

Solomon Islands

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Solomon Islands had a population of approximately 515,870 people in the latest national census in 2009, with an annual population growth rate of 2.3 per cent. Melanesians accounted for 80 per cent of its population, with Polynesians, Micronesians, Chinese, Europeans and others making up the remaining 20 per cent.¹ The country was granted independence in 1978 but nation-building has been an uphill climb due to political events further consolidating people within their own geographical and language *wanwok* groupings (i.e. closely linked people speaking the same language). Some *wanwok* groups have called for political autonomy, and civil uprisings from 1998 to 2003, exemplifying national fragmentation, led to regional intervention to return law and order to the country. The country still needs to strengthen national consciousness and unity after more than 100 years of colonial rule and more than three decades as an independent state.

The making of the modern Solomon Islands

The first officially recorded European visitors to the islands were a Spanish explorer, Álvaro de Mendaña y Neira, and his crew in 1567.² Mendaña's expedition recorded and mapped the archipelago and named it the Solomon Islands. Mendaña sailed westward across the Pacific in 1567–68 to colonise, find economic opportunities and convert people to Catholicism. He also sailed in search of a vast austral continent, the *Ophir* of King Solomon, the lands reported by Marco Polo and golden islands

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reputed to have been known to the Incas.³ The unsuspecting locals were unaware of these ideas and influences from beyond their world, which were soon to impact on their lands and livelihoods.

Apart from whalers, who began stopping over in the 1760s,⁴ other groups that exposed the islands to the world were traders, planters and missionaries. Traders and labour recruiters frequented the islands during the 1870s and 1880s, some residing there while others sought labourers for sugarcane plantations in Queensland and Fiji and mines in New Caledonia. The exposure of these labourers to foreign goods, education and ways of doing things had an impact on Solomon Island communities when they returned. On the other hand, experiences with 'blackbirding' – kidnapping islanders for forced labour overseas – led to early resentment of the 'white man' and his foreign world. The murder of planters, colonial officers and Christian missionaries was partly blamed on Melanesians' retaliation against 'blackbirders'.⁵ Planters who established plantations secured huge plots of land that remained alienated from customary tenure, becoming an ongoing source of conflict in contemporary Solomon Islands.

As elsewhere in the Pacific, missionaries were instrumental in creating a sense of oneness among the islanders.⁶ The missionaries successfully established health and education services in the early contact period. Anglican missionaries sent young local members to New Zealand, where they were educated, returning to teach Christian principles to their own people.⁷ What transpired was the introduction of foreign goods, modern currencies, foreign education, medicine and religion: '[a]ll Europeans have helped to break down the old society . . . and the missionary has done this more than all others because he has given them á new religion in exchange for the old beliefs which entered into every part of the life of their former society'.⁸ The British Protectorate, which was declared over the southern Solomon Islands in 1893, consolidated forces of modernisation, nurturing the new identity developed by traders, planters and missionaries in the indigenous population.

Colonial rule and government

Imperial rivalry in the Pacific led to a drawing of colonial boundaries that has remained in place to the present day. In an agreement between Germany and Great Britain, the islands of Santa Isabel and parts of

what are now Western and Choiseul provinces were traded to Britain in exchange for the islands off German New Guinea. The declaration of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate in 1893 was primarily meant to control the activities of planters, missionaries and traders, particularly the 'blackbirders'. With the declaration came British law and the identity of the archipelago as a British colony. Three distinct stages in the political evolution of Solomon Islands into a modern nation-state can be identified.

The 1893-1960 period can be described as the 'stagnation period' because no indigenous Solomon Islanders participated in the governance of the protectorate over these 67 years.⁹ The colonial power established the Advisory Council in 1921 as the responsible authority for the colony, but Council membership was exclusively European for 30 years.¹⁰ A centralised administration was imposed with the appointment of the first Resident Commissioner in 1896, continuing until the 1960s, who was answerable to the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific, based in Fiji. The Resident Commissioner was based in the colony's capital on the small island of Tulagi, with district officers, police officers and others working under him, administering colonial activities in district stations.¹¹ District officers kept law and order and ensured that villages were kept clean and maintained a healthy standard;¹² they later collected taxes, from males between 16 and 60 years of age, under the 1920 Native Tax Regulation. This taxation was a standard British colonial practice, one that moved men out of their homes to work for money elsewhere; in this case, on plantations.¹³ The 1920 Regulation subsequently gave way to a statutory structure of native administration, with 'headmen appointed at district and village levels.'¹⁴

A centralised administrative system slowly emerged around district and sub-district areas; until World War II, rule was exercised through appointed headmen.¹⁵ Their appointment, to facilitate tax collection, marked the beginning of Solomon Islanders' participation in administration. Political power remained in the hands of the Resident Commissioner, with locals carrying out his directives. The government appointed headmen for each village, and in some instances 'one over the whole island, but these were for the purposes of carrying out the orders of the District officer'.¹⁶ No Solomon Islander had a part to play in governing other than in the carrying out of colonial administrators' orders.

The late 1930s and 1940s saw native courts and councils established. District officers were empowered to establish courts under the Native Courts Regulation; at about the same time, informal councils were instituted at sub-district levels.¹⁷ In both cases, the headmen acted according to orders from government but they were also the individuals who united people in different units for administrative purposes. A difference from previously was that locals took part as headmen in the courts and informal councils, and did not rely entirely on the courts presided over by Europeans. Nevertheless, everything was done according to guidelines established by the Resident Commissioner.

Colonisation and Christianisation slowly instilled a general sense of national identity amidst ethnic diversity, with churches providing alternative structures through which modernisation and a sense of identity was fostered.¹⁸ World events, particularly World War II and the notion of 'protection' by Americans, further instilled a sense of national identity and the beginning of thinking towards self-determination. While there was general acceptance by Solomon Islanders that a government was in place, through the work and services provided by District Officers after World War II, the introduction of the overall 'big man' overseeing a whole territory was also subsequently accepted.¹⁹ The need to administer the colony through decentralisation was sought by various movements that emerged after the war, including the Chair and Rutle Movement and the Society for the Development of Native Races.²⁰ A notable nationalist movement was the Māsasina Ruru Movement, which was strongly influenced by the American Labor Corps during the August 1942–February 1943 battle of Guadalcanal against the Japanese. The movement's aim was to create a united front when negotiating with colonial rulers on local matters.²¹ A direct outcome of the Māsasina Ruru leaders' efforts was the establishment of the first-ever appointed local council on Malaita in 1953.²²

The 1960s onwards was regarded as the 'participation period', with constitutional changes introduced in 1960, 1963, 1964 and 1967. In 1963, elected councillors replaced appointed headmen, representing the first real participation by Solomon Islanders in the 'government of the people'.²³ This was in line with wider decolonisation elsewhere at that time, a part of the 'winds of change' spoken of by British prime minister Harold Macmillan.²⁴ By then, the identity of the islands as a British colony was already present in people's minds, as people were paying taxes to the

government and systems of punishment for breaking laws were already being imposed.

The 1964 constitutional change led to the indirect election (by an Electoral College composed of elected members of Local Councils) of eight people who were not civil servants as members of the 25-member Legislative Council.²⁵ The 1967 constitutional change extended the franchise to all Solomon Islanders 18 years and older, allowing them to vote for Legislative Councillors. As with the 1964 change, elected members remained a minority (14 of 29 members) on the Legislative Council; however, the constitutional changes promoted the sense of a political entity under one administration. Finally, in 1970, a Legislative Council came about with a majority (17 of 26) of elected members. By 1976, all except one of the 39-member legislature were chosen through direct elections.²⁶ The governing council also allowed elected members to participate in policy making in some committees for the first time. This ultimate engagement in government pushed aside any doubts about Solomon Islanders accepting the inevitable transformation to sovereign statehood, achieved on 7 July 1978.

The political system

The political system adopted at the time of the country's independence followed the Westminster model.²⁷ Parliament has 50 seats, with elections held every four years. The country is divided into single-member constituencies, with elections administered under the first-past-the-post (plurality) system. In many instances, seats are won with less than 50 per cent of the votes, making issues of representation a concern.²⁸ The Cabinet is usually composed of a coalition of MPs and parties that managed to secure seats at the elections.

At the village level, the customary form of government is still common; leaders – either through hereditary succession or through the 'bigman' system – have considerable influence over their kin groups.²⁹ The relationships and livelihoods of people in rural villages and informal settlements are heavily dependent on this customary form of leadership. It is sometimes referred to as the *wanTok* system, in which people speaking the same language (or from an extended family group) look after each other through the practice of reciprocity and sharing.³⁰ These customary

forms of leadership through the *wantok* system also have considerable influence on the political system in the modern state of Solomon Islands.

Decentralisation and provincial governments

A provincial government system exists alongside the national government structure. The country is divided into nine provinces, including the Honiara Municipal Authority, which governs the country's capital Honiara (Honiara replaced Tulagi as the capital city following the Second World War). The provinces are replicas of district councils established during the colonial days to assist in the delivery of services to rural areas. Decentralisation continues to serve as a national development strategy.³¹ The post-colonial provinces were established under the Provincial Government Act of 1984, with each province given specific power on particular dates (called Second Appointed Days). A third tier of government, Local Councils, was removed during the 1996-97 period. Most of the revenue available to the provincial governments comes from the central government, and provincial governments can be dissolved by the minister for provincial governments.

The courts

There is a hierarchy of courts in the Solomon Islands, including the Court of Appeals, the High Court and the Magistrates' Courts. In addition, there are Local Courts, dealing mostly with customary land disputes. When there are appeals to decisions made by local courts, they are heard at the Local Lands Appeals Courts. The independence of the judiciary is constitutionally protected to some degree 'by appointments being made on the advice of the Judicial and Legal Service Commission, which is established under the constitution, and by conferring tenure until the age of 60'.³²

Political parties

As in many other Pacific Island countries, political parties are loosely organised in the Solomon Islands. There are no dominant parties, although some have relatively long histories, such as the People's Alliance Party (formed in 1977) and the Solomon Islands United Party (launched in 1980). These parties had some ideological basis, while others, emerging later, are mostly reactive and based around particular issues or individuals.³³ There

has been a history of coalition government since independence, reflecting weak party organisation. The prime minister is elected by Parliament following a general election, with weak party attachments making for a somewhat unpredictable post-election environment, as rival candidates (and their backers) manoeuvre for support.³⁴

In 2014, in a hurried move to strengthen political parties, the government passed the Political Parties Integrity (PPI) Act to encourage party registration and to ensure that elected MPs are members of political parties if they enter Parliament as independents. At the 2014 election, however, 80 per cent of those who passed the PPI Act opted to contest as independent candidates. Moreover, 32 of the 50 MPs who were elected campaigned as independent candidates; the remaining 18 came from six registered political parties – Democratic Alliance (7), United Democratic (5), People's Alliance (3), Kadare Party of Solomon Islands (1), Solomon Islands Party for Rural Advancement (1) and Solomon Islands People First Party (1) – while six other political parties failed to secure a single seat.³⁵ The strengthening of the Solomon Islands' political parties thus remains a work in progress, with the PPI Act likely to be reviewed and revised (or replaced).

Decolonisation and civil dissents

Although Solomon Islands is a sovereign independent state, the country's citizens generally see government mechanisms and structures as somewhat alien. A national leader, Solomon Mamaloni (chief minister prior to independence, 1974–76; prime minister, 1981–84, 1989–93 and 1994–97), once claimed that the amalgamation of small independent communities into one country may have been a gross miscalculation, noting that all islands within the group were independent entities despite similarities in some cultural respects due to inter-island migration. He argued that merging the distinct groups and islands into one sovereign authority was necessary, but 'for all practical purposes it was the greatest error of the British administration in this region.'³⁶ The establishment of political and administrative boundaries amalgamated distinct communities into seemingly acceptable convenient groupings. Nevertheless, differences in perspectives and ways of doing things persist, being particularly evident in the 1998–2003 tensions between militants from the provinces of

Guadalcanal and Malaita, when notions of homogeneous ethnic identities were exploited.³⁷

Solomon Islands' geographic features, along with its cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity, are important in understanding not only the past and the present, but also in the charting of future directions in national politics and governance, given that 'Solomon Islanders have yet to accept each other as one people'.³⁸ Diversity in its various forms influences (and inhibits) governance despite the adoption of Westminster parliamentary democracy. Solomon Islanders continue to utilise the *wanok* system for different purposes.³⁹ The provincial boundaries have become common identities around which groups have raised political grievances both before and after independence. In 1975, for instance, the Western province made a submission to government stating that there was need for a form of government that could unite the country through recognition and respect for regional differences.⁴⁰ The submission included arrangements for making the province an independent state, including population movements and a revenue-sharing formula. These sentiments were carried through to independence, when the Western province threatened to secede, boycotting Independence Day festivities⁴¹ while insisting on a federal arrangement where provinces determine their own destinies and distinct regional features are acknowledged and respected. This outlook reflected fears of being marginalised by migrant populations, as well as aspirations to control wealth created in the province. Also at issue were problems stemming from contradictory views about customary and modern land tenure. This call to secede was solved, at least at the time, through concessions and bargaining, but it signalled a continuing trend.

During the tensions of 1998, these sentiments of 1978 re-emerged, the Guadalcanal–Malaita tensions in Honiara reigniting the autonomy calls by Western province that had been made on the eve of independence. Both ethnic and economic factors contributed to the conflict, the latter involving resource owners and the government: 'the 1998–2000 conflict in the West began with ethnic violence, but was quickly channelled away from a specific conflict with Malaitans and propelled into a direct contestation with the State over its failure to serve landowner interests'.⁴² Demands for autonomy were also orchestrated by the Guadalcanal province, who petitioned the national government in 1978 on similar grounds as those of the Western province.⁴³ In 1988, ten years after

their first petition, Guadalcanal people again pressured the government to change the political system, their demands triggered by violence and by allegations of disrespect by Malaitian settlers in Guadalcanal. The Guadalcanal petitioners called for a federal system,⁴⁴ their petition raising issues related to revenue sharing, population movements and settlements, as well as the distinctiveness of the province, its people and its cultures. Other provincial leaders have likewise expressed such sentiments. A Constitution Review Committee, commissioned in 1987, revealed similar opinions raised by six provincial premiers in a petition seeking federalism for Solomon Islands, their joint statement calling for recognition and respect for cultural differences.⁴⁵ In 1998, ten years after their second petition, Guadalcanal again urged the national government to change the political system. This time, however, a number of Guadalcanal youths took up arms to pressure the government to address longstanding issues related to the land occupied by settlers and the feeling of being neglected by successive governments. The inter-*wantok* tensions from 1998 to 2003 highlighted these grievances, as well as the significance of *wantokism* and its impact on nation-building.

'Ethnic tensions': 1998–2003

In November 1998, a group of armed Guadalcanal men calling themselves the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA) – later known as the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) – attacked Malaitian settlements in northwest Guadalcanal, destroying properties and displacing settlers. The tensions ultimately led to the displacement of 35,000 people, mostly Malaitians, from Guadalcanal. By 2000 the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) was formed, representing displaced Malaitians. The group's main concern was to demand compensation for the killings of Malaitians, and for properties lost and damaged by members of the IFM. Seeking protection of Malaitian interests in Honiara, the MEF spokesman, Andrew Nori, explained that it was a response to the petitioners by the then prime minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu – that 'the SIG [Solomon Islands Government] was not responsible for the damages caused and should not pay compensation'⁴⁶ – that forced them to depose the government. The prime minister's response was seen as an insult to Malaitians who had lost most of their properties and homes in the wake of Guadalcanal militancy.

The MEF made incursions into Guadalcanal villages, killing people in March 2000, confrontations between MEF and IFM had escalated in areas surrounding Honiara. On 5 June 2000, MEF joined forces with elements of the Solomon Islands police, taking over the state armoury, staging a coup, and placing Bartholomew Ulufa'alu under house arrest. He resigned on 23 June 2000 and a new government, led by Manasseh Sogavare, was formed under duress. The national government carried out consultations with conflicting parties, while Australia and New Zealand allowed the use of their warships for various consultative meetings. It was not until the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) was signed in Australia on 15 October 2000, however, that hopes for true peace returned to Solomon Islands.

Townsville Peace Agreement and RAMSI

As soon as overt hostilities ceased between the warring parties, the government went ahead with processes to review the constitution, the TPA negotiators having agreed that Malaita and Guadalcanal provinces would be given autonomy, with other provinces to follow.⁴⁷ As a signatory to the agreement, the government was obligated 'to introduce a form of government that would give autonomous powers to the people of Solomon Islands to manage their own affairs'.⁴⁸ A month after the TPA was signed, the government summoned all provincial premiers to a conference in Buala, in Isabel province, where it was agreed that the 1998–2000 events were the consequence of negligence and an imbalance of power between central and provincial governments. The overriding need for national unity was realised and the Buala Conference Communiqué included in its resolutions a commitment to adopt a federal system. The signatories authorised Parliament to immediately amend section 114 of the constitution to facilitate the establishment of state governments. The resolutions also recognised the desire of three provinces – Temotu, Makira-Ulawa, and Rennell and Bellona – to become separate, independent states, and agreed that these provinces could pursue their intentions with the national government.

Such resolutions signalled an intention by some provinces to maintain their provincial and *wanok* identities while determining their own development aspirations. A task force, appointed to revisit the 1987

Constitutional Review Committee's recommendations on federalism, completed its assignment in 2001, with Cabinet approval being given to the report in June 2001. Presenting the report to Parliament, the responsible minister stated that it was 'time to reconsider our political history and correct a Government System that was introduced by our past colonial masters, which has proven unsuitable for our interests'.⁴⁹ Work on a new constitution emphasising secure governance and stability had thus begun.

Years later, it is clear that work on introducing the reformed constitution has progressed slowly. The National Coalition for Rural Advancement Government elected in 2010 highlighted constitutional reforms as a priority, prime minister Danny Philip stating in 2010 that his government 'will be committed to developing a sensible policy on federalism which will take into account the conflicting demands by our people'.⁵⁰ The Constitutional Reform Unit announced in August 2011 that final nationwide consultations would be carried out in the first quarter of 2012, with a final draft of a proposed federal constitution submitted to Cabinet by December that same year.⁵¹

RAMSI and nation-building

The Townsville Peace Agreement brought overt fighting between ethnic factions to an end but it did not eliminate criminal activities. Access to firearms made life difficult for people on Guadalcanal and Malaita. Criminal groups were visible, especially in Honiara, and government coffers were looted by armed militants demanding compensation. Calls by Solomon Islands for Australia and New Zealand to intervene were futile as tensions were regarded as an internal matter. The government bureaucracy ceased to function and most public servants were either laid off or put on indefinite unpaid leave.⁵² Change occurred in 2001, however, after the events of 9/11, the October 2002 Bali bombings and the subsequent declaration of a 'War on Terror'. Concerns about 'failed states' had an impact on perceptions of the Solomon Islands' crisis by the Pacific Islands Forum and others, and provisions of the Forum's October 2000 Bikerawa Declaration offered the opportunity to act after the Solomon Islands Parliament passed the International Facilitation Act in 2003, inviting a regional force to intervene. The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was deployed in July 2003, involving military, police and technical assistance contingents.⁵³ RAMSI re-established the rule of law: militant leaders and arms from both sides were surrendered,

criminals prosecuted and government mechanisms strengthened. Although there are mixed evaluations of the RAMSI intervention and its effectiveness, without it Solomon Islands would still be under the control of thugs.⁵⁴

The fragility of peace and security remained evident even with RAMSI present. On 18 April 2006 the Honiara Chinatown shopping district was looted and burned following the announcement of Parliament's election of Snyder Rini as prime minister, reflecting dissatisfaction with the former government of Allan Kemakeza (2001–06) in which Rini had served as deputy prime minister. Frustrated voters with no control over the election of a prime minister directed their anger towards Asian businesses,⁵⁵ targeted because of allegations that they had played an important role in financing lobbies that determined the outcome of the prime ministerial election.

Another disturbance occurred on 30 November 2010 when a former MEF militant leader turned parliamentarian, Jimmy Lusibaea, was sentenced to prison for violent offences; 37 individuals were arrested in the attempted riots that followed.⁵⁶ The 2006 incident had been poorly handled by RAMSI and the Solomon Islands' police, resulting in the destruction of businesses and buildings. The 2010 incident was quickly controlled by police, realising that it was not only inter-*wanik* related but also the work of opportunists and criminals.⁵⁷

The RAMSI mission effectively ended during July–September 2013 with the withdrawal of military forces led by Australia (but including personnel from New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Tonga). A small police mission remained, assisting with training and oversight.

Constitutional reforms and the future

With law and order generally in place and financiers investing again, new opportunities have arisen to facilitate and strengthen nation-building. Most calls for recognition of *wanik* and provincial autonomy focus on the need to reform the constitution. A UN Development Programme fact-finding mission's report envisaged that this would occur, observing that '[t]he process of constitutional review in the Solomon Islands is on an irreversible track'.⁵⁸

A mix of modern political structures and local perspectives, recognising the distinctiveness of local communities, appears to be a sensible way to minimise the likelihood of tensions occurring again. The RAMSI

intervention, in restoring state institutions, may have inadvertently delayed a broader restructuring, postponing 'debates that may prove crucial to long term reconciliation or nation-building'.⁵⁹ These debates are likely to focus on several themes.

Freedom of movement versus freedom of settlement

One of the issues that gave rise to the ethnic conflicts related to the free movement and resettlement of people from one island to another, a consequence of adopting Western notions of democracy and land tenure (although movement in the sense of 'circulating' to one place and back has long been a practice in the Pacific).⁶⁰ While the right to move freely must be upheld, the freedom to settle anywhere one wishes needs basic controls to be consistent with how Solomon Islanders have coexisted over centuries.⁶¹

Provincial consultations found broad agreement that it is appropriate for people to own land in perpetuity in their own birthplace, rather than elsewhere in the Solomon Islands. Other issues involve compliance with local customs and practices. Behaviour in urban areas, including the capital, as the place of government, represent a different challenge.⁶² Land and settlements are sensitive issues; however, if properly addressed it should be possible for available land to be utilised for economic development purposes.⁶³ Constitutional changes might be expected to balance rights to free movement with respect for custom and tradition in local communities to which people migrate.

Common properties and resources

Since land ownership differs from region to region, provinces and landowners need to decide on how disputes over land are to be managed and income obtained from land distributed. In September 2011, the *Tandai* people of Guadalcanal reiterated their call for the government to return the land alienated from them to establish Honiara (which became the Solomon Islands' capital in 1952).⁶⁴ In Melanesian societies ownership of land is expected to remain with tribal owners, as land is central to peoples' livelihood and identity. During consultations in the Western province, lands that were alienated provoked concerns, particularly when people not indigenous to the 'place' settled on them. Malaitians and Gilbertese⁶⁵ who made settlements on alienated land were especially singled out, a

report noting that '[t]he Gilbertese population is seen as growing rapidly and that the lands they currently occupy will not be sufficient to sustain them, thereby putting pressure on them to move into customary land or into alienated land'.⁶⁶ Complaints were also made about settler communities not assimilating into host communities, and there were disputes over resource rights and the sharing of resources.

Anything below the surface of the soil (or waters) is considered to belong to customary owners.⁶⁷ The draft federal constitution of 2009 reflected this view:

Every development of customary land or exploitation of resources must have the customary land and resource owners' free and informed consent prior to the approval or implementation of any project affecting their lands and other resources, particularly in connection with the development, utilisation or exploitation of forests, minerals, water and other natural resources.⁶⁸

Exploration would be under the ownership of indigenous landowners, and arrangements to exploit minerals and other resources would need to be made among investors, landowners and provincial governments, with the central government playing a facilitative role.

Redistribution of wealth and service delivery

Inherent in inter- and intra-*wanik* disputes is the redistribution of national wealth. If each province were given powers to raise revenue, dependence on the central government would be limited and service provision boosted. In existing arrangements, provinces' revenue base is limited and there is heavy dependence on central government for funding. The draft federal constitution accommodated this by expanding the tax base for the proposed states. Other measures seek to ensure sharing of revenue between federal and state governments, with the intention being that no *wanik* group should be disadvantaged in a manner likely to lead to further unrest.

National reconciliation and unity

Nation-building and unity in Solomon Islands requires a linking of local and national, with local identities (including province of origin and ethnic *wanik* group) serving as building blocks in a diverse nation. The positive side of the *wanik* system, involving care and support for one another, is

a social buffer for the nation.⁶⁹ Solomon Islands pidgin is widely spoken and represents another pillar in the development of a national identity. The national curriculum is a further means of facilitating nation-building while maintaining cultural diversity.

The 1998–2003 events made uniting the country through reconciliation and forgiveness a matter of paramount importance. Important initiatives in this area are the little-known Prison Fellowship International's 'Sycamore Tree Project' and the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Other initiatives at family and community levels share the same inclination towards truth telling, reconciliation and efforts at restorative justice. The Sycamore Tree Project focuses on prison inmates and facilitates reconciliation between warring groups, as occurred when the project brought together prominent former members of IFM and MEF in May 2011 for counselling, reconciliation and forgiveness.⁷⁰ Such meetings, including truth telling and public apologies by former leaders of militia groups, are a positive gesture for future stability and nation-building.

Officially launched in April 2009, the Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission was launched with several important goals, including the need to promote national unity and reconciliation; to determine the root causes of the tensions; and to provide both victims and perpetrators a means by which to voice their concerns, share experiences and reconcile. The Commission was also tasked with promoting accountability for human rights abuses and engaging all stakeholders in the reconciliation process, as prescribed by the Truth and Reconciliation Act of 2008. Like the Sycamore Tree Project, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was an initiative promoted by a civil society organisation, the Solomon Islands Christian Association, which succeeded in getting the idea through Parliament. The Commission carried out public hearings in most provinces, submitting its report to Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo in February 2012. Following delays in making the report publicly available, an unauthorised release (online) took place in April 2013.⁷¹ Controversy over the report's release – and the government's protracted delay in circulating its contents – did not entirely overshadow the report's overall message, which focused on the need for reconciliation, seen as critical in efforts to unify and rebuild the country.

Conclusion

Understanding the problems of nation-building and insecurity in Melanesia requires an appreciation of ethnic and inter-*wanok* complexities in Solomon Islands, once distinct and independent communities have been co-opted into a single political entity as a result of colonial powers and processes. Attempts to incorporate these previously independent features into modern governance structures have not been easy, with conflicts continuing over identity, allegiance and what constitutes the common good. Successive governments have attempted to address the symptoms of overt conflicts rather than their root causes. It is an ongoing process, in July 2015 the government – through its Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace – launched a National Peace-Building Policy, intended to coordinate ‘peace building activities . . . across all sectors of government’.⁷²

An overriding concern, with respect to the preservation of national unity, has been that giving more autonomy to distinct groups and administrative entities may encourage secession and the break-up of the country. That this remains a possibility can be seen in the August 2015 statement by the premier of Malaita province – the country’s most populous – that the provincial government was moving ahead with plans for a sovereign Malaita nation, and the Provincial Assembly was suspending discussions on a federal system.⁷³ The draft federal constitution of Solomon Islands attempts to recognise and appreciate *wanok* differences as a basis for stability, nation-building and peaceful co-existence. Likewise, reconciliation efforts need to succeed as part of the foundations for positive nation-building. As in pre-colonial and colonial days, churches and the state need to work together to develop and nurture a sense of identity and oneness. After the *wanok* tensions these same institutions are once again at the forefront of nation-building. Next steps involve the process through which the draft federal constitution proceeds through Cabinet, Parliament and (if approved) subsequent implementation.

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