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"Failed State" and the War on Terror: Intervention in Solomon Islands

T A R C I S I U S   T A R A   K A B U T A U L A K A

AsiaPacific
I S S U E S

SUMMARY   A heightened sense of vulnerability to terror has touched every part of the world, including the Pacific Islands, and has linked small nations to large in new ways. Since the September 11 tragedy, concern has risen that so-called "failed states," losing the struggle to maintain law and order at home, could become springboards for terrorism. Australia has shed its reluctance to intervene militarily in Pacific trouble-spots—such as Solomon Islands, whose descent into chaos and violence was sparked in 1998 by civil unrest on Guadalcanal. With regional support, Australia led a mission in 2003 to restore law and order. A short-term success, the mission leaves questions about its long-term ability to achieve either well-being for Solomon Islands or security for the region. Its emphasis on shoring up a perennially weak central government, and its inattention to other pillars of Solomons society, threaten to undermine its success and create a crippling sense of dependency. For the mission to succeed, it must empower Solomon Islanders to take charge of their own destiny.

It is vital that the intervention enhance, rather than undermine, local capacity for change

Australia's June 5, 2003, decision to lead a regional intervention into Solomon Islands marked a dramatic change in Australian policy, towards the Solomons in particular and more generally the Pacific Islands region. It demonstrates Canberra's willingness to play a more assertive role in the domestic affairs of island countries.

Earlier, Australian authorities had ruled out any possibility of deploying military or police to help Solomon Islands resolve the civil unrest that began in late 1998. The June 2003 decision reflects a fundamental change in global security policies following the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center in New York. In particular, it illustrates the perception that transnational terrorism has made it less possible to separate external and internal security.

Hence, to understand the change in Australia's policy one needs to examine, not only what occurred in Solomon Islands, but also the nature of global security policies, and Australia's collaboration with the United States in the war against terrorism.

Global security issues influenced the approach employed by the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), especially its focus on strengthening a "failed" state to prevent terrorists from manipulating it and threatening Australia.

The state is important in the context of global security. But the effort to build sustainable peace in Solomon Islands raises other questions: Who controls the state? Can a strong state apparatus alone create a stable nation committed to a shared identity and mission? And is the state the only institution that can facilitate peace building and national reconstruction? To achieve sustainable peace and rebuild Solomon Islands there is a need to strengthen both state and non-state entities. This is especially important in a plural society where the state will always share power with other organizations.

Furthermore, the RAMSI must not become so dominant that it creates dependency—as illustrated by the local saying *"weitim olketa RAMSI bae kam stretem"* (wait for RAMSI to come and fix it)—or is perceived as an occupation. If Solomon Islands stability is important for global (and Australian) security,

then it is vital that the intervention enhance, rather than undermine, local capacity for change.

Solomon Islands Civil Unrest: The Background

Solomon Islands' current turmoil can be traced to late 1998, when men from the island of Guadalcanal —where the capital, Honiara, is located—formed the militant Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) and harassed settlers from neighboring islands, especially Malaita. By July 1999, about 20,000 people, mostly Malaitans, had been evicted from homes on Guadalcanal.

The government of Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufaʻalu set up a task force to negotiate with the IFM and address the plight of the displaced people. The Commonwealth Secretariat sent former Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka as its special envoy, and deployed a small contingent of unarmed police officers from Fiji and Vanuatu.

Rabuka facilitated talks that led to formal accords in which the government agreed to address issues raised by the IFM and the Guadalcanal Provincial Government, and the IFM agreed to give up arms. Neither side, however, fulfilled its commitments.

Displaced Malaitans pressured the government to address their plight. Many had lost property, been harassed or raped, or had relatives murdered, and wanted help to rebuild their lives.

By the beginning of 2000 some displaced Malaitans, frustrated with the government's perceived failure to help them or to apprehend Guadalcanal militants, formed their own militant organization, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), located in Honiara and supported by some prominent Malaitans. The MEF, which had allies in the Royal Solomon Islands Police, began attacking villages and IFM strongholds on the outskirts of Honiara.

On June 5, 2000, the MEF, with the support of elements of the police, took over the police armory in Honiara and forced the prime minister to resign. Less than two weeks later the National Parliament met and elected Manasseh Sogavare as prime minister. In the months that followed, the confrontation

between the IFM and the MEF intensified, resulting in an unconfirmed number of deaths.

Despite this, negotiations continued, leading to the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) on October 15, 2000. The TPA achieved a ceasefire but failed to solve many of the problems emanating from the civil unrest or to address the underlying causes. Hence, law and order continued to be a problem, prompting requests to Australia and New Zealand for assistance.

Australian authorities offered advice and financial support but refused to deploy Australian police and military personnel. The Australian foreign affairs minister, Alexander Downer, said in January 2003, "Sending in Australian troops to occupy the Solomon Islands would be folly in the extreme." [i]

Six months later, Downer dramatically retreated from this statement and announced Australia's plans for a military mission, saying that the Solomon Islands civil unrest had "forced" Australia to produce a new Pacific policy involving "nation rebuilding" and "cooperative intervention." He stressed that the initiative was built on the spirit of the Biketawa Declaration, signed in 2000 by members of the Pacific Islands Forum to address the need for regional cooperation on matters of security.

Australia and the Global Security Discourse

To appreciate why Australian policy changed, it is useful to locate the Solomon Islands civil unrest within the context of the contemporary global security discourse. The events of September 11 demonstrated how transnational terrorism has denationalized, deterritorialized, and privatized the use of violence. Previously confined to specific places or conflicts, terrorism has now become global, with intricate financial and recruitment networks and new choices of weapons and victims.

As Tobias Debiel notes, "The new terrorists act not only with diabolical precision, but also with camouflage, which makes them very difficult to apprehend using loose-knit actions or conventional means in the area of external or internal security." [ii] Similarly, Ari Fleischer, a White House spokesman, said in 2002:

> The threats we face are no longer from known enemies, nations that have fleets or missiles or bombers that we can see come to the United States, nations that can be deterred through previous notions such as mutually assured destruction or any other previous defense notions. [iii]

The new terrorism knows no geographical, ideological, or moral borders, making it less feasible to separate external and internal security. This has had significant influence on security policy, especially in countries that see themselves as potential targets of terrorist attacks. The United States, Great Britain, and Australia, for instance, argue that international law and the United Nations, which were created to resolve conflicts between states, cannot deal adequately with the new terrorism. In particular, they raise the concern that terrorists could use unstable, ineffective, and "rogue" states to broaden and strengthen their global network. Their call for new anti-terrorism strategies has engendered the Bush administration's pre-emptive strike policy, the UN-sanctioned invasion of Afghanistan, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, and the Australian-led intervention in Solomon Islands.

Although the nature of these conflicts, the context in which they occurred, and the issues involved differed, the objectives and rationale for intervention were similar. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, each aimed to get rid of an existing regime and replace it with one friendly to—if not controlled by—the intervening power. The overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan and of Saddam Hussein in Iraq were justified by the argument that these regimes not only repressed their own people, but also collaborated with terrorists. Hussein was also alleged to possess weapons of mass destruction that could potentially be made available to terrorists. In Solomon Islands the intervention was justified by perceptions that its internal instability could pose a threat for Australia.

Hence, to understand why Canberra changed its Solomon Islands policy, we need to examine Australia's active role in the war against terrorism since September 11 and its alliance with the United States. While there is no evidence to suggest that Washington dictated Canberra's Pacific Islands policy, it would be fair to

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say that the Bush administration's agendas influenced Australia. Australian Prime Minister John Howard, for example, stated that he would launch a pre-emptive strike against terrorists in another country if he had evidence they were about to attack Australia:

> It stands to reason that if you believed that somebody was going to launch an attack against your country, either of a conventional kind or of a terrorist kind, and you had a capacity to stop it and there was no alternative other than to use that capacity, then of course you would have to use it.[iv]

This also reflects the so-called Howard Doctrine, which became popular in late 1999 and suggests that Australia has a new role as the United States' peacekeeping "deputy" in the Asia Pacific region. In referring to Australia's role in East Timor, for example, Howard said:

> This has done a lot to cement Australia's place in the region…. We occupy a special place—we are a European Western civilization with strong links with North America, but here we are in Asia…. In foreign policy we spent too much time fretting about whether we were in Asia, part of Asia, or whatever. We should be ourselves in Asia.[v]

In discussing Australia's leadership in the Solomon Islands intervention, Howard said, "The Solomons is our patch…. If the Solomons becomes a failed state, it's a haven potentially for terrorists, drug runners and money launderers… we don't want that on our door step."[vi]

The Howard Doctrine drew criticism from Southeast Asian leaders. Pacific Island leaders, however, were less critical of Australia's new assertiveness. At the Pacific Islands Forum meeting in August 2003, Howard played an aggressive role and pushed for an Australian to be elected as secretary general. It seemed that island leaders had accepted that Oceania is Australia's "patch" in the global security arena. This might partly be due to the fact that many island leaders wanted Australia to have more presence in the region, especially in its disbursement of aid.

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pre-emptive interventions. The White House saw Howard's position as supportive of U.S. and global security policy. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer, for example, said: "Australia has been a stalwart ally of the U.S. in the war on terror."[vii]

The partnership between Canberra and Washington was further cemented during Howard's visit to the Bush family ranch in Texas in May 2003. Following that visit, Howard signaled his readiness to involve Australia in further "coalitions for action" to confront global security threats:

> Our participation as a U.S. ally in the War on Terror might attract some criticism. But a weaker or equivocal response to this threat would not serve Australia well, or decrease our vulnerability. And this would not reduce the prospect of U.S. and other foreign interests being targeted in Australia, with the inevitable loss of Australian lives, or of Australians abroad being incidental victims of terrorism.[viii]

Claiming an "immense moral and humanitarian dividend" from the U.S.-led war on Iraq and citing Australia's proposal for armed intervention in Solomon Islands, Howard said that Australia enjoyed "unparalleled world respect" for its willingness to take a stand.[ix]

Solomon Islands is, therefore, important for Australia in the context of global security in an era when terrorists could, arguably, manipulate the country's instability to threaten Australia.

The potential of this occurring was tragically demonstrated by the Bali bombing of October 2002, where 88 Australian citizens were killed. This brought home to Australians the threat of terrorism. The Howard government was quick to capture this— "The terrorist attacks in the U.S. and Bali, and the arrests in Singapore, Indonesia, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, demonstrate the reach of terrorism and show that our region is no longer immune"—and to highlight the links between Jemaah Islamiah (which was responsible for the Bali bombing) and Al Qaeda.[x]

"Failed" State and Global Security

Canberra's major concern was the disintegration of state authority that would enable terrorist organizations to

reproduce themselves through what Tobias Debiel has called "markets of violence." Hence, the strategy was to target the state: intervene, rebuild, and strengthen the state in order to prevent it from "failing" or becoming a "rogue" state that could be exploited for networks of violence.

When the Townsville Peace Agreement expired in Solomon Islands in October 2002, the weapons surrender had been only partially successful and criminals continued to operate with impunity in a situation of fragile peace. The civil unrest encouraged a culture of violence that permeated even the highest institutions of the state. In some cases former militants teamed up with corrupt public officials to commit crimes and extort millions of dollars from the government in the guise of "compensation."[xi] State infrastructure was used to build lucrative cliental relationships that benefited only a few people.

The capacity of the state to manage the economy, provide basic services, and create respect for law and order was dramatically weakened. The country's economy deteriorated, further undermining the government's ability to provide adequate social services.

> Since 2000, the Solomon Islands economy had severely contracted causing a fall in incomes, increased unemployment and widespread poverty, and the poor delivery of social services, particularly in the education and health sectors. In fact, without the goodwill of the donor community, services in these two important sectors would have discontinued early in the year.[xii]

It was this situation that led John Roughan, a prominent Solomon Islands citizen, to say that the "Solomon Islands' lack of national security for its people guarantees it the distinction of being the Pacific's first failed state."[xiii] *The Economist* and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute made the same assertion in 2003. When announcing the proposed Solomon Islands intervention, the Australian prime minister told the Federal Parliament:

> If we do nothing now and the Solomon Islands becomes a failed state,… potential exploitation of that situation by international drug dealers, money launderers, international terrorism… will make the inevitable dealing with the problem in the future more costly, more difficult.[xiv]

Is the state capable of restoring relationships between conflicting parties?

This closely echoes the Bush administration's National Security Strategy, which drew attention to failed states not just as a humanitarian problem, but also as a major security concern:

> Poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders…. America is threatened less by conquering states than by failing ones.[xv]

Intervention and Solomon Islands' Future

Two of the major objectives of the intervention were to restore law and order and to rebuild the nation. So far, there have been marked improvements in law and order. By November 2003, for instance, more than 3,700 weapons (including 660 high-powered military weapons) were removed from the community; between July 24 and December 24, 2003, 733 people were arrested on 1,168 charges.[xvi]

The Public Service is being reviewed with the objective of curbing mismanagement and corruption and improving efficiency. At the time of writing, the economy showed signs of improvement. This was due partly to better management, but more to a huge aid injection.

Despite the successes of the intervention's state-centered approach, a number of questions still need to be examined: What is the place of the state in Solomon Islands society? Who controls the state? Would the establishment of an effective state lead to a nation with a collective consciousness, committed to a shared identity and mission? Is the state capable of restoring relationships between conflicting parties? Will the intervention address the underlying causes of the problem?

The Solomon Islands state has always shared control of society with other entities. Its strength is measured relative to that of other entities: churches, NGOs, and traditional political organizations and leaders. In Solomon Islands, even prior to the civil unrest, the state, while important, was often not the most influential institution in people's everyday lives, or the basis for organizing the community. The Solomon Islands state has long been relatively ineffective. The civil unrest merely exposed a weakness that already existed.

Economically, the state has depended largely on the exploitation of natural resources—forests, minerals, fisheries, and land—that it does not own. About 87 percent of land is owned by traditional landowners. As a result of the intervention, the 2004 budget is funded largely by aid donors—they will contribute up to 24.6 percent of the estimated revenue and 100 percent of the development expenditure.[xvii] When aid funding lapses, the state will revert to depending on resources it does not own and over which it has little control.

Because of this, it is vital to look beyond the state and involve other entities—churches, landowners, community leaders, and civil society—in the peace-building and nation-rebuilding processes.

The question of who controls the state is also important. Despite rhetoric about working in collaboration with the Solomon Islands government, the civilian leader of the RAMSI and his military and police counterparts exercise significant pressure on, if not control over, Solomon Islands affairs. Australians have been placed in important positions in the police, in the Ministry of Finance, and in other departments responsible for revenue collection and financial management.

Apart from Canberra, aid donors and international institutions such as the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank, and European Union also impose significant influence through the conditions attached to their aid.

Furthermore, politicians with questionable reputations and records have also controlled the state. The current prime minister, Allan Kemakeza, for instance, aroused widespread controversy over his financial dealings as deputy prime minister in the Sogavare government. At the time of his election as prime minister, his public declaration of friendship with militants, who were involved in criminal activities, raised concerns about the exact nature of his involvement with them. When he requested Australia's intervention, local and Australian news media were reporting that former MEF militants were about to demand millions of dollars in "compensation" from the government. Despite his flawed record, Kemakeza received Canberra's support.

Another question remains: whether an effective state would invoke common symbols, heroes, memories, and myths amongst the culturally and ethnically diverse communities that make up Solomon Islands. The state-centered approach assumes that an effective state can not simply impose order and deliver goods and services, but also create a loyal nation and harmony amongst citizens.

This issue is not unique to Solomon Islands. In Afghanistan, the U.S. attempt to create a government was described thus: "We have no option but to create some political order in that country. Call it nation-building lite."[xviii] The same could be said of the ongoing attempts to create a government in Iraq. The goal was not to turn these countries into Jeffersonian democracies, but into quasi-functioning states—restoring order, roads, bridges, and water supplies, ending violent conflicts and law and order problems, and ensuring that terrorists do not use them to attack the invading states.

Furthermore, for peace to be achieved there is a need to restore not only law and order but also relationships between former enemies. So far, the RAMSI has focused on retributive justice, hence the large number of people arrested and charged. This is helpful in the short term, but in the longer term Solomon Islanders must consider how the judicial system can cope with processing these cases, the cost of keeping people in prison, and the fact that the process does not restore people's relationships. This is especially important in a society where wrongs are often perceived as existing not between two individuals but between families and communities, and imprisoning one individual does not right the wrong.

Some Solomon Islanders argue that the underlying cause of the country's problems is poor leadership, especially amongst elected officials. The governor of the Central Bank, Rick Hou, for example, told the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation news service in November 2003 that the country's economic problems could be attributed to the "rottenness" of leadership and that unless the crisis of leadership is addressed, Solomon Islands would continue to face problems.

Similarly, Kabini Sanga, a Solomon Islander academic based at the University of Victoria in Wellington, argued: "The Australian-led and New

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Zealand-supported external armed intervention (called *'helpem fren'*) in the Solomon Islands is dealing with a minor issue. The real crisis, the one requiring priority attention, is leadership." He suggested that "the *'helpem fren'* mission should quickly give way to a New Zealand-facilitated (not led) *'iumi wantok'* (we are neighbors) strategy, aimed at supporting the strengthening of leadership capacity and a culture of leadership." [xix]

Roughan stated that the Solomon Islands crisis "shows up our leaders' special talent for destroying the country by lining their own deep greedy pockets first," [xx] while Transform Agorau (a Solomon Islander working as legal advisor to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat) argues:

> Unless there is a sea of change that is fundamental enough to ensure good, honest leadership at the highest echelons of government, Solomon Islanders will continue to suffer the consequences of poor leadership. [xxi]

RAMSI leaders have said that no one was above the law. On November 18, 2003, the minister for communication, aviation, and meteorology, Daniel Fa'afunua, was arrested and charged with a number of criminal offences.

But leadership is not an issue that RAMSI can resolve, and neither is it one that could easily be addressed through institutional changes. It is one that involves changing leadership culture over a long period of time and must involve Solomon Islanders.

There is a need to restore, not only a functional state, but also a functional society

Conclusion

Australia's willingness to lead the regional intervention into Solomon Islands is reflective of the contemporary global security discourse that focuses on the war against transnational terrorism, and the "failing state" discourse, which argues that the Solomon Islands state was collapsing and vulnerable to being used by terrorist organizations.

Consequently, the RAMSI's focus is on the state. However, while the state is important, it must not overshadow other organizations that could contribute positively to peace building and nation rebuilding. There is a need to restore, not only a functional state, but also a functional society.

The Solomon Islands case demonstrates that foreign intervention, while useful in the short term, does not offer an easy solution to internal problems. It might create a quasi-functioning state that is able to restore order and serve the interests of the intervening forces, but without addressing the underlying causes of unrest or building long-term peace.

Furthermore, for intervention to be successful it must cultivate a capacity for positive change within the country, otherwise it will create a culture of dependency. The role of the intervening force must, therefore, be that of facilitating positive development rather than dictating it. In Solomon Islands, Australian interests must not be privileged over those of Solomon Islanders. If that happens, Solomon Islanders will continue to say "*weitim olketa RAMSI bae kam stretem*"—wait for RAMSI to come and fix it.

Notes

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[vi] *Transcript of the Prime Minister the Hon. John Howard, MP, Interview with Charles Wooley, 60 Minutes*. July 20, 2003. http://www.pm.gov.au/news/interviews/Interview381.html (accessed February 22, 2004).

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