

Solomon Islands: New PM follows Canberra's orders

Wednesday 30 January 2008, by [LORIMER Doug](#) (Date first published: 25 January 2008).

"Prime ministers of the Solomon Islands and Australia have refused to comment on their meeting in Canberra this afternoon", ABC News Online reported on January 23, adding: "Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's office says he will not be commenting on the outcome of the goodwill visit. Repeated attempts to contact [PM] Dr Sikua have been either unanswered, or unsuccessful, with no reason given for the secrecy."

The article noted that, "Prior to his arrival in Australia, Solomon Islands' Prime Minister Dr Derek Sikua had made it clear the trip's purpose was to mend the fractured relationship between the two countries."

However, the January 24 Sydney Morning Herald reported that upon his return to Honiara, Sikua told reporters that "I believe that we have turned a new page in our bilateral relations with Australia in that our relations have been mended. We are looking forward to very fruitful and cordial relationships with Australia in the future."

Colonial rule

The "relationship" between Canberra and the impoverished Pacific island-state since July 2003 has been a barely disguised exercise in Australian colonial rule, with Canberra-appointed Australian officials heading the Solomons' police force, court system and key government departments.

The aim of this operation, formally named the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), was spelled out in a June 2003 document issued by the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI). Titled "Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of the Solomon Islands", the document proposed the formation of a colonial-style "Solomon Islands Rehabilitation Authority", staffed by Australian government officials.

The ASPI document argued that the breakdown of "law and order" in the Solomons was "depriving Australia of business and investment opportunities that, though not huge, are potentially valuable". This "breakdown" occurred in 1998 in the wake of the 1997 Asian "financial crisis", which caused a halt in exports of hardwood logs from the Solomons. These exports had provided 60% of government revenues.

Under "advice" and strong pressure from Canberra, the government of then-Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufualu began to drastically reduce public sector services and jobs. The consequent rise in poverty and youth unemployment in the capital Honiara led to widespread petty crime.

Canberra, however, publicly justified the RAMSI operation, initially involving the deployment of 2200 Australian troops and armed police, as necessary to prevent the Solomons from becoming a "haven for terrorists".

Relations between Canberra and Honiara deteriorated sharply after the election of Manasseh Sogavare as Solomons PM in May following anti-RAMSI riots in Honiara.

In July 2003, when the Solomons parliament was being bribed and bullied by Canberra into passing legislation approving the RAMSI intervention, Sogavare warned that it would undermine the island-state's sovereignty. Upon being elected, Sogavare called for a RAMSI "exit plan".

Diplomatic warfare between the countries broke out in September 2006 when Sogavare ordered the expulsion of the Australian ambassador. Leaked diplomatic cables had revealed that the ambassador had secretly collaborated with business tycoon Sir Thomas Chan in his attempts to "induce" MPs to elect a pro-RAMSI government.

In a parliamentary speech defending the expulsion, Sogavare said that previous Solomons' governments had wrongly given "full authority to run this country to foreign governments who hide behind the guise of having concern for the welfare of Solomon Islanders when in fact they were really concerned about their own strategic interests".

Moti affair

Canberra retaliated by launching a campaign to discredit and bring down Sogavare's government. Central to this campaign was the issuing by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) of a warrant for the arrest and extradition of Fiji-born, Australian lawyer Julian Moti, Sogavare's new attorney-general, on "sex tourism" charges.

While working in Vanuatu in 1997, Moti was charged with having sex with a 13-year-old girl. The case was unanimously dismissed in 1999 as lacking any credible evidence by the Vanuatu Court of Appeals.

Sogavare rejected the AFP arrest warrant as a violation of the Solomons' national sovereignty. With Canberra's backing, Solomons opposition leader Fred Fono finally succeeded on December 13 in using the Moti affair to get a no-confidence motion against Sogavare narrowly passed in parliament.

Derek Sikua was subsequently elected as the new PM. A career bureaucrat, Sikua was elected to parliament in the April 2006 general elections, in which voters decisively rejected pro-RAMSI candidates. Sikua was Sogavare's education and human resources development minister until last November, when he resigned citing the Moti affair as damaging the Solomons' international relations.

On December 24, Sikua sacked Moti as attorney-general and had him deported to Australia — despite the Honiara central magistrates court ordering a stay of execution of the deportation order pending an appeal hearing from Moti's lawyer. Sikua thus demonstrated his abject willingness to do whatever his Australian masters demand of him.

P.S.

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