

## Sustaining Peace in Solomon Islands through a New Constitution? Part 1: Historical Contestations

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### Introduction

This In Brief is the first in a two-part series that discusses a critical aspect of the Solomon Islands (SI) internal peace process through the development of a new constitution. It provides a brief history of the various calls, demands, and contestations expressed by various groups and leaders in the country over the years on the favoured government arrangements. Part 1 also outlines the misconceptions and ‘half-truths’ that were the basis of contestations in Solomon Islands.

Following the ‘Tensions’ (1998–2003) and exit of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, a critical process to long-term peace, stability, and development in the country continues. This process of developing a new constitution is, arguably, a culmination of historical events, debates, contestations, and compromises in a longstanding search for a suitable government system for modern Solomon Islands.

A crucial feature has been the attempt to align modern governance concepts with local values and contextual knowledge. Sadly, there has been deafening academic silence about this locally driven peace process. Yet, as the country’s Prime Minister, Manasseh Sogavare, stated in August 2017, this process ‘can make or break’ Solomon Islands.

### ‘Half-Truths’

There are certain ‘half-truths’ that became the basis for contestation and demands in post-colonial Solomon Islands. While these perceptions have some merits, they are not entirely true. In their retelling, they have often been blown out of proportion. The common half-truths are:

- the assumed homogeneity of individual provinces. Provinces are not homogeneous entities but they have been used as a launch pad to mobilise support, place certain demands on government, and contest national issues.
- the supposition that some provinces contribute more to Solomon Islands’ development than others through their resources, both human and natural. There is little realisation that large numbers of people who have paid employment do

it with national development as a secondary consideration. They work for pay primarily because they have needs to satisfy. Likewise, national development may be the last thing in the resource owners’ minds when they give companies access to harvest their resources. To them, the critical concern is how to ensure maximum returns for their group members.

- the impression that some provinces are being favoured economically while others (especially rural and maritime areas) are neglected. Although there may be some truth in this perception, the general trend is that the quality of services has dwindled everywhere since independence. Moreover, since the introduction of rural constituency development funds, controlled by national parliamentarians in the 1990s, rural and maritime areas ‘theoretically’ would have access to similar levels of funding as urban areas.<sup>1</sup>
- the view that customary land tenure is an obstacle to (rural) development and must be ‘reformed’. Developments such as the Guadalcanal Plains Palm Oil Limited, especially its out grower scheme, is testament that development programs can take place without changing customary land tenure.

### Overview of Debates and Contestations

Here is a chronology of events and discussions since 1975, leading up to the Tensions and beyond.

- 1 1975: Western Council<sup>2</sup> leaders called for a system of government that ensures central and provincial governments are self-ruling coordinate bodies, as in a federal system, rather than subordinate to each other.
- 2 1978: Guadalcanal Council leaders expressed their desire to have a state government system.
- 3 1987: Provincial premiers of Western, Central, Isabel, Makira, Temotu, and Guadalcanal made a joint submission to the 1987 Constitutional Review Committee (CRC), recommending federalism.

- 4 1987: Solomon Islands Government (SIG), through a nationwide consultation process, recommended that Solomon Islands become: (a) a federal republic — a democratic union of states with equal status, and (b) a unitary republic with a ceremonial indigenous head of state.
- 5 1987: Malaita Provincial Government recommended a system of government with full participation of all people in looking after their own affairs and services at all levels. They wished to see the provincial government system replaced with an alternative system based on the Area Councils — a system that recognises the authority and status of traditional chiefs in the communities (CRC 1987).
- 6 1988: Guadalcanal Provincial Government demanded the national government effect recommendation 1 of the CRC report (see point 4 above). The Western Provincial Government also made a supportive submission to the CRC.
- 7 1988: the minister for provincial governments, Andrew Nori, appointed an in-house committee to look at alternatives to the provincial government system. The committee's report recommended the institutionalisation of 'chiefs' into the political decision-making structure, and it rejected federalism. Reacting to this, Opposition leader Nathaniel Waena requested the government shelve the report as its recommendations did not capture a majority view. Waena suggested that CRC recommendations (see bullet point 4 above) be pursued as these were based on nationwide consultations.
- 8 1996: SIG enacted the [Provincial Government Act 1996](#) (repealing the 1981 Act), establishing area assemblies. Guadalcanal questioned the constitutionality of the new Act, and the High Court ruled that aspects were unconstitutional. SIG appealed the ruling and the Court of Appeals overturned the High Court decision. Soon after, a new national government was elected, which did not pursue the proposed changes and decided to revert to the 1981 Act under the new title [Provincial Government Act 1997](#).
- 9 1998: Guadalcanal Provincial Government demanded SIG look into a state government system, among other demands on land and revenue sharing. A few months following the petition and government responses, the Tensions broke out, with militia groups and dissatisfied police officers taking the law into their own hands.
- 10 2000: SIG, the Malaita Eagle Force, and the Isatabu Freedom Movement negotiated and signed the [Townsville Peace Agreement](#). This recommended that Malaita and Guadalcanal Provinces be given more autonomy, by devo-

lution and constitutional amendment, to look after their own affairs and their growing population.

- 11 2000: SIG, all provincial premiers, and other leaders signed the [Buala Communiqué](#). Its resolutions included: SIG to take to parliament the desire of the provincial governments to adopt a home-grown State System of Government, and noted the desire of Temotu, Makira, and RenBell to secede from the rest of Solomon Islands as sovereign states.
- 12 2003: [SIG and the United Nations Development Programme ran consultations](#) in nine provinces and Honiara to seek people's views on the system of government. An amalgamated report from these consultations and historical records became the basis of the [drafting instructions](#) for the current draft federal constitution.

## Conclusion

'Half-truths' became the bases for various protests, contestations, and demands since 1975. Discussions and consultations since 2001 have focused on how to address these long-standing issues that became the root causes of instability and the Tensions in the country. Outcomes of the various discussions formed the basis of the drafting instructions for the proposed constitution of Solomon Islands.

The Constitutional Reform Unit of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's Office, the Constitutional Congress, and the Eminent Persons Advisory Council have worked tirelessly to get the various drafts of the constitution out, to facilitate a stable future through an appropriate system of government (CRU 2012).

## Author Notes

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## Endnotes

- 1 Note that rural constituency development funds do not normally go through provincial governments but members of parliament; a discussion for another time.
- 2 Provincial governments were formally established in 1981.

## References

- CRC (Constitutional Reform Committee) 1987. Report of the Provincial Government Review Committee 1986–1987 (Vols 1 & 2). Honiara: Ministry of Home Affairs and Provincial Government.
- CRU (Constitutional Reform Unit) 2012. *Reform News Quarterly Newsletter* 1(12): October–December.

