts (including Western District), and gradually introduced self-governance in terms of sub-Districts, Districts and the Protectorate as a whole.

In 1975 the Western Submission to the Kausimae Committee on Provincial Government phrased the experience of defining a regional identity as follows:

Take the formation of the Western Council. The move of the different local government councils in the Western District to form the Western Council was initiated by local leaders with government encouragement. These leaders, through the increased awareness of their people in knowing that the Western District is in fact for them all and not for the Choiseul man or Marovo man only, came to realize that having one council would be better than having several. So the process of unity gradually grew. Many other factors contributed to the Western Council, but the process of unity and identity has spread from a tribe to a village, to a locality, to a whole island, to a district.<sup>3</sup>

The main point here is that localities, traditionally defined as 'tribes', saw a common interest in amalgamating the five local councils in the West to form a District Council, which happened in 1972.<sup>4</sup> What of the 'other factors' mentioned? The defining effect of the British early on defining a 'Western District' is itself an important factor, as it was through this institution that the people of the west first experienced governance back in the early 1920's. Coupled with this was the coterminous extent of the Methodist and Seventh-day Adventist missions, which operated exclusively in the west. The third major factor has to be indigenous understanding of pre-Protectorate history, when all the islands of the west were linked by alliance or warfare, exclusive of what was happening to the east. Together, along with similarities of geography and economic experience, these factors have combined to lay a foundation of western 'identity', and a region which is mostly characterised by amicable relations. In contrast, the west's relations with other parts of the Solomons has not always been so amicable, especially in dealings with Malaita (an issue to be recalled later).

### **The relationship between Bougainville and the western Solomons.**

The one area of politics of the west that I have not so far discussed is the special case of the Shortland islands, which are part of the Western Province. Here, in fact, the colonial

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<sup>3</sup> Submission of the Western Council, August 1975. Special Committee on Provincial Government, Background Paper No. 28 (mimeo).

<sup>4</sup> Campbell 1974 cited in Premdas, Steeves and Larmour, 1984

history was different from the rest of the west, in that the catholic mission held sway, and the British had at various times a different 'Shortlands District' with its own Commissioner.

In early times, the Shortland Islands and southern Bougainville were together known as Sonto by people to the east, and by all accounts had much in common. The Germans and English drew their revised border through this old unity in 1897. The earliest record I have found of difficulties caused by the colonial border comes in 1946, when C.H. Allen discusses the problems of administering a border drawn inconveniently across the heavily trafficked strait, where people on one side had land interests and relatives on the other. Allen raised the question of 'ceding the Shortlands to the Australian New Guinea administration' only to dismiss it, but the question has lingered in one form or other.<sup>5</sup>

Again in 1974, when it was thought that Bougainville might form its own government once PNG became independent, there was much talk about whether Bougainville would join Solomons, or Bougainville and Shortlands could together become an independent entity. This talk was heard in Bougainville among the secessionists, and in Shortlands among the islands' leaders.<sup>6</sup>

Neither of these options eventuated of course, and the Shortlands remains part of the Western Province and its own politicians (particularly Jerry Buare, the first Premier of Western Province), were supporters of the western breakaway movement.

We see that, using the important case of the Western Solomons to illustrate the central issues, the main themes of regionalism were set by 1978.

### **Regionalism re-ignited: the events of 2000.**

While never completely forgotten, the issues of regionalism were not decisively dealt with by any government in the Solomon Islands over the first 21 years of post-independence politics. The national constitution, drafted prior to independence, deferred the details of regional governance to a later time, when they could be debated in Parliament on the recommendations of a review committee. The Kausimae Committee on Provincial Government, released its report in June 1979, 11 months after independence. This was equivocal on the issue of regional autonomy, and preferred not to raise mention of the word 'State'. A Provincial Government Act was introduced in 1981, which importantly followed section 106 of the Constitution that 'no taxation shall be imposed or altered except by or under an Act of Parliament', limiting the power of the provinces to raise revenue. The Act also provided the provinces no powers to make laws affecting trade and commerce with countries outside Solomon Islands.

A review of the constitution was ordered by the Mamaloni Government in 1987, dealing substantially with the issue of devolution of legislative and revenue-raising power to the provinces. The report was not tabled in Parliament, however, and the issue suppressed

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<sup>5</sup> Draft of letter to District Commissioner Western 25-06-46. C.H. Allen Papers.

<sup>6</sup> Hannett, L., 1975. The case for Bougainville Secession. *Meanjin Quarterly*, Spring, pp. 286-93; BSI News Sheet No. 22, 6 December 1974.

until 1996. In 1996, Mamaloni revisited the issue of Provincial powers in a review of governance in the Solomon Islands. The Local Area Councils were abolished, and plans were set to abolish the provinces and replace them with Provincial Councils and a President instead of a Chairman. Chiefs and elders were to be appointed as members of new Area Assemblies, along with some elected members. Powers to the proposed Councils were not increased, and indeed the Western and Guadalcanal provinces at the time argued that powers were effectively diminished and that the proposed changes were a bid by Mamaloni's government to increase its own powers. The changes did not proceed because the Mamaloni government was voted out of office.

The new Ulufa'alu Government elected in 1997 continued to work on the issue of Provincial Government reform as part of its commitment to the overall structural reform of the government and economy of Solomon Islands. It set up a Provincial Government Review Committee in May 1998, and this Committee began its work after some delay a year later.

A draft of the Provincial Government Decentralisation Bill was completed by late January 2000.<sup>7</sup> This was due to go to Parliament in April, and was a topic of controversy as the Government was keeping secret the contents of the Bill, although rumours at the time had it that the legislation would deinstitutionalise the Provinces.

Eventually, in mid March 2000 the draft Bill was sent to the Provincial Premiers for comment, and coincidentally Reuben Lilo was invited to speak on the Provincial Government Review at a conference in Honiara where Milner Tozaka, the Chairman of the Review Committee, was also making the first public presentation of the results of the Review. The new system, Tozaka said, would be a 'two-tier constituency based system', removing the current Provincial Assembly and Executive structures. Constituency Governing Councils (CGC's) would be formed instead, each covering a ward area (there are currently 26 wards in the Western Province). A Provincial Congress made up of the Presidents of the CGC's, headed by an elected Governor, would 'coordinate' the CGC's within a Province while not actually forming a separate tier of government. The Governor would take the place of the current Premier and would mediate between the CGC's and the National Government.<sup>8</sup>

Various advantages were touted in Tozaka's paper for the new system, including greater grassroots participation in formal politics through the CGC's (whose members were to include chiefs, women and youth representatives), greater public benefit through articulation of provincial-level planning with nationally-coordinated service delivery agencies, and a more active role for MPs at a Provincial level.

Criticism of the proposed system was heavy during the conference session, both because the Bill had been kept secret rather than going through a 'green paper' public response stage, and criticism, led particularly by westerners (western Solomons people) in the

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<sup>7</sup> 'Draft law completed'. Solomon Star, 24 January 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Milner Tozaka, 'Provincial Government Review'. Paper presented to the SICHE-ANU Governance and Economics Update conference, 16-17 March 2000, Honiara (5 pp.).

audience, that the proposal would lead to central government control with weak regional representation. Reuben Lilo, while noting the government's fault in not providing him with the document early enough for him to read it thoroughly, interpreted the proposed system as the antithesis of regional autonomy, which Lilo stressed was the wish of people in the West.

Lilo returned to the west quite concerned about the contents of the proposed Bill, and affected by debate at the conference. In response he set a joint meeting of the Provincial and National political representatives to form a Western Province response to the issue.<sup>9</sup> The Western Leaders Consultative Meeting was held in Gizo in early April, two weeks after the Honiara conference.<sup>10</sup>

Prior to that meeting the Provincial Assembly passed a motion calling for Western Province to attain statehood under a federal government system by 2005.<sup>11</sup> The main rationale given for the motion by the member tabling it (Thornley Hite) was that the annual grant from the National Government, on which the Province bases most of its budget, was insufficient to maintain Provincial services. At the same time the Province has few powers to raise revenue itself. He raised the old theme that relative to other provinces, Westerners 'produce more but receive less'. In the discussion prior to passing this motion sentiments were expressed that this was a 'long awaited' motion. The Premier noted that according to his reading of the Provincial Government Review Committee Report, a number of submissions from other Provinces had called for a federal system.

An interesting reflection by one member was that the issue of autonomy had been hard to raise since the separation of Choiseul Province from Western. As it was, the motion before the Assembly included a clause for a new 'Federal statehood' working committee to look into the re-amalgamation of Choiseul and Western Provinces as one state.

#### *Western Leader's Communique, April 2000*

The Western Leaders Consultative Meeting, which began the next week, then went on to develop a set of resolutions for delivery to the National Government.<sup>12</sup> The preamble to the resolutions noted that 'the way forward economically and politically lies in greater political and economic autonomy of the Province' and 'real and sustainable development can only occur in an environment of peace and security as well as in the ownership and control of all natural resources in the Province'. Following from this, the crux of the resolutions were that:

- 'a substantial portion of the revenue generated in the Western Province be retained in the Province and relevant legislation be amended accordingly;'
- 'security issues should be addressed immediately in line with the Munda Accord;'

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<sup>9</sup> 'Minutes of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Caucus meeting of Hon. R. Lilo's Government', 21-22 March 2000, 10 pp.

<sup>10</sup> 'Programme', Western Leaders Consultative Meeting 3-4 April 2000, 6 pp.

<sup>11</sup> 'Western Provincial Assembly: Budget Session [2000/2001]'. Proceedings of the Western Province Assembly meeting 25 March -3 April 2000. 147 pp.

<sup>12</sup> 'A joint communiqué by the leaders of the Western Province', dated Gizo 4 April 2000. 3pp.

- ‘the National Government with immediate effect prepare the Province for the attainment of State Government by 2005, and that it should reconsider the implementation of the proposed Provincial Government Bill;’ and,
- ‘the National Government immediately transfer all alienated land and other government assets to the government and people of Western Province.’

The resolution also included a number of demands relating to economic development in the Province, including building the international airport at Munda and the implementation of other Provincial development projects previously agreed to by the National Government.

A ‘Second Western Leaders Consultative Meeting’ was held in late May. The call for a ‘Federal State Government system’ was re-iterated. In order to develop a constitution for the new state entity and to report of the desired changes to the National constitution, a task force for statehood was established at this meeting, and it was agreed that it should report by September 2000.

A few days after the second leader’s meeting, the Police armoury at Rove was overrun and Andrew Nori announced that the MEF and the Joint Operations force had ‘declared war’ against the IFM.<sup>13</sup> This was the June 5 takeover, later referred to as the coup.

On Monday 26 June the executives of both Choiseul and Western Provinces sat in a joint meeting and decided to declare on National Independence Day, July 7, their intention to form a joint state government.<sup>14</sup> This speeding-up of the Statehood agenda had been mooted in private ever since the MEF takeover of Honiara earlier in the month. It was well understood that to become a State within an ongoing nation, there would still need to be a process of constitutional and legislative change by the National Parliament.

Nevertheless, for many, the nuance of an ‘intention to declare a State was too fine, and even the title of Lilo’s public speech on National Independence Day was ‘on the occasion of declaration of State Government in the region’.<sup>15</sup> The decision to advance the movement by the declaration was a reflection of the gaining currency of more radical views among the political community in and around Gizo. There was a view of ‘to hell with the National Government’, which many thought of as no more than a puppet regime of the MEF.<sup>16</sup> In his speech, Lilo said that it was the ‘inalienable right’ of Western and Choiseul Provincial peoples to ‘remove any threat’ that ‘interfered with’ the ideals of peace and freedom, and to ‘confirm... our very existence as a people, and our resources and other indigenous rights, as opposed to our constitutional rights and obligations.’ Lilo in fact stopped short of an unambiguous unilateral declaration of Statehood, saying instead:

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<sup>13</sup> Transcript of statement by Andrew Nori, SIBC 6:00 PM news Wednesday 7 June 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Solomon Star 28 June 2000; SIBC news 26 June 2000.

<sup>15</sup> ‘A speech delivered by the Premier of Western Province, Hon. Reuben Lilo on the occasion of the declaration of State Government in the region on July 7, 2000.’ (TS, 8pp).

<sup>16</sup> Ministers in the new Sogavare Government swore their oaths in early July 2000 (SS 03-07-00).

"That from this day on, we the people of Western Solomons do hereby renew our commitment to achieving State Government...

We raise our flag today in recognition of our sincere and noble desire to have

- Autonomy
- Indigenized democracy
- Rule of law
- Legislative powers over our own resources and in the conduct of governance in the State of Western Solomons."

This was followed by calls of 'God bless the State of Western Solomons' and 'God bless the sovereignty of Solomon Islands', and the raising of a new State of Western Solomons flag.<sup>17</sup> Following this, all official correspondence was typed under a 'State of Western Solomons' letterhead. The flag and the letterhead were again triumphs for those who wanted quick action on the issue.

The declaration of intended Western Statehood was met with consternation by the National Government. Nathaniel Waena eventually came out with a public statement later in the month, to say that all Provinces were still operating under the National Constitution and Provincial Government Act and that none had become a state.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the Minister of Provincial Government, Nathaniel Waena, took the statehood issue seriously and organised a delegation to hold discussions in various places in the west, and visited Shortlands, Choiseul, Gizo, Noro, Munda and Marovo during mid-August.<sup>19</sup> The Government accepted that the movements in the west, in Temotu, Makira-Ulawa, and Rennel-Bellona for statehood or independence had to be addressed, and undertook feasibility studies that could be discussed with the provinces.

In mid-October the Western State taskforces presented their findings to a joint Leaders Meeting, two days after the Townsville Peace Agreement was signed.

### **Response to the crisis**

Under the Townsville Peace Agreement of mid-October 2000, the Solomon Islands Government was mandated to introduce a form of government that would give more autonomy to the provinces. As a first step, the government organised a week-long Premier's conference which was held in mid-November. A number of reports were prepared for the Premier's conference, dealing with the legal requirements of a change in the system of governance, the changes required to administrative arrangements, levels of provincial funding and a report on the Provincial Government's own submissions. In the latter it was noted that almost all provinces commented on the need to devolve more legislative powers and functions, provide extended powers of taxation and revenue-raising, and freedom to source their own funds. At the conference's end, the Premiers all agreed that the government adopt a 'Homegrown State System of Government for

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<sup>17</sup> Solomon Star 11 July 2000.

<sup>18</sup> SIBC news 25 July 2000.

<sup>19</sup> SIBC news 14 August 2000.

Solomon Islands whereby each respective Province should become a state with its own State Constitution', and that the national constitution is amended accordingly.<sup>20</sup>

In response, the National Government of Peace, Reconciliation and Unity set up a Taskforce to revisit the Mamaloni Constitutional Review of 1987. In working through these issues, it developed a draft Constitution Amendment (Creation of the Federation) Bill in July 2001, along with budget estimates for the State Government system.<sup>21</sup> The main proposals were presented a couple of months earlier, in the Report of the State Government Taskforce. In the main, these proposals seem to be largely an amalgam of recommendations from the 1987 Constitutional Review Committee Report and the 1999 Report of the Provincial Government Review Committee. Clearly there is not enough detail in these documents to effect the changes, which are quite fundamental and suggest a complete re-organisation of the country's governance. In any case, some recommendations made which are of interest here were:

**Political governance :**

- Conversion to the 'Federal Republic of Solomon Islands'
- Replacement of the Queen as sovereign with a President elected by electoral college of members of the federal parliament and governors of the states
- Greater recognition for customary law
- Each state in the federation has a Governor elected by an Electoral College of members of the state's parliaments and the State's council of chiefs.
- Each State has a State Government who elect a Premier
- Each State also has a Council of Chiefs in an advisory capacity
- Area or local councils to be established

**Management of resources:**

- Customary land owners receive rights to all minerals in their land
- Customary landowners have all rights to develop their land and resources without interference by State or Federal policies or regulations
- The states take over the receipt of dues and issuing of receipts
- Alienated lands to be returned to traditional landowners unless specifically excised (eg; Honiara, State headquarters lands etc).

**Relations between the Federation and the States:**

- Decentralise financial powers to the states
- Expectation that the states eventually become financially self-reliant
- Transitional services grants to the states eventually will be tapered off
- Establish a Financial Council consisting of state premiers, the prime minister and senior ministers to share out federal funds to the states equitably.

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<sup>20</sup> Buala Communiqué, 17 November 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Constitution Amendment (Creation of the Federation) Bill 2001. Ministry of Provincial Government and Rural Development, Honiara, July 2001; Solomon Islands State Government System Budget. Ministry of Provincial Government and Rural Development, Honiara, July 2001.

- Taxes raised within a state are kept by that state
- Each state receives a percentage of export levies paid on export of primary produce, with the share determined by a 'financial expert'.

**Law:**

- Establishment of Community Courts to deal with land disputes, breaches of social customs and non-statutory criminal offences. These would have the power of imprisonment up to 1 year, and imposition of fines up to \$2000, along with customary arrangements like compensation.
- Legislative powers are based on Federal and State constitutions, and are either Federal, State, or shared.

## Questions

The questions posed in the introduction were:

- Will new arrangements provide the kind of stability that will rule out ethnic conflicts like the one just seen?
- What will be the consequences for PNG and Solomons islands if their adjoining provinces of Bougainville and the Western Solomons both have greater autonomy over trade?
- Could a new regionalism serve to develop the economy, or will a multiplicity of poorly-resourced centres of governance hinder it?
- How does Australia usefully deliver aid to a decentralised Solomon Islands?

OVERHEAD PRESENTATION SHEET 1  
SSGM SEMINAR 20/09/01

**Selected recommendations of the State Government Taskforce, May 2001**

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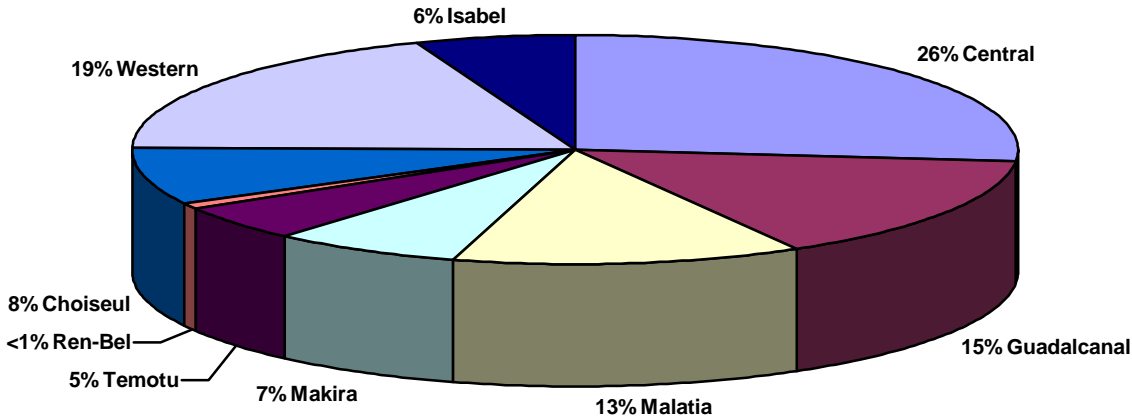
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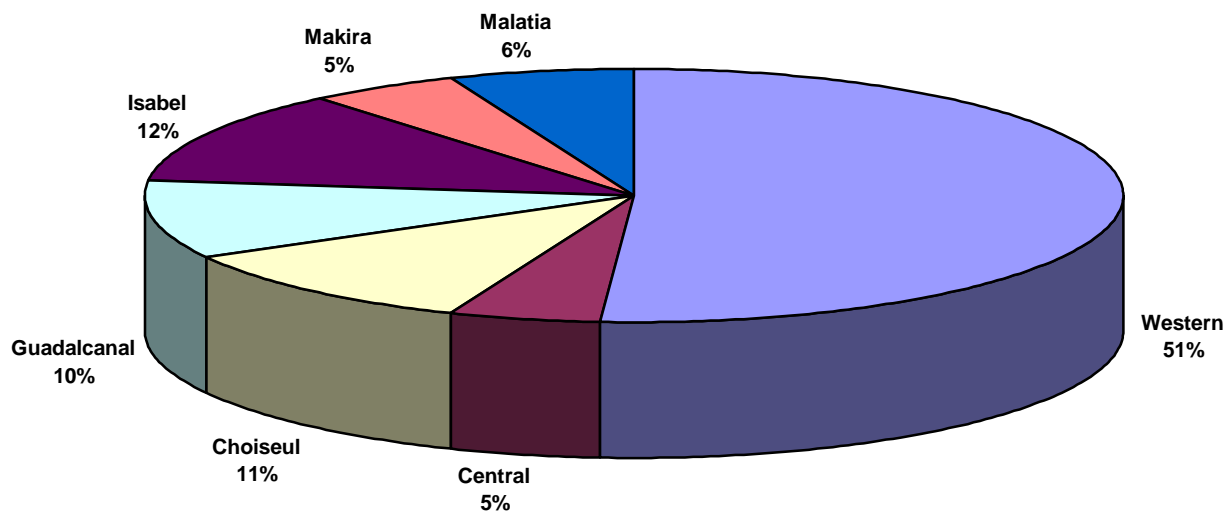
OVERHEAD PRESENTATION SHEET2  
SSGM SEMINAR 20/09/01

- Will new arrangements provide the kind of stability that will rule out ethnic conflicts like the one just seen?
- What will be the consequences for PNG and Solomons islands if their adjoining provinces of Bougainville and the Western Solomons both have greater autonomy over trade?
- Could a new regionalism serve to develop the economy, or will a multiplicity of poorly-resourced centres of governance hinder it?
- What is the role of customary land estates in governance?
- How does Australia usefully deliver aid to a decentralized Solomon Islands?

**Copra production by province, 1996-97**



### Log exports by Province 1995-96



## Solomon Islands population by Province, 1999

