

# Solomon Islands: The Challenge of Democracy

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Lyng to the east of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands is a small south Pacific Island nation comprised of hundreds of coral and volcanic islands. The scene of fierce air and naval battles during World War II, the country until recently had a reputation as “the Happy Isles”. Unfortunately, the years since independence in 1978 have not been easy for the people of Solomon Islands, with dissatisfaction erupting finally in the coup of June 2000.

In the years preceding the coup, the failure of the state to provide adequate services and equal treatment for all Solomon Islanders resulted in increasing friction between ethnic groups over land and resources. Inadequate, inept and even incendiary political leadership saw the outbreak of violent conflict between the two major island provinces, Malaita and Guadalcanal. At the height of the conflict police armouries were ‘raided’ with the complicity of police officers - destroying the reputation of the police overnight - and the democratically-elected reformist government of the day was encouraged under the barrel of a gun to ‘step aside’.

When the worst of conflict finally abated - assisted by a peace agreement brokered by Australia in Townsville in October 2000 - Solomon Islands was left to rebuild its shattered economy, infrastructure and political systems. A discredited police force and a paralysed government of dubious legality were left in place – a situation which was ruthlessly exploited by armed thugs. Subsequent breakdown in law and order led to widespread view that the Solomon Islands was on the verge of becoming the regions first ‘failed state’.

External intervention has been the response. In July 2003, the Regional Assistance Mission (RAMSI) led by Australia but with the support of Pacific leaders, assembled at the explicit request of the Solomon Islands’ government – a last effort to stave off multiple imminent crises.

Interestingly, the arrival of Regional Assistance Mission has coincided with the shift in international relations policy which has seen some Western governments pursuing interventionist foreign policy strategies, allegedly premised on the notion

of “installing democracy” in nations in crisis. Regardless of one’s views on the appropriateness or viability of this approach, the intervention throws up many serious challenges for the people of Solomon Islands, their government and the Mission coordinators.

Unlike Iraq, the most recent and obvious example of so-called ‘democratic nation-building’, in Solomon Islands, the sovereign (arguably) democratically elected government actually requested outsiders to actively intervene in their domestic affairs. While the consent of the Solomon Islands’ Government, and apparently even the people, provides a positive foundation on which to premise any intervention, the fact remains that the country is not being re-colonised, but remains an independent and free nation. This needs to be kept in mind at all times by all parties – the Mission leaders, the Solomon Islands’ Government and the people, on whom the burden of rebuilding and the responsibility of participatory development and democracy ultimately rests.

It is vital that the Mission respects the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands’ people and works in cooperative partnership to support local people to achieve goals they set for themselves. Keeping this in mind, one views with foreboding the huge number of expatriate advisors and consultants that are currently engaged with the Mission to work on reforming Solomon Islands’ institutions. The Mission and the Government should be wary of assuming that Solomon Islands’ problems can be “fixed” by external “experts” ready to provide technical solutions. This oversimplifies the challenges facing the country and is reminiscent of outmoded development approaches, which often assume the only factor holding back development in poor countries is lack of expertise. This not only underestimates the abilities of local people – the fact is that Solomon Islands *does* have some level of capacity which must be tapped and nurtured – it also fails to recognise the significance that cultural norms can play in shaping a country’s political and bureaucratic institutions.

Notably, unlike the current democracy project in Iraq, Solomon Islands has supposedly been a democratic country for the last 25 years. While some would argue that this is a

good start for rebuilding, the perplexing question still remains: what went wrong with democracy in Solomon Islands that intervention was finally considered the only solution to the country's problems? If the Government and/or the Mission do not find an answer to this question, the risk looms large that money will be wasted on rebuilding institutions that will simply degenerate again once the Mission leaves.

Serious attention needs to be given immediately to the question of how democracy can be moulded to fit the unique cultural traditions and social mores of Solomon Islands. Although the situation deteriorated markedly after the June 2000 coup, it is simplistic to blame all of the country's current troubles on the conflict between the provinces of Malaita and Guadalcanal; Solomon Islands had been struggling to meet the challenges of democracy and development for a long time before that. Representative democracy was grafted – not very successfully - onto traditional governance systems dominated by chiefs and 'big men'. The result is a political system where members of parliament still maintain strong allegiances to their 'wantoks' (kin), rather than the broader constituency they are supposed to represent.

In recent years, the lawlessness that followed the coup exacerbated the criminalisation of politics that has increasingly characterised the country. Corruption became endemic and the economy was gutted. The direct result has been a marked decline in government-funded health services to the predominantly rural population, an education system in tatters and a people in serious need despite the abundant richness of its natural resources with which it is endowed.

Without innovative and appropriate responses, one has to query whether the same solutions – in particular, a technical approach to institution-building – will simply result in the same results: failure. 'State-building' and 'institutional-strengthening' cannot be the whole solution – these approaches to development gloss over the importance of *people* in making or breaking political, economic and social systems. Strategies need to be developed which harness the diversity of the Solomon Islands' people and ensure the effective representation of all sections of the population. There have been some suggestions that amending the Constitution could achieve this, but arguably this is an overly technical option. While rules of operation do need to be developed that will entrench more meaningful and representative democracy, this could occur through changes in the electoral system and/or the application of the current

constitutional provisions for provincial decentralisation. The key is that the *spirit* of cooperative governance needs to be entrenched in the political and socio-cultural framework before governance will improve. Mere changes to systems and institutions are cosmetic solutions, which are liable to fail in the long-run.

At this juncture, it is worth noting that one of the most fundamental guiding principles that must underpin every strategy for rebuilding Solomon Islands needs to be a serious, tangible commitment to good governance – that is, transparency, accountability, participation and equity. Importantly, the Mission itself must lead by example and explicitly apply the principles of good governance to its own operations. It should be accountable to the Solomon Islands' people and cannot be allowed to operate as an entity apart.

In practice, it is crucial that the Mission actively encourage and value the participation of all Solomon Islanders. The Mission needs to be wary of slipping into the easy habit of consulting Government and accepting that as de facto public participation. People have the right to participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect them – particularly in a context of such huge changes – and should be at the centre of development strategies intended for their benefit. In Solomon Islands, this has even greater importance because the Government has been notoriously unrepresentative. Although the Mission is reliant on the acquiescence of the Government for its mandate, it needs to maintain an active awareness that many of the governance problems that have plagued the country for so long were caused by the very politicians they are working with. Care needs to be taken not to compromise the integrity of the long-term development of Solomon Islands for short-term reasons of political expediency.

It is important to note that while there are many difficulties still facing the people of Solomon Islands, they have an exciting opportunity to take control of their own development destinies and demand the rights they have been denied for far too long. Democratic governance institutions need to be built which take into account not only the political elite but every section of the population. The Mission needs to support the Solomon Islands people to find their own solutions, assisting and guiding where appropriate, providing expertise and resource where necessary, but in the end, simply providing sufficient space and time for the people themselves to forge their own destinies. ■