

## Behind the Solomons Crisis: A Problem of Development

### Introduction

This note provides an historical, social and political background to the crisis in the Solomons.

The current situation in the Solomons has come about from problems created by lack of economic progress, declining living standards and the weakness of political institutions inherited from Britain. The crisis exploded in 1999 when frictions between two of the country's main regional groups resulted in clashes between militias and the forced resignation of the government.

The crisis is symptomatic of the problems of creating a modern state in a Melanesian society where traditional power relations are not always conducive to representative institutions and open accountable government.

### Development and governance after independence

The Solomon Islands became independent in 1978. The Solomons group of islands have an overall identity but great cultural and linguistic diversity. Bougainville, while part of PNG, is considered part of the Solomons in a cultural sense. With a population of less than 500,000, more than 80 indigenous languages are spoken, with no one language spoken in common. The only shared languages are English and Pidgin. The sense of national identity is weak.

The Solomons became independent while still heavily reliant on economic assistance from Britain and other donor

countries. There was some optimism that, with its resources of timber, fish, plantation crops, gold and other minerals, the country could achieve economic sustainability. But critical deficiencies existed, particularly in the area of skilled human resources. British colonial officials, although a relatively benign and stabilising force in Solomons society, gave little attention to education, with the few schools mainly being run by missions. By 1978 there were only six secondary schools and about a dozen university graduates. Services and infrastructure were concentrated around the capital, Honiara, with most social services in other areas being delivered by the churches.

At the same time the influence of Christianity radically changed traditional family relations. The result was a rapid increase in population and over recent years the Solomons have grown at 3.5 per cent p.a., a rate which would double the country's population every 20 years. This placed great strain on the traditional subsistence economy, encouraged a drift to urban areas and high youth unemployment, while creating huge burdens for the health and education systems and physical infrastructure. More ominously, conflicts over the use of land and access to jobs have grown, with the throwing together of historically separated regional and clan groups leading to violence and law and order problems.

The Solomons inherited Westminster institutions that interacted with Melanesian political systems in unpredictable ways. With few Western-educated people and with indigenous experience of representative institutions only dating from the creation of local administrations in the 1960s, there was only a tiny stratum of Solomon Islanders who had a sense of national political identity. Westminster-style elections encouraged leaders who appealed to narrow local loyalties and provided few incentives for the development of national-level policies. Broadly, leadership in Melanesian society is not inherited, but is achieved through winning benefits for one's own clan and becoming a 'big man'.

The melding of Westminster institutions and Melanesian political practice has tended to break down the divisions between the private and public use of state and national resources that is a key (but often unstated) element of democratic accountability as it has developed over hundreds of years in the West. This has led post-independence Solomons politics to be marked by shifting unstable alliances, frequent changes of government and the creation of coalitions through blatant vote-buying. Corrupt and inefficient use of government resources, together with policies created for minority interests, have enriched some powerful individuals (mostly the 'big men' of national politics), but have squandered the country's scarce

resources. The worst example has been in forestry, where the sale of licences to unscrupulous foreign logging companies has threatened to strip the country of its key source of wealth and devastate the environment, without any long-term developmental benefit to local communities or the nation.

As economic development ground to a halt and social problems mounted during the 1990s, there was a steady break-down of the institutions of state. Government expenditure far exceeded revenue and was financed through foreign aid or overseas borrowing (with little thought about future repayment). Teachers, police and government administrators did not receive regular pay and government services stopped working properly. Law enforcement agencies became dysfunctional in the face of rising lawlessness, due to poor leadership and lack of funds. Police officers became afraid to arrest offenders from their own clan group (*wantoks*) for fear of retribution from relatives. Even the Prime Minister could not be sure that his own officers would obey his commands.

### **The Malaita-Guadalcanal Conflict**

In 1999, the explosive mix of economic stagnation, social tensions and political decay was detonated by conflict between people from the islands of Malaita and Guadalcanal. This conflict dates back to the creation of Honiara on Guadalcanal as the new capital of the Solomons after WWII. When the capital moved to Guadalcanal (to take advantage of infrastructure left by the US military), so too did most indigenous government employees from the old capital on Malaita. Malaitans had a history of working for Europeans, first on whaling ships, then as indentured labourers overseas and on local European-owned plantations. They became the main labour

force in the growing town of Honiara and also began to lease land around the capital for agriculture. Malaitans made up 75 per cent of the police force. Rivalry and jealousy between Malaitans and the local people of Guadalcanal grew over the decades, often taking the form of disputes over inheritance and use of leased land and other divergent social customs.

The final spark came in 1999 when the Premier of Guadalcanal province made a claim to the national government for compensation for land occupied by Malaitans and for alleged crimes by Malaitans. This precipitated a wave of attacks on Malaitans and the formation of a militia calling itself the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army, which went on a spree of destruction, rape and murder. In response, Malaitan youths formed the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF) and stole high-powered weapons from a police armoury. The resulting conflict caused over 200 deaths. 20,000 Malaitans and people from other islands fled Guadalcanal. In June 2000 the MEF took control of Honiara and forced the government of Prime Minister Bart Ulufa'alu to resign.

The situation stabilised after the formation of an interim government, which signed an agreement with the two militias in Townsville in October 2000. Under the agreement the militias agreed to surrender their weapons in return for compensation for loss of property and promises of development aid. Elections in December 2000 led to the formation of the current government under PM Allen Kamakeza.

Open conflict was brought to an end, but large numbers of weapons were not surrendered and have remained in the hands of ex-militia members and criminal elements. A corrupt and divided

police force, with linkages between criminal elements, corrupt police, some MPs, loggers and businessmen, have led to the collapse of effective government and an uncontrollable law and order situation <sup>1</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

The conflict in the Solomons is not an ethnic or separatist insurgency, nor is the country in the state of near civil war that briefly prevailed in mid-2000. It is rather a severe crisis of the ability of the Solomon Islands government to enforce its rule and to maintain security across the country. The crisis is principally a crisis of economic and political development: in its short post-independence history, successive governments have been unable to establish the conditions for sustainable economic growth which are essential for political stability and personal security.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Bennet, 'Roots of Conflict in Solomon Islands', RSPAS Discussion Paper no. 5, Australian National University, 2002.

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