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Introduction

Solomon Islands comprises 6 main islands—Santa Cristobal, Malaita, Santa Isabel, Guadalcanal, New Georgia and Choiseul, and about 300 small islands. More than 90 per cent of the indigenous population are Melanesians and 4 per cent are Polynesians. The rest of the total population are naturalised citizens, comprising Micronesians, Chinese and ‘Europeans’.

Traditional society

In traditional society, prior to British colonisation, there was no central authority controlling and governing the chain of islands that stretches from Bougainville to Tikopia, known as the independent state of Solomon Islands (excluding Bougainville) since 7 July 1978. There was no central authority that governed an entire island in traditional society, or even the smallest of the islands. Instead, people were organised into numerous tribes, clans and lineages, to which they owed (and they still do) their loyalty and allegiance. The common bond motivating strong loyalty and allegiance to tribes, clans and lineages is land. Every indigenous Solomon islander is a member of one of the tribal land-owning groups.

According to the fundamental principal of tribal land tenure, which entails collective ownership, land is not a commodity to be sold. The current occupants of tribal land are regarded as custodians of the land that hosts the spirit of the ancestors of the tribe and which must be preserved for the use of future generations. Therefore to sell tribal land would mean selling the spirits of one’s ancestors and the birthrights of the future generations of the tribe. An understanding of the concept of tribal land tenure in the Australian context can be found in the Aboriginal traditional land tenure system.

Nationhood vs tribes

The declaration by the British in 1893 of the chain of islands now known as Solomon Islands as a British Protectorate gave birth to the concept of nationhood, as opposed to tribes. Following that declaration, the new nation was divided into four administrative units by the colonialists—Western District, the Central District, Malaita District and Eastern District. Within each District there was strong tribal links among the tribes in traditional society.

The alienation of tribal land in Solomon Islands

Prior to and after the declaration of the Solomon Islands as a British Protectorate, the colonial government, the churches and private capitalists stole tribal land from the islanders for the purpose of economic and commercial activity. In order to produce copra in the coconut plantations, not only the natives of the particular islands where the plantations were located were recruited as workers, but men from other islands were brought in to work. Many were

from the populous island of Malaita, with its experienced workforce, some of whom had returned home after working in sugarcane plantations in Queensland and Fiji.

Job opportunities in Guadalcanal

The capital of the British colonial administration was moved from Tulagi in Gella, or Florida, island to the island of Guadalcanal after WWII to take advantage of the infrastructures left behind by the American and the Japanese forces, such as the airport, roads, buildings and other installations. Consequently, people from all over the Solomon Islands started drifting to Guadalcanal looking for job opportunities in the colonial administration, private enterprises, especially coconut plantations where copra was produced for export markets. The great majority of the migrant workers came from Malaita. It is important to note that not all the workers who went to Guadalcanal were recruited by foreign plantation owners. Some of them were recruited by natives of Guadalcanal.

Settlers from other Provinces in Guadalcanal

There are three ways that people from other provinces gained access to tribal land for settlement in Guadalcanal. There are those who purchased ‘alienated’ land from the government, the churches or private interests while there are others who purchased tribal land or customary land from traditional land owners. The third category are those who claim to have been given land by the traditional land owners as a payment in kind because they could not pay the workers in cash for their labour. It is important to point out here that in all three categories, people from all Provinces have been involved, with the majority of them from the Northern Region of Malaita.

Grievances of Guadalcanal people

The people of Guadalcanal have been complaining about settlements of people from other Provinces, especially Malaita on Guadalcanal, the absence of any form of rental for Honiara township, the crimes of various nature that they alleged to have been committed against the Guadalcanal people due to the capital being located there and the control of their natural resources by the central government, and they have been calling for the establishment of provincial or state government with autonomous powers so that they would be more in control of these issues.

However, successive governments since independence have done nothing about these grievances. At the end of 1998 a group of armed young Guadalcanal men who called themselves Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA), now known as the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), started to physically force settlers, the majority of whom are from Malaita, to leave their settlements. In addition to that the GRA/IFM demanded that the central government pay certain compensations to the people of Guadalcanal for wrongs they allege have been committed against them by Malaitans.

Grievances of displaced Malaitans

Since the end of 1998 the government has been repatriating the displaced Malaitans and others to their islands of origin. It would appear that the displaced Malaitans have no intention of trying to regain access to the settlements from which they had been forced out. Rather, what

they have been demanding is payment or compensation by the central government for the properties they have been forced to abandon. When the government appeared to drag its feet on the compensation issue they decided to form a militant force, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), with the purpose of protecting the Malaitans living in and around Honiara against the GRA/IFM, and to pressure the government to pay their compensation claims quickly.

Breakdown in law and order

When these two militia groups, the IFM and the MEF, started to engage on a 'war' over the control of the outskirts of Honiara, the government found itself incapable of maintaining law and order in and around the capital due to one simple fact, the Royal Solomon Islands Police and the Prison Service were compromised. As it turned out, the officers from Malaita and Guadalcanal in the two supposedly disciplined forces were more loyal to their tribes than to the state. Consequently, the Prime Minister of Solomon Islands requested assistance from the government of Australia but the request was turned down.

The attempted coup

On 5 June 2000, the MEF and some members of the Royal Solomon Islands Police staged an attempted coup. The initial demands were that Prime Minister Ulufa'alu tender his resignation within 48 hours and that the National Parliament be convened immediately to elect a new Prime Minister. The main justifications for staging the attempt coup given by the spokesman for the coup, Andrew Nori, were as follows

- the Government of Prime Minister Ulufa'alu has failed to resolve the ethnic crisis
- the Police Force has lost control of law and order in Honiara, instead the criminals now rule the streets of the capital
- the likelihood of the ethnic crisis to spread to other parts of the country (for example, Western Province).

Andrew Nori goes on to state that the following were to be the main objectives of the attempted coup

- to re-instate law and order in Honiara and on Guadalcanal generally
- to restore confidence in the process of governance
- to speed up the peace process
- to prevent the Solomon Islands from disintegrating.

The Constitutional crisis—the impasse

When the Prime Minister submitted his resignation on 13 June 2000 the Governor General accepted it and proceeded to set up a committee comprising members of the opposition and the government with His Excellency The Governor General as the chairman. The committee came up with six conditions, including the handing in of arms by the two militia groups to the Police, which had to be satisfied before the National Parliament is convened to elect a new Prime Minister. While 28 June 2000 has been set down for Parliament to meet and elect a new Prime Minister, the Malaita Eagle Force and the Isatabu Freedom Movement do not appear willing to surrender their arms to the Police before the meeting.

Under the prevailing situation, if the Parliament proceeds with the meeting, it will be held under duress, depriving the members of Parliament of exercising their constitutional and democratic rights in a free and fair environment. The question remains as to whether or not there will be substantial number of MPS attending to elect the Prime Minister who will have to get the support of half the total number of MPS plus one ($1/2$ of $50 + 1 = 26$), according to the Constitution. If the meeting does not produce an outcome that is acceptable to the Malaita Eagle Force, what is going to happen to Honiara which is now under its mercy.

The involvement of Australia in the conflict

The Australian Government's current position appears to be that it is prepared to facilitate the payment of the compensation claims by displaced Malaitans, backed by the MEF and those by the IFM, and be part of a multi-national peace monitoring force, provided that both militia groups meet the following conditions, subject to the convening of Parliament meeting, without duress, to elect a new Prime Minister

- That the warring parties (MEF and IFM) immediately agree to have a truce in place.
- That the MEF and IFM agree to have a multi-national Peace monitoring Force to supervise the truce and to maintain law and order in Honiara for an interim period until such time that the Royal Solomon Islands Police is in the position to resume its responsibilities.
- That the MEF and the IFM agree to lay down their arms and surrender them to the multi-national Peace keeping Force.

Will the Solomon Islands remain a united country or disintegrate after this crisis?

The question that is hanging over us now is what is going to happen to our country after this crisis? The Solomon Islands has a two-tier system of government—a central government that has most of the power, and the nine provinces to which certain powers have been devolved through an Act of Parliament. After the experience of the current crisis there is bound to be soul searching throughout the nine Provinces as to whether or not it is worth maintaining a united Solomon Islands. It would appear that the only way to maintain a united country is to put in place a federal system of government whereby the Provinces or States have autonomous powers to control their natural resources and internal migration and give less powers to the Central or Federal Government.

On the other hand, if the country is to be divided into smaller units/countries, there appear to be two options to be considered.

- That the original four Districts—Western, Central, Malaita and Eastern—that existed during the colonial period become the four new countries.
- That the nine Provinces become countries of their own.

After more than 20 years of political independence, the Solomon Islands is on the crossroad now. Whether or not the country can pull through in this critical moment as a united nation, time alone will tell.