

The RAMSI intervention in the Solomon Islands crisis

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Abstract

The paper gives an up-date on the situation in the Solomon Islands [as in May 2005] and attempts to assess both RAMSI and the future needs of Solomon Islands. The paper argues that there is a disjunction between what RAMSI sees as its tasks and abilities, the capability of the present government, and the needs and expectations of the citizens of the nation.

Keywords RAMSI; Solomon Islands

IN AUGUST 2004 I visited Honiara and Malaita for two weeks, talking with a wide range of people, many of them rural villagers with no influence on the nation. I returned to Honiara in mid-November 2004 with two colleagues from the University of Queensland to take part in a four-day round of interviews with senior government officials, RAMSI, diplomatic missions, aid donors and NGOs. This high-level contact was the result of a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Kemakeza government and the university in April 2003, aimed at fostering the relationship between Solomon Islands and

the largest and longest-established university on its doorstep. It is now close to two years since the arrival of the Regional Assistance Mission, adequate time to assess the effectiveness of the Mission and its future direction. As a 'Solomons watcher' for thirty years, I have never been in a better position to view the workings of the government and the nation. What I found was a little disquieting and not quite the picture that RAMSI and the government like to present.

RAMSI and beyond

In July 2003, RAMSI, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, sent more than 2,200 armed services personnel, police and public servants into Solomon Islands. RAMSI's brief was to restore and strengthen, not replace, existing government institutions. However, the situation is unusual and given the level of decay in the apparatus of government, RAMSI needs to take a proactive role, quietly guiding the present government as well as providing logistic support.

The surrender of firearms began almost immediately, and within a few weeks of the RAMSI arrival almost 2,500 weapons and 300,000 rounds of ammunition had been handed in, including SR88s and light machine guns, shotguns and revolvers. Most weapons came from Honiara and Malaita, but 600 were handed in at Gizo. One parliamentarian, Alex Bartlett, a former Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) leader and then Minister for Tourism, handed in several rifles, two revolvers and thousands of rounds of ammunition.¹ RAMSI, working with the Papua New Guinea Defence Force, also pursued gun-runners working across the Shortland–Bougainville border between Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. By late November 2004, 3,700 weapons had been handed to authorities in a totally bloodless operation that has been praised by all sides as a successful strategy. Opinions differ as to how many guns remain in the community. In November 2004 Peter Noble, RAMSI's Deputy Special Coordinator, believed around 100–150 high-powered weapons are still extant, mainly in remote areas,² but Malaitans in Honiara told me that there are still guns buried within a few kilometres of the centre of the city.

Some of the illegal *kwaso* (alcohol) stills were closed down, criminals began to fear arrest and street life in the capital returned to normal. Honiara's

residents have had a weight lifted off their shoulders; it is now possible to move about freely and to enjoy recreational activities on the outskirts of town. During 1998–2003, fear and hopelessness dominated the demeanour in Honiara. After the troops and police arrived, smiles replaced downcast glances and there was a feeling of optimism. Many of the less savoury beneficiaries of corrupt and illegal largesse left Honiara, taking their money with them, in hopes they could avoid detection, but RAMSI has worked at bringing them back to face justice. Honiara's economy began to pick up in late 2003, although retail business is still sluggish and the only immediate improvements were in businesses that supplied government or aid donor organisations, for which money flows steadily.

Some industries have been resuscitated. Logging is once more dominating exports, with a totally unsustainable one million cubic metres of timber exported during 2004, and the government hopes to get the Guadalcanal oil palm plantations operating again soon, through a Malaysian company running similar plantations in Papua New Guinea's West New Britain Province. Exactly where the workforce will come from, given that Malaitans have no wish to return to work in the oil palms, is unclear. In May 2005 the government announced that the Goldridge mine, which for a short time in the late 1990s produced close to thirty per cent of the nation's Gross National Product, will be reopened by Australian Solomons Gold Proprietary Limited, 47.5 per cent of which is owned by Michelago Limited. The military and police presence has stimulated tourism, particularly in Western Province (where Honiara-based RAMSI staff like to take holidays) and is good for artifact sales. The iniquitous Duty remissions will have to run their legal course before being removed, but they will disappear.

By December 2003, more than half of the troops were withdrawn, and more of them departed in February–March 2004, leaving a policing rather than a military operation.³ By the end of 2004 only 200 foreign police and a few dozen armed forces personnel and public servants remained. The RAMSI intervention was carefully presented as the action of good neighbours to a friend, clearly forestalling or avoiding any criticism of a colonial hangover. There is little doubt that RAMSI successfully restored law and order: but has a resolution been achieved? Will the calm remain when the foreign police

withdraw, and what is being done to ensure that deeper structural problems are reformed? Has RAMSI just applied an expensive Band-aid to the nation's wounds, which in the long term will not heal under such ministrations? An intervention that does no more than restore law and order will fail. Has any real conflict resolution taken place, and have the underlying causes of the conflict been addressed? Will the corrupt culture of the public service and the police be repaired?

By mid-2004 business had picked up pace, public servants were being paid regularly and government revenues were increasing. The only survey of public opinion carried out in the islands is by the Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT), which has conducted regular surveys of town and village people over the last several years. The survey preceding RAMSI showed that in the four survey categories—health, education, resource assistance and availability of money—not one area scored more than 42 per cent. The people signalled that they had given up expecting anything from their government. A new survey in February 2004 (of 2,341 town and village respondents) gave RAMSI high marks (88 per cent) for restoring security, and a slightly lower score (74 per cent) for the success of the justice system. However, RAMSI scored only 66 per cent for service delivery (education, clinics, transport, jobs etc.) and 64 per cent for restoration of the national economy. John Roughan commented on the 2004 survey:

The Justice System Working, for instance, drew lower results than security partly from the nature of the justice system. Collecting guns, jailing warlords, and restoring basic peace produced quick, dramatic results. Justice system procedures—police investigations, court processes, sentencing and jailing—are a much more drawn out affair and work at a slower pace. But people are not shy to observe that few senior politicians have yet to feel the full sting of the law and their rightful place in a Rove cell. Crooked politicians, unsavoury business men, coup plotters and their cronies have yet to see the inside of a court house and until they do, then the nation as a whole continues to be the big loser!⁴

It is very telling that when I visited Malaita in August 2004, the island's only civil airport, second in passenger traffic to Henderson airport in Honiara, was closed due to disputes with the landowners. Guadalcanal's only three rural

airports—at Avu Avu, Babanikira and Marau—are still closed after nearly two years of RAMSI's presence. Essential rural roads, such as Malaita's road across the central mountains to Atori on the east coast, are poorly maintained, and Honiara's suburban feeder roads are still in a shocking state. Perhaps the drivers of RAMSI and diplomatic corps four-wheel drive vehicles have not noticed. Essential services in the nation are still in disarray, which does not give the people much confidence in RAMSI or their government.⁵

Part of RAMSI's brief was to investigate corruption. By November 2003, over eighty police had been charged, including Manasseh Maelanga, the former commander of the Police Field Force and operational commander for the 2000 coup, and two Deputy Police Commissioners, Wilfred Akao and John Homelo. The entire Supreme Council of the MEF is now in prison or facing charges, and several politicians from the crisis years have also been charged or are in jail: Daniel Fa'afunua, Alex Bartlett and Francis Zama. Lawyer and ex-politician Andrew Nori, advisor to the MEF, has also been charged. RAMSI has overseen the trial and conviction of the three main Guale renegades, Harold Keke, Ronnie Cawa and Francis Lela, with other investigations and trials continuing. Nevertheless, Solomon Islanders have been disappointed that so few known corrupt senior politicians, police and public servants have been detained. The Prime Minister and other members of Cabinet have also been under investigation, without result, but some of the commanders and senior officials of both militant groups are now either in jail or facing criminal charges, with more to be investigated.⁶

Also to their credit, RAMSI has been successful in settling the situation on the Guadalcanal Weathercoast, and has begun a drive to recruit new police, but there has not been an equivalent programme to recruit good public servants. Many new university graduates are still unemployed while incompetent or unmotivated time-serving officers remain in jobs. Although electoral reforms will probably be opposed by sitting Members, RAMSI also needs to ensure that voting lists are up-dated, and measures taken to prevent registration in multiple constituencies and by non-resident candidates. RAMSI also needs to work more on restoring the collapsed infrastructure, particularly rural roads. Funds and expertise need to be concentrated at village level, not only in urban areas. RAMSI does an excellent job of providing itself with a positive media image,

but there are cracks behind the facade. Although the initial RAMSI activities were accomplished without loss of life, two RAMSI personnel have since died: an Australian police officer was deliberately killed by a sniper in Honiara in December 2004 and another died through misadventure in March 2005. Many instances of discontent and small uprisings are not reported by the media, giving a false impression of peace. It is quite untrue to say that all guns are back in safe hands: no one knows how many illegal guns have entered the Solomons; the police inventories of their armouries were incomplete; and there are still many high-powered weapons out in the community. The original civil, military and police heads of RAMSI have completed their terms and left. RAMSI's first Special Coordinator, Nick Warner, has been replaced by another Australian diplomat, James Batley, a previous High Commissioner to Solomon Islands (1997–99), with recent experience in Bougainville and East Timor. As the RAMSI operation goes into its longer phase, problems recur: constant turnover of RAMSI personnel, chronic under-staffing, inability with Pijin and lack of cultural awareness. And there is little point in any of their activities if they are not at the same time training competent local staff to take their places.

The situation is rather like the one prevailing in many Pacific colonies in the final decade before they achieved independence and in the first decade as independent nations. Unless there are local understudies and training and localisation are pursued as prime aims, Solomon Islanders will have been 're-apprenticed', this time to Australia rather than to Britain, still without developing any long-term ability to run their own nation. When RAMSI leaves, will they have replaced themselves with competent Solomon Islanders? At the moment Solomon Islanders are conscious that RAMSI is a foreign force that is not making enough effort to return to them 'ownership' of their government.

With the second anniversary of the the arrival of RAMSI about to occur, there is no sign that the Solomon Islands politicians or public servants are back running the nation, or that they are being encouraged to prepare to re-take control. This does not bode well for the future.

Reconciliation and conflict resolution

Some dreadful atrocities occurred during 1998–2003. Communities and individuals have to rid themselves of the demons that will prevent them from

forgiving. I took a taxi ride with a Malaitan driver in Honiara during mid-2002. He was from the clan into which I am adopted, and he knew me although I did not know him. I had heard rumours of the existence of a video that showed the MEF beheading members of the Guadalcanal Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), and asked him if it was true. It was hardly the usual conversation between a passenger and a driver, but he said yes and quite proudly invited me home to watch it. I declined. Soon after that, I had another matter-of-fact conversation with a former Malaita Eagle about beheading. We discussed the difficulties of cutting off a human head.

Rapes and murders, executions and mutilations occurred on both sides. Men were held and made to watch their wives and daughters being pack-raped. Innocent people became involved just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Innocent Solomon Islanders have been threatened and hurt, had their property destroyed and received no compensation, while at the same time they have seen politicians and criminal thugs roting the system. Millions of dollars have gone missing. Ordinary people on Guadalcanal felt and still feel hopeless, deceived and deserted. Communities have suffered from extortion by thugs who are still roaming free.

The Malaitan and Guadalcanal leaders of the escalating violence after 1998 and the Malaitan leaders of the 2000 coup unleashed forces of violence, coercion and corruption that they could not control or contain. Solomon Islanders recognise complex symbolic links between human relationships, lands, gardens, music, dance, everyday thoughts, speech, their ancestors and now Christianity, but this cosmological balance is fragile and rather like living comfortably in the vortex of a cyclone. Malevolent spirits circulate in the winds, and constantly try to get in. During the last five years, the calm was broken by unwelcome forces that everyone knew were always circulating although they remained contained by other factors. RAMSI chased out the malevolent spirits, but this was hardly a cosmological solution. What is needed is a large-scale programme of restorative or transformative justice, the process by which all the actors involved in injustice are given an opportunity to join discussions about the consequences of the aberrant actions and how the situation can be put right. Former militants need to confess their terrible acts, before they can re-enter the calm of their communities, even if they feel their actions had legitimate causes. Criminals need to apologise for the sorrow and

hurt they have caused, for their own sakes as much as to achieve closure for their victims. Pacific societies have long-established methods of dispute resolution that existed well before books were written on the topic. Negotiations involve a complex knowledge of kinship, status and social relations, and there is no concept of a final fixed adjudication; deals can be renegotiated when the circumstances change. The result may not restore society to the position before the dispute began; the aim should be to transform and move forward (Dinnen 2003:8–9; see also Rumsey 2003).

There have been constant requests since 2000 for implementation of a system like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to provide a mechanism for Solomon Islanders to confess and to forgive.⁷ The Solomon Islands Christian Association has developed and fine-tuned a process based on the South African original, which can be used in the islands. The Christian churches have been leaders in holding reconciliation services; the Melanesian Brothers' reconciliation service with the police in April 2002 was a good example of what needs to be done. Ethnic communities also held reconciliation ceremonies, such as that between Filipinos and Kwaio Malaitans in Honiara,⁸ and in April 2003 the Solomon Islands Christian Association held a dialogue on truth and reconciliation at Mbita village on the Weathercoast.⁹ Some political and militia leaders, particularly Andrew Nori and Alex Bartlett, have apologised, but as Gary Fa'aitoa noted in the *Solomon Star* in April 2002:

A blanket apology by any person or organization without specifically addressing the fears, hurts, scars and sufferings of the people victimized in the conflict will do little to help people recover from their traumatic ordeals.¹⁰

Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka advocates dealing with the years of turmoil through the proper administration of the formal justice system and the notion of restorative justice:

As a nation we cannot continue to pretend that it is proper to forcefully overthrow a civilian government. To do so would be to set a dangerous precedent. It implies if one disagrees with political processes and outcomes all one needs to do is put a gun to the Prime Minister's head and force his government out of office.

What follows from this is also Kabutaulaka's blind spot: he is on public record as accepting that the Guale were justified to drive their fellow citizens off Guadalcanal. The Guale path of action was a dangerous illegal precedent, as was the MEF counter-action that removed a lawful government. Harold Keke and Jimmy Rasta Lusibaea, the worst of the ex-MEF and IFM militants who became criminals, are in jail, but other thugs who ruled through terror tactics also need to be dealt with by the formal justice system. Kabutaulaka is more perceptive when he deals with restorative justice:

This involves a reconciliation process that encourages the restoration of relationships between families, communities and our nation. The process must provide an opportunity for those who did wrong to admit their faults and be held accountable for it. Furthermore, those who were wronged must be apologized to and be given the opportunity to forgive and come to terms with their loss. Reconciliation must involve restoring relationships amongst people at all levels of society.¹¹

Reconciliation is not about revenge. It involves cleansing the national soul to enable people to move on to a path of normality and unity. By-and-large Solomon Islanders are a very Christian people who understand concepts of forgiveness and the cathartic experience of confession. Some national leaders have called for this process to be implemented, but the present government prefers to pretend that nothing more needs to be done to bring about reconciliation. The military nature of the initial RAMSI occupation did not require cultural sensitivity, but the next phase does, and *kastom* procedures need to be acknowledged before the nation can move forward. RAMSI seems to believe that facilitating reconciliation is not within their brief; this is a misunderstanding caused by their lack of cultural awareness. The Civil Society Network (CSN), because it has a substantial base in the Christian denominations and is closer to the people than any other group, certainly acknowledges the *kastom* dimension to any solution better than the government and RAMSI. Civil society has emerged as a major social voice and conscience of the nation. While aid donors have swung towards financial support delivered through NGOs and other CSN groups, this has not filtered through as far as it should. If the elected government will not admit its inability to deal with the situation,

RAMSI should facilitate this new channel and encourage civil society to cleanse Solomon's temple.

Pacific Islands' value systems are quite different from those of the West. Direct confrontation is usually avoided; but when it occurs there needs to be a final ceremonial compensation and forgiveness to re-establish societal equilibrium. This process now includes modern monetary exchanges, and modern goods and possessions, whereas traditionally it involved only items such as shell and feather wealth, pigs and taro. Human exchanges also occurred, with exchange of women often used to bind descent groups together. These processes restored a cosmological balance that involved the present generations as well as ancestors. Over thousands of years, Solomon Islanders have effectively altered customary ways to cope with changes as new groups migrated within and through their islands, and interacted through trade, territorial disputes and wars. They also have hundreds of years' experience of dealing with encroachment by the outside world into their islands. Today's peace and reconciliation involves customary ways in combination with Christian faith and Western-educated leadership, but the old balances still need to be achieved. Solomon Island leaders understand how to proceed by a combination of half-modern, half-traditional ways. However, compensation has been taken to ludicrous extremes in recent years, and the large abuses of the compensation processes that have enabled millions of dollars to pass from government to private hands—really just bribes and blackmail—cannot be justified. Cultural reconciliation should not depend on large amounts of donor money. It must involve village, community, provincial and national levels, and people who act for themselves. It must be an indigenous process. Sweeping the past under the mat will never aid healing.

The future of the National Peace Council (NPC), led by Paul Tovua and Dennis Lulei, is unclear. Early in 2005 its term was extended, but it is unclear whether the NPC should continue to operate independently or be incorporated into the Ministry for National Reconciliation and Peace. The NPC wishes to remain autonomous, but the Ministry is small and would be strengthened by the NPC's extensive network at village level.

Leadership

Sir Allen Kemakeza has survived as Prime Minister during the RAMSI interventionist period, despite calls for his resignation and legal action instituted by the then Leader of the Opposition, John Martin Garo.¹² In early August 2003, under pressure to stamp out corruption, the Prime Minister removed eight department heads and swapped two portfolios, Finance, held by the Deputy Prime Minister, Snyder Rini, and Education, held by Francis Zama. Michael Maina became the new Police Minister. Since then Kemakeza has lost three Ministers through RAMSI investigations. Experts from Australia and New Zealand have been placed into key departments such as Treasury and Finance, and the Office of the Prime Minister, to try to regularise the administration.¹³ They tread a precarious path, trying to contend with Melanesian *wontokism* and what would be minor corruption in Australia or New Zealand but is legitimate Bigmanship, 'grease' and *kastom* in Solomon Islands.

A few key political and bureaucratic transfers will not reform deeply ingrained corrupt and incompetent governance practices. The culture of politics in contemporary Solomon Islands has been self-serving and based on personal aggrandisement, not a fixed political ideology or attempts to serve the citizens of the nation. The biggest challenge to the Solomon Islands elite is to create a nation-wide sense of loyalty to the state, and then to find a compromise position between the demands of modern Bigman politics and the needs of the nation. Successful *kastom* leaders have to accumulate wealth, which is then distributed to their kin. Translated into modern political leadership, there is no way that elected political leaders can legally accumulate enough wealth through their salaries and business dealings to enable them to remain in positions of power in both elected and *kastom* authority for any length of time. The Solomons must either separate political leadership from *kastom*, or re-invent a constitutional marriage between good governance and *kastom*. Either path seems unlikely in the post-RAMSI reconstruction. This aside, there has also been extreme avarice by politicians and their cronies, and wealth is no longer distributed in a traditional manner. The rich with access to government largesse are getting richer at the expense of the grassroots masses. *Islands Business* pulled no punches when it described the plight of Solomon Islands in August 2003. It would be extremely optimistic to think this scenario will change after RAMSI:

Reliant on the limited experience of a few educated administrators, democracy was swamped, stunted, throttled and ultimately raped by politicians who applied Melanesian tactics to drain the national coffer dry virtually free, and latterly completely so. They have been free of any serious risk of intercession by what has been passed in the Solomon Islands as western-style law and order. Some government ministers and their lieutenants are in daily collusion with the brazen armed mostly semi-literate bandits who reign in the capital, Honiara. The national management of the Solomon Islands has been a disgrace for years. The present elected government is clearly incapable of stopping the rot by itself; certain of its members actively foster it.¹⁴

The use of electoral development funds, distributed at the whim of each politician, as has become institutionalised practice in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, is one way that has developed to facilitate the need to distribute largess to electors, who as often as not are also extended kin of the politicians. Although these funds encourage corrupt distribution practices, they are probably a better method than would be the denial to politicians of *kastom* esteem, or the forcing of them to use corrupt means to gain the funds they need to satisfy *kastom* redistribution. Cleansing politics of criminal corruption and rorting is by comparison an easier task. The other extreme is to continue down the path of large-scale political corruption such as exists in Asia and Africa.

The post-RAMSI Solomons must educate politicians and public servants to be accountable and not to rort the system for their own advantage. Major offenders need to be prosecuted, but where does the dividing line fall between corruption and acceptable cultural behaviour? Solomon Islanders know that many more politicians, police and public servants should be in prison, and will judge the success of RAMSI by how effectively it tackles corruption. Unfortunately, so far the policy seems to be to preserve the political status quo and let the electors make the final decisions in early 2006. There are also quite distinct differences between what Australian and New Zealand public servants regard as corrupt practices, and what Solomon Islanders regard as necessary grease to keeps the wheels of government working.

Governance

The ten-year contract of Rick Houenipwela, Governor of the Solomon Islands Central Bank, ended in mid-August 2003. Houenipwela, who sometimes

publishes as Rick Hou, was persuaded to remain in the position. He has been competent and constant in his warnings of looming economic catastrophe and bad governance practices over many years, even if seldom heeded. The Central Bank and the Asia Development Bank also warned that no credible economic analysis was possible because the moribund statistics office of the government had no ability to measure the condition of the economy.¹⁵

To get the economy back on track will be slow. Many Solomon Islanders are deeply disturbed by Western-model government processes based on a centralised Westminster system and capitalism, rather than a system incorporating local cultural norms.¹⁶ The British left behind a governance system based on their colonial experience around the world, not one developed for Solomon Islands. The colonial government also over-centralised the administration and economy and presumed that Solomon Islanders would eventually adapt to the imposed system. Historically, development was Honiara-centred and aimed to generate income for the national treasury, without much thought to 'ownership' of the development by the 84 per cent of Solomon Islanders who live a semi-subsistence style in rural areas, often with inadequate transport and communication systems. The poor management of resources and high levels of corruption created what Mark Otter dubbed 'immature' governance (Otter 2002, 2003a). Because of the colonial power's desire for a quick exit, Solomon Islanders were not properly prepared for independence, so that the outgoing regime left too few capable public servants. However, 1978 is a long time ago and governments since then must also bear some responsibility for the state of the post-independence civil service. To strengthen and rebuild the governance apparatus is a crucial task for the post-RAMSI period (Otter 2003b).

Civil society

Government at all levels has to listen to civil society. While final responsibility rests with elected leaders and the legal system, the Civil Society Network and churches have proved themselves a worthy part of the social and political process. Participation in civil society is the easiest way for women to have their say in decision making, given they are barely represented in the formal political system and poorly represented in senior levels of the public service. The

Christian denominations are one of the main sources of sensible advice and practical help in all communities, particularly in rural areas. Christian leaders are trusted, listened to, and have shown their dedication to the nation more than any other group in the Solomon Islands. Churches and NGOs have become central to leadership and planning. John Roughan's words of ten years ago remain true:

Some national leaders balk at the thought of NGOs having assumed certain public leadership roles, once thought to be those of elected officials. Development is a government prerogative, contends conventional wisdom. Governments are installed by a public, more or less democratic selection process, for which everyone understands the rules. Who gives the NGO its authority to be working in this vital field? Should not a properly elected government official be worried about the idea that NGOs are and ought to be moving into a more central role in providing public leadership? (Roughan 1994)

While recent Prime Ministers have bridled at what they saw as interference, after the crisis years they must now acknowledge that while government services crumbled away, churches and NGOs remained strong and held the nation together. NGOs and other elements of civil society have a critical role to play in providing information and feedback to public servants. They have effective communication with the village sector and can introduce new ideas and monitor implementation at a local level. Civil society institutions are better able to empower the vast majority of Solomon Islanders who still live in outer islands and rural villages. The leadership that will emerge from the national election in early 2006 has a chance to lead the nation in a new and different way, and must pay more heed to the voice of the people. Governments react to opinion polls, but these do not exist in Solomon Islands, except the rudimentary attempts by the Solomon Islands Development Trust. Civil society generally, and the Civil Society Network in particular, can provide this missing voice.

Land

Modernisation theorists tend to argue that the solution to underdevelopment is to remove traditional social forms that limit development. Many would

suggest that communal land ownership is a barrier to achieving sustained rural development. Some theorists suggest that rather than total change, the best policy is land registration as an acceptable alternative to private land tenure, although in other places where this has occurred, it often leads in the long term to land ending up under the control of a male elite.

Solomon Islanders insist that the existing land tenure system is integral to maintaining *kastom*. Yet, in some ways modern communal land tenure is, like *kastom*, an adaptation arrived at over the last hundred years. The way the communal land system operates today is actually far removed from that of the mid-nineteenth century before there was any outside interference. Leadership at village level has also altered, and communal land tenure operates in a semi-modern manner. Decisions over land use now seldom contain any element of ancestral control and the need to propitiate spirits.

The modern nation-state has failed to confront the basic issue of resource ownership, which should rest with local communities, not an imposed structure of governance. Elected leaders at national and provincial levels do not have as extensive power bases as do local area traditional chiefs and Bigmen, elected paramount chiefs, male and female elders, and church leaders. Until the national and provincial governments of Solomon Islands become serious about inclusion of resource owners in negotiations for economic development begun by the governments or private companies, there will always be dissatisfaction and resentment. Often the land debate mixes up several problems: the need to safeguard communal ownership; the desire for provinces to become independent nations that control their land; the wish for competent government in the regions; and frustrations over poor infrastructure development, which many, perhaps misguidedly, presume would be improved if governance were devolved.

There are many questions, both general and specific, about the future of land tenure. Reconstruction on Guadalcanal, and to a lesser extent Malaita, should not force a national reconstruction on all the provinces, islands and landownership groups of Solomon Islands. However, Malaita Province needs sufficient infrastructure development to persuade its population that there is a good future in staying home. Guadalcanal Province needs assurance that its many valid grievances will be handled properly. What is to be done about the

encroachment of Honiara onto Guale lands? When will legitimate landowners who lost their property and possessions during the civil war all be compensated? How can commerce expand onto customary land where multiple landowners have rights? The future of customary land tenure is at stake. How can the modern market economy on Guadalcanal, and elsewhere, mix with the old land tenure system? Would it be better to abandon customary land tenure and register all land, or is there an in-between path? This would prevent half-customary remedies being applied, and remove all barriers to the investment of capital and private investment. But to adopt this path would be to signal an admission that there was no accommodation possible between the two systems and that a choice had been made to adopt a non-traditional and non-culture friendly system. Is it possible for Solomon Islands to have different land tenure for village communities, designated commercial land use zones, a national capital district, or tax-free zones on Guadalcanal and Malaita, but not other islands?

Law and order and the public service

Planning is under way to ensure that one ethnic group can never again dominate the police force. The return of law and order to the community will go a long way to restore normality, but much deeper problems exist within the administration of government processes. Many public servants have insufficient training to perform their duties, and have no work ethic or belief in the importance of the duties they carry out. Nepotism and wantokism are deeply embedded cultural phenomena. While these cultural characteristics can be used to advantage, equally these short cuts can be and are abused. Rehabilitation of the public service and entrenching a leadership code of ethics with checks and balances is just as important as stabilising law and order.

But how do we bridge the cultural gap between the logical reform theories of the new planners and the actual lives of public servants and all citizens? It is difficult for foreign RAMSI staff in the public service, secure in their nice homes with nice views and driving air-conditioned four-wheel drive vehicles, to appreciate the full extent of Honiara's urban poverty and overcrowding of accommodation. Urban Solomon Islanders, even in relatively affluent Honiara suburbs like Vura or White River, often share their small homes with 20 to 30

adults and children, and learn to live with the spasmodic water and electricity supply. There is often not enough food to last until the next pay day, and they suffer debilitating bouts of malaria. Public service reforms need to address much more than the simple abstractions of efficiency and probity.

The economy

RAMSI's intervention will have been pointless unless economic rehabilitation also occurs. The Solomon Islands' economic problems arise from uncoordinated development strategies and poor government practices. Together these have created a large inefficient public service, which attempted to take on many functions that should have been left to private industry. The islands have rich natural resources on land and sea, and the people can survive without incorporating donor aid into their lives. The previous economic culture encouraged a handout-oriented and corrupt mentality. Balanced timber exports and exploitation of fish stocks, along with material infrastructure development spread through rural areas, and adequate social infrastructure development for schools and health services will encourage more even development, and remove one of the main Guadalcanal and Malaita grievances. Indications are that changes have begun. The good news is that Rick Hou announced in May 2004 that the economy had undergone a six per cent growth during 2003, and that the changes had actually begun in 2002. This economic upswing was mainly in the rural sector, where village people put effort into cash crop and other small-scale production. These villagers seem to have given up waiting for the government to get itself organised and have quietly got on with their lives.¹⁷

On 20 July 2004, the Australian government launched its long-term policy for rebuilding the Solomon Islands economy. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and the authors of the report place a great deal of stress on the need for land tenure reforms and on persuading private business to develop the nation. The Solomon Islands government will be assisted to meet its obligations to its own employees, to contribute responsibility to the National Provident Fund, and to service its overseas debts, while also developing infrastructure, particularly health and education. In the medium term, 2004–2009, the government will be assisted to re-establish 'fiscal responsibility' by 'removing

the raft of barriers to income-earning activities and employment. These include a host of regulatory barriers, unreliable or high cost infrastructure services and expensive or absent credit facilities' (AGDFAT 2004:134; see also DNRP 2003). The message is that inefficient and poorly managed state-owned enterprises should be handed over to private enterprise and the government should concentrate on running core activities. The days of 'ghost' and non-performing employees on the government pay roll, and unauthorised and corrupt expenditure, are also over. This is exactly what the Ulufa'alu government proposed when it was elected in June 1997, and was in part the reason for its downfall. RAMSI will have to deal with the personal greed of leaders who have prospered as their nation fell apart, but the mood of the people has changed since 1997–2000 and it is to be hoped that this time economic reform will succeed.

Nationalism

Solomon Mamaloni was fond of saying that Solomon Islands was 'conceived but never born' and that it 'has never been a nation and will never become one'. Nation-builders have tried to promote a national identity, but the events of 1998–2003 ripped apart what little progress had been made. Negotiations over provincial autonomy and break-away movements have not been followed by policy changes. There are building blocks in place—the education system, Pijin English as a common language, and popular culture—that will eventually lead to a national identity, but island regionalism is strong, and basic allegiances are still to extended families and clans, not to the nation. There is no external focus, such as exists in the French and American Pacific territories, that could unite the nation. Hopefully, RAMSI will have departed long before resentment at the foreign presence wells up against foreign intervention. Creating a national identity will be slow. The chances of the Western Solomons breaking away and joining an independent Bougainville are now remote. Solomon Islanders are stuck with each other into the foreseeable future.

A new draft national constitution is circulating, which includes more autonomous states to replace the centrally-controlled provinces. While most politicians publicly support the need for the new constitution, in private many of them express grave doubts. The road to statehood satisfies regional loyalties

but will be expensive and more inefficient than the present system. It seems likely that the new constitution will be allowed to continue circulating, giving the appearance of consultation, but will not be implemented (PISDU 2004).

Australia and the Pacific Islands

The RAMSI intervention in Solomon Islands was the first sign of a radical change in Australian policy towards its Pacific Islands neighbours. Paul Kelly, international analyst for *The Australian*, summed up this change at the time of the RAMSI intervention:

A paradigm shift has taken place in the Howard Government's foreign policy as it accepts the idea of Australia as a metropolitan power prepared to intervene to assist and save failing nations in the neighbourhood. This decision, already taken in essence, is a threshold step for Australia and its Pacific region. It has the potential to be our most important decision for this region since Papua New Guinea's independence 30 years ago. It is driven by the recognition that the prime source of instability today is the failed state and that only Australia can exercise the leadership role in the Pacific.¹⁸

Australia has indeed begun a new policy that Alexander Downer named 'co-operative intervention'. The chaotic situation in Solomon Islands drove Australia to assume a role it had always avoided, impelled perhaps by the world order after the World Trade buildings and Bali bombings, and intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. Solomon Islands has become a crucial component of Australia's new role in the region.

RAMSI in its present form will probably remain in Solomon Islands only for a few years maintaining stability until after the national election early in 2006 and seeing the new government into office. After that there may be a significant down-grading of the operation, although in-line support for government departments will continue.

The way forward

Solomon Islands will once more return to stability and peace, even though the six years from 1998 to 2003 dragged the nation to its knees. RAMSI intervention has forced the necessary beginnings to rehabilitation, but the real long-term effort must come from Solomon Islanders. Solomon Islands is a

large enough economic unit to survive and be self-sufficient, and there are enough citizens educated in traditional and modern ways to guide the nation's future planning. Consolidation of the post-RAMSI 'new deal' will take at least ten years, and the RAMSI 'honeymoon' period is now well and truly over. Their continued presence inevitably will cause some discontent, as will frustration at RAMSI's lack of ability to bring permanent change to Solomon Islands. The first real post-RAMSI test will come in the 2006 national election, when the crippling elements of incompetence and corruption must be removed. A new generation of Solomon Islander leaders is waiting and able. Let us hope that they have learnt salutary lessons from the events of recent years and do not follow down the old track.

Notes

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- ¹ Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC), 20 August 2003.
- ² Peter Noble, RAMSI Deputy Special Coordinator, Honiara, 18 November 2004.
- ³ *National*, 30 July 2003; PC, 31 July 2003; John Kerin, 'First of Solomons troops come home', *Australian*, 29 October 2003.
- ⁴ John Roughan, 'One year on!', *Iu-Mi-Nao* www Network, 18 July 2004.
- ⁵ John Roughan, 'Village-led economic recovery!' *Iu-Mi-Nao*, 9 August 2004.
- ⁶ Mary-Louise O'Callaghan, 'Honiara top cop arrested over rape', *Australian*, 5 November 2003; 'Solomon PM under investigation', *Australian*, 22 December 2003; 'Corrupt force at end of the line', *Australian*, 8 March 2004; *Solomon Star (SS)*, 19, 20 November 2003.
- ⁷ The National Peace Council made this suggestion in August 2000, followed by a similar request from a conference of Malaitan chiefs in December that year. In 2002, the acting Chief Justice also called for the establishment of a similar commission, as also did ex-Police Commissioner Frank Short in February and July 2003. Such a commission would enable Solomon Islanders to establish the truth of what happened between 1998 and the present, particularly the lead-up to the June 2000 coup and the turmoil that followed.
- ⁸ *SS*, 25 April, 10 May 2002; SIBC, 27 February, 21 July 2003.

- ⁹ SIBC, 22 April 2003.
- ¹⁰ Gary Fa'aitoa, 'Towards meaningful reconciliation', *SS*, 25 April 2002.
- ¹¹ Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, 'The politics of peace', *SS*, 26 April 2002.
- ¹² *National*, 5 August 2003.
- ¹³ *Post Courier*, 6 August 2003.
- ¹⁴ *Islands Business* (IB), August 2003, p. 10.
- ¹⁵ In mid-2003 the Central Bank estimated that the inflation rate was running at about 14.4 per cent and that the government owed S1\$7 billion (A\$347 million), 70 per cent of which was to overseas creditors. The situation remained extremely precarious (Rowan Callick, 'Standing firm under pressure', *IB*, September 2003:28–9; SIBC, 4 May 2003).
- ¹⁶ The best expression of the need for understanding and harnessing indigenous epistemology comes from David Gegeo and Karen Watson-Gegeo (Gegeo, DW 1998, 2001; Gegeo DW & Gegeo, KAW 2001). Refer also to Huffer and Qalo (2004).
- ¹⁷ John Roughan, 'Recognize, celebrate and then, invest?', *Iu-Mi-Nao*, 18 May 2004.
- ¹⁸ Paul Kelly, 'Neighbourhood saviour', *Weekend Australian*, 14–15 June 2003.

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Australian

Islands Business (IB) (Suva)

National

Post Courier (PC) (PNG)

Solomon Star (SS)
