

Solomon Islands: Canberra launches new assault

Tuesday 24 October 2006, by [LORIMER Doug](#) (Date first published: 25 October 2006).

In a further assault on the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands, its Australian-appointed police commissioner, Shane Castles, had Solomons immigration minister Peter Shanel arrested on October 17 over the alleged illegal entry of Fiji-born Australian lawyer Julian Moti.

Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare appointed Moti as the impoverished Pacific nation's attorney-general on September 21. Eight days later, as Moti was flying to the Solomons from Singapore, he was arrested by Papua New Guinea police at Port Moresby airport on the "urgent" request of the Australian Federal Police.

The AFP sought to have Moti extradited to Australia to again face charges of having sexually assaulted a 13-year-old girl in Vanuatu in 1997 — charges dismissed in 1999 by Vanuatu's Court of Appeals. He was released on bail by a PNG magistrate and took refuge in the Solomons' embassy.

The October 7 Sydney Morning Herald reported that the AFP had reopened the 1997 case against Moti "in June this year, after the Solomon Islands threatened to appoint Moti as attorney-general".

On October 10, Moti was arrested by AFP officers working for the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) upon his arrival in Honiara. He was flown to the Solomons aboard a PNG military aircraft. Canberra has subsequently punished PNG for this by banning visits by PNG ministers to Australia.

Moti was charged with having illegally entered the country, his Australian passport having been cancelled by the AFP two weeks earlier. He was denied bail by RAMSI-appointed Australian magistrate John Myers.

During a Solomons High Court hearing on October 16, Moti's lawyers produced an order signed by Shanel on October 8 exempting Moti from having to have valid travel documents to enter the Solomons. They requested that Castles drop the charges against Moti.

That evening, RAMSI-appointed solicitor-general Nathan Moshinsky, also an Australian, applied for an injunction to stay the exemption document, alleging it was falsified.

Moshinsky, who has also assumed the post of acting attorney-general despite Sogavare's insistence that Moti holds this position in his government, told the court that on the day of Moti's arrival in Honiara, Shanel had informed Castles that he would not be signing any order to allow Moti's entry from PNG.

The following morning, Castles had Shanel arrested for allegedly perverting the course of justice and misleading a police officer. Australian magistrate Steve Wilson granted Shanel bail, but ordered him to surrender his passport and to report to police twice a week before reappearing in court in 30

days.

Under RAMSI, the court system is run by Australian magistrates and key government departments are controlled by Australian bureaucrats, as is the Royal Solomon Islands Police. There are 200 armed AFP officers and 100 Australian soldiers stationed in the Solomons.

The blueprint for RAMSI was drawn up by the Australian government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute. In a June 2003 document it described the Solomons as a “failed state” that was “depriving Australia of business and investment opportunities that, though not huge, are potentially valuable”.

RAMSI was approved by the Solomons parliament a month later as a condition for receiving a \$220 million-a-year Australian aid package, most of which, however, has gone to pay the exorbitant salaries of RAMSI’s Australian personnel.

“The parallel economy created in the Solomons by Australian bureaucrats”, Australian National University professor Helen Hughes, a RAMSI supporter, noted in the September 15 Australian, “has fed [ethnic] Chinese [owned] restaurants, shops, service stations and even a casino.”

Canberra has publicly opposed Moti’s appointment as attorney-general because he advised Sogavare to set up an independent judicial inquiry into the causes of riots against Sogavare’s predecessor, the pro-RAMSI Snyder Rini. Canberra wants the riots investigated by 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 on April 18, the day Rini was elected as the country’s new PM.

Rini had been deputy PM in a pro-RAMSI government that was defeated in the country’s April 5 general elections. In the days before his election as 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 casino-owner Sir Thomas Chan, the president of Rini’s party.

The April 30 SMH revealed that Australian ambassador Patrick Cole 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”.

On September 12, Sogavare ordered Cole to leave the Solomons. Five days later he accused Canberra of using “bullying tactics” to block the judicial inquiry into the riots.

Government MPs also accuse Cole of attempting to line up MPs’ votes for a no-confidence motion to be put by pro-Canberra opposition leader Fred Fono. The motion to oust Sogavare was put by Fono on October 11 and was defeated by 28 votes to 17 in the 50-member parliament.

P.S.

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