

Solomon Islands: Canberra bid to oust PM fails

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In a blow to Canberra's campaign against the government of Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, a no-confidence motion put by pro-Australian opposition leader Fred Fono was defeated on October 11 by 28 votes to 17 in the impoverished Pacific nation's 50-member parliament.

Since September 12, when he ordered the expulsion of Australian ambassador Patrick Cole, Sogavare has publicly denounced Canberra for violating the national sovereignty of the Solomons.

Speaking to his no-confidence motion, Fono claimed that nothing undermined the Solomons' sovereignty more than providing protection to an "Australian citizen wanted in Australia on child sex offenses".

Fono was referring the attempt by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) to have Julian Moti — a Fiji-born Australian lawyer who was appointed as the Solomons' attorney-general on September 21 — extradited to Australia to again face charges that he had sexually assaulted a 13-year-old girl in Vanuatu in 1997. The charges were dismissed by Vanuatu's Court of Appeals in April 1999.

Moti was arrested by Papua New Guinea police on September 29, after an "urgent" AFP request, while passing through Port Moresby airport on a flight from Singapore to take up his appointment as attorney-general. He was released on bail that evening and given sanctuary in the Solomons embassy.

On October 10, Moti was arrested by police officers of the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) upon his arrival at Honiara airport after being flown back to the Solomons aboard a PNG military aircraft.

Under the colonial-style RAMSI intervention, which began in July 2003, the Royal Solomon Islands Police has been under the command of a RAMSI-appointed AFP officer. The AFP has 300 armed officers stationed in the Solomons, backed up by several hundred Australian troops. Australian magistrates run the court system and Australian bureaucrats control key government departments.

Canberra has publicly opposed Moti's appointment because he proposed that the causes of the April 18 riots against Sogavare's pro-RAMSI predecessor, Snyder Rini, be investigated by an independent judicial commission rather than a RAMSI-run police inquiry.

The riots were provoked by an AFP tear-gas attack on a peaceful gathering of Rini's opponents outside parliament. In the days before Rini was elected by the parliament as the country's new PM, opposition MPs and their supporters accused him of buying MPs' votes with money provided by the country's ethnic Chinese business elite headed by Sir Thomas Chan, the president of Rini's party.

Rini was forced to resign as PM on April 27 after it became clear he would lose an impending no-confidence motion. After being elected PM on May 4, Sogavare told journalists he wanted to see a

RAMSI “exit strategy”.

Canberra’s attempt to extradite Moti has come in the wake of threats by Australian PM John Howard to punish Sogavare’s government for ordering Australian ambassador Patrick Cole’s expulsion on September 12.

The April 30 Sydney Morning Herald revealed that Cole had had private discussions prior to April 18 with Chan on who Canberra wanted as the Solomons’ next PM so as to ensure RAMSI had an “effective voice in cabinet to guide economic and fiscal policy”.

In a September 17 radio address Sogavare accused Cole of interfering in internal Solomons political affairs. He also accused the Howard government of using “bullying tactics” to block the independent judicial inquiry into the riots.

Sogavare’s supporters accuse Cole of collaborating with Fono to line up MPs to back a motion to oust the PM.

On October 12, Moti was remanded in custody for two weeks by the Honiara Magistrates Court on charges of illegally entering the Solomons, his passport having been cancelled by Canberra two weeks earlier.

Associated Press reported that Moti had sought “magistrate John Myers’ removal from his case, claiming that because of the separate charges against him in Australia, it would be impossible for Myers” — an Australian posted to the Solomons as part of the RAMSI intervention — “to remain impartial. Myers dismissed the request”.

AFP commissioner Mick Keelty told the National Press Club in Canberra on October 11 that the AFP’s pursuit of Moti had “absolutely nothing to do with the intended appointment of Moti as attorney general in the Solomon Islands and indeed all of our activity [in reopening the 1997 case against Moti] ... was even before the Sogavare government was put in place”.

However, the October 4 Australian reported that the AFP had reopened the case against Moti in June, “while he was advising the Solomon Islands government on an inquiry that sparked a major diplomatic row between Canberra and Honiara”.

The October 7 SMH also reported that the AFP reopened the 1997 case against Moti “in June this year, after the Solomon Islands threatened to appoint Moti as attorney-general”.

P.S.

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