

Dissenting voices: local perspectives on the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands

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On the eve of the third anniversary of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in July 2006 and in the wake of the social unrest which gripped Honiara in April 2006, it is timely to reflect on the role and efficacy of the intervention mission. Such reflection also comes at a time when RAMSI is being lauded in foreign policy circles as a new, innovative and largely successful model for international interventions aimed at addressing the phenomenon of 'state failure'. Whilst RAMSI has undoubtedly made considerable progress in the areas of law and order and economic recovery, and whilst a majority of Solomon Islanders continue to support the mission, there are also significant and growing voices of dissent emanating from within certain sectors of Solomon Islands' state and society. Moreover, local criticism of RAMSI has sharply intensified following the recent civil unrest which saw widespread looting and the almost complete destruction of the Chinatown district of Honiara.

The purpose of this article is to present and examine some of these dissenting voices. I have collected these perspectives over the past six months or so, in the course of

conducting research into the 'ethnic tension' over the period 1998–2003. I have formally interviewed around 50 people and held informal discussions with many more. These people include ex-combatants, former and current police officers, politicians, public servants, journalists, representatives of non-government organisations, church and community leaders, taxi drivers and villagers. I cannot claim to have conducted a comprehensive, or even representative, survey of the general populace's views on RAMSI. However, these conversations, in combination with other sources, such as local media and non-government organisation reports and letters to the editor, nevertheless provide useful insights into local perspectives on RAMSI.

It is important to stress from the outset that the overall picture is one of continued support for the mission. However, the history of conflict in Solomon Islands indicates that it is perilously dangerous to ignore the dissenting views of a minority of people.¹ These views are presented against a backdrop of the recent unrest and also as a counterpoint to a recently published Lowy Institute report which is glowing in its praise

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for RAMSI (Fullilove 2006). Solomon Islanders are conspicuously under-represented in the list of persons consulted for the latter report and I therefore seek to employ local perspectives to challenge some of its specific findings. The perspectives on RAMSI examined here raise a number of considerations for Australian policymakers. Most importantly there is a need for RAMSI, particularly its policing component, to improve its public image and its connectedness and interaction with the Solomon Islands' community. Failure to do so will most likely result in further challenges to the mission's authority and legitimacy and, more importantly, further civil unrest and hardship for the people of Solomon Islands.

What is RAMSI?

For most academic and policy commentators, RAMSI is an interesting example of an international intervention mission, an exercise in 'peace keeping' and 'state building'. It has a particular structure, composition and legal foundation. It has a purpose and specific goals and objectives. RAMSI's most senior officer, Special Coordinator James Batley, recently described the structure and purpose of RAMSI for the benefit of the newly elected Members of Parliament (*Solomon Star*, 6 June 2006). He stressed that it is a regional mission with a two pronged legal foundation: a multi-lateral treaty and a Solomon Islands Act of Parliament known as the Facilitation of International Assistance Act 2003 (the 'Facilitation Act'). Fourteen countries contribute to its police contingent (the Participating Police Force, or PPF), five are represented in its military element and eight contribute to its civilian component. RAMSI works in three broad areas: law and justice, economic governance and machinery of government. The purpose of the mission is

to 'foster...a nation which is peaceful, well-governed and prosperous' (*Solomon Star*, 6 June 2006).

However, for people in Solomon Islands, RAMSI is a very different animal. RAMSI means vastly different things to different people across both time and space. From the moment of its arrival (which occurred at different times in different places) the mission has been the subject of much speculation, rumour, intrigue and even mystique. Some people continue to believe that RAMSI is an almost supernatural force which is capable of dealing with any imaginable contingency. However, this myth of inviolability has, to a considerable extent, eroded over time. The 'shock and awe' generated by the initial deployment of RAMSI has largely worn off. People are keenly aware of challenges to the mission's infallibility, such as the fatal shooting of Adam Dunning in late 2004 which indicated that RAMSI did not, after all, have 'machines' which would find all of the guns which hadn't been surrendered. The failure of the PPF—which is mostly comprised of Australian police officers—to prevent two days of rioting which resulted in the destruction of the Chinatown district of Honiara, has added to these growing perceptions of RAMSI's weakness. According to an ex-combatant and former follower of Harold Keke with whom I recently spoke on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, 'people are no longer afraid of RAMSI'.

It is fair to say that the majority of the predominantly rurally based population of Solomon Islands identifies RAMSI as primarily, if not exclusively, a police and military operation. Most people are not aware of the economic governance and machinery of government components of the mission. Nor are they versed in the nuances of acronyms and technical distinctions, particularly the difference between RAMSI and PPF. For most people, RAMSI basically

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means police and soldiers, most of whom are Australian and all of whom are under the command of Australian officers. One person I spoke to on Malaita even went as far as saying that RAMSI should be called 'AMSI' (the 'Australian Mission to Solomon Islands').

Having said this, there are, of course, Solomon Islanders who are very familiar with the full scope of the RAMSI mission, and some local politicians and public servants have voiced concerns about the economic governance component of the mission in particular. I have dealt with these concerns elsewhere (Allen 2006).² The primary focus of this article is on the policing component of RAMSI, which for the majority of people in Solomon Islands *is* RAMSI. In the remainder of the article, 'RAMSI' is used to refer to the PPF and the military, just as it is in the common parlance of Solomon Islanders.

A light touch?

One of the eight positive features of RAMSI highlighted by Fullilove is its so-called light touch: 'physically it adopts a fairly low profile. RAMSI arrived in the Solomons under cover of darkness' (Fullilove 2006:17). No doubt the people who were in the Malaita Province capital of Auki when RAMSI staged an ultimately unsuccessful operation to capture fugitive ex-policeman Edmund Sae in 2003 would strongly disagree with this assessment. In that instance, RAMSI emerged from the sea at dawn, just near the market place, in the form of navy commandos dressed in black wetsuits and fully-armed and equipped. The early morning betelnut vendors at the market fled in fear, as indeed did most of the townsfolk. The commandos were followed by large numbers of regular troops who landed in the mangroves adjacent to Auki. For many people on Malaita this was interpreted not as a low profile intervention,

but as a large-scale and explicit invasion of the island.

Similarly, in the aftermath of the riots on 18 and 19 April (dates which are referred to locally as 'Black Tuesday' and 'Black Wednesday'), the people of Honiara were subjected to the almost constant low-altitude circling of RAMSI helicopters, at one stage four of them at once. Heavily-armed RAMSI personnel, including military reinforcements, had an extremely high profile on the streets of Honiara (as, in fact, they did when RAMSI was originally deployed in July 2003). Parliament House was 'locked down' by the Commissioner of Police (Shane Castles, an Australian) and other strategic locations, such as the Magistrate's Court and High Court, were guarded by armed RAMSI police and soldiers.

Whilst it is true that the main RAMSI base (known as Guadalcanal Beach Resort or GBR) is located on the outskirts of Honiara, out of sight from the main road, it is a stretch to argue that this means that 'the infamous white four-wheel drives are out of sight' (Fullilove 2006:17). It is not white four-wheel drives, but marked police four-wheel drives with PPF number plates which ply up and down the main road of Honiara. These vehicles are somewhat more ubiquitous than Fullilove would have us believe. Moreover, many of the provincial RAMSI posts can hardly be described as discrete. In some remote rural locations, such as on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, RAMSI personnel are based in fenced compounds with 24 hour-a-day generator-powered security lighting. The compounds contain an array of impressive equipment such as speed boats, vehicles and quad-bikes. As the rules prevent the PPF officers from consuming any locally produced food, or even rainwater, these bases are regularly re-supplied by helicopters operated by Patrick Defence Logistics.

The many innocent Solomon Islanders who have directly experienced the punitive

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might of RAMSI would also be unlikely to endorse the 'light touch' imagery. A case in point is an ex-Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP) officer with whom I recently spoke in Auki. He was arrested on a charge of assault and later acquitted. The first time RAMSI officers attempted to arrest him, neither he nor his wife were at home. However, his three young children and their house girl were at home when the house was raided in an anti-terrorist style operation by 11 land cruiser-loads of heavily-armed police and soldiers. They came through the doors and windows, terrifying the children whom to this day run in fear at the sight of a 'white man'. On Malaita there are many such stories of heavy-handed operations and a growing resentment that RAMSI officers do not respect local custom, with the most common complaint being that they trespass on traditional tribal lands without seeking proper permission. On several occasions people on Malaita said to me '*mifala save hatem RAMSI*' ('we hate RAMSI').

Successful communication with Solomon Islanders?

According to Fullilove, another aspect of RAMSI's light touch is its 'diligent and largely successful efforts to communicate with Solomon Islanders...an openness and humility which is entirely appropriate for an international mission' (Fullilove 2006:17). A majority of Solomon Islanders distinguish between PPF officers on the basis of their nationality. Pacific islanders are the most popular because they 'come down to the people'.³ Australian officers are the least liked. They are perceived as arrogant and aloof. New Zealand officers are regarded as being some where in the middle. Interestingly, the military are preferred to the PPF because they walk the streets and talk to people. The PPF, on the

other hand, are rarely seen outside of their ubiquitous police vehicles.

In a Melanesian country such as Solomon Islands, successful communication depends on building relationships of trust. Ongoing interaction and exchange are the keys to developing such relationships, even if it is only friendly words that are being exchanged. The PPF's deliberate isolation from the community—the location of its base on the outskirts of Honiara, its refusal to consume locally produced foodstuffs, its reluctance to have its people walking the streets, the inability of the majority of its people to speak Pijin, the high rotation of rate of its officers through the provincial posts and through the operation as a whole—is inimical to this process of interaction and exchange.

The recent civil unrest in Honiara raises a number of serious concerns about RAMSI's ability to communicate and build relationships with Solomon Islanders. Commissioner of Police Shane Castles primarily blames a lack of intelligence, and consequent lack of preparation, for the inability of the police to prevent the rioting, looting and arson. However one would have thought that after almost three years in the country, the PPF would have established an effective network of contacts within the community from which it could draw its intelligence. The admission of a lack of intelligence is also, therefore, an admission that RAMSI, and the PPF in particular, is very poorly integrated and connected with the local community. This situation cannot reasonably be described as one of successful communication with Solomon Islanders.⁴

Furthermore, the ability for police to be able to communicate effectively with members of the public is crucial in any crowd control situation in any part of the world. During the events which occurred outside Parliament on the afternoon of 18 April, the inability of the front line PPF police (most of

whom were Australian) to speak or even understand Solomon Islands Pijin may be regarded as a significant strategic disadvantage. A former RSIP officer told me that in the past, the RSIP has been able to diffuse the vast majority of civil disturbance situations through negotiation and effective communication with the crowd. According to John Roughan,

[h]ow can the [Australian] Federal Police's professional conduct be taken seriously when some of them were unaware that the word 'waku' is Pijin for Chinese people. What does this say about the Police's lack of social integration with the people of this nation? (2006:2).

The public debate around the role of the PPF during the civil unrest has also raised issues concerning the cultural appropriateness of the RAMSI approach. For example, a Solomon Islander writing in the 'Private View' section of the *Solomon Star* states

I believe the situation could have been cool down if only RAMSI officers stopped using teargas and let Sir Peter Kenilorea (the Speaker) address his own people (Solomon Islanders) on what he has according to the mediation process and restorative justice, which are deemed appropriate to Melanesian situation... Therefore let me advise the RAMSI officers and military units, if there is any disagreement arises between the leaders and indigenous people of this country (Solomon Islands) please allow Melanesians themselves to take the first approach to try and solve their own internal matters and affairs (*Solomon Star*, 27 April 2006).

Did RAMSI contribute to the riots?

Detailed analysis of the causes of the recent unrest in Honiara is beyond the scope of this paper and is dealt with elsewhere (Allen 2006). It is suffice to say that the riots were caused by a number of factors, not least of which was widespread frustration with the outcome of the April National Election and the subsequent 'second election' for the new Prime Minister. However, part of this frustration can be attributed to RAMSI. The general public has voiced considerable dissatisfaction with RAMSI's inability or unwillingness to arrest the so-called 'big fish' in relation to crimes committed during the 'ethnic tension' period from 1998 to 2003. Whilst a number of high-profile parliamentarians have been arrested and charged with tension-related offences, notably Benjamin Una and Alex Bartlett, there are widespread feelings that RAMSI has not gone far enough.

Since the arrival of RAMSI in July 2003 there have been almost daily appeals in the letters to the editor and editorial sections of the local newspapers to arrest the 'big fish', including former Prime Minister Sir Alan Kemakeza. These appeals have intensified following the publication in late 2004 of an Auditor-General's report into the disbursement of a US\$25 million loan from a Taiwanese bank for which Kemakeza assumed overall responsibility at the time as Minister for National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace (Solomon Islands 2004) and the subsequent arrest of Lucien Ki'i, who was Kemakeza's Permanent Secretary at the time, on corruption charges relating to the disbursement. The return to power of the same ruling coalition, headed by Kemakeza's heir apparent (Snyder Rini) was, for many people in Solomon Islands, the final fatal act in a process of mass political disempowerment and would appear to have immediately precipitated the rioting which broke out on Black Tuesday.

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There is also evidence to suggest that RAMSI officers and vehicles were deliberately targeted during the riots. It appears that only PPF officers sustained injuries and only PPF number-plated vehicles were destroyed during the unrest. Moreover, torched PPF vehicles and Chinese-owned businesses were graffitied with obscenities against RAMSI, an indication of the strong negative feeling towards RAMSI expressed to me by a number of people on Malaita. One cannot, therefore, discount the possibility that the riots were partly aimed at attacking RAMSI. However, regardless of whether or not RAMSI contributed to the riots, there can be no doubt that the events have been disastrous for RAMSI's image, with members of the public cynically remarking that the military and police reinforcements were too late, just as the original deployment of RAMSI came long after the open armed conflict in Solomon Islands was over.

Conclusion

This paper has examined some local perspectives on RAMSI which are not commonly heard in academic and policy discourse about the intervention mission. It has been argued that the RAMSI of 'state building' and 'nation building' is markedly different to the RAMSI which is seen and interpreted by Solomon Islanders. For the majority of people in Solomon Islands RAMSI means police and soldiers. Moreover, it is widely perceived as an Australian-dominated enterprise, composed mostly of Australian security forces which are commanded by Australian officers. Regrettably, the Australian police, who do indeed make up the bulk of the PPF, are the least liked. They are regarded as arrogant and isolated. They do not walk the streets, they do not shop at the markets and they do not

talk to people. They stay locked up in their conspicuous vehicles and bases. They raid suspects' houses in anti-terrorist style operations. They lack local language skills and knowledge of indigenous culture and custom. They have a serious image problem.

The way in which RAMSI operates also means that it, particularly the PPF component, experiences severe difficulties with communicating, interacting and building trust with the Solomon Islands community, including, it would seem, the RSIP. It is therefore hardly surprising that the PPF had no intelligence about the riots of Black Tuesday and Black Wednesday. Nor does it come as a surprise that they were unable to negotiate with and diffuse the angry mob, as the RSIP has been able to do in the past. Yet it must be remembered that RAMSI currently has sole responsibility for maintaining law and order in Solomon Islands. If it cannot prevent a significant section of Honiara from being destroyed in mob violence then what exactly is it doing in Solomon Islands (and, it should be noted, at vast expense to the Australian taxpayer)?

However, the situation is by no means hopeless. Despite the recent challenges to its authority and inviolability, RAMSI continues to enjoy the support of a majority of people in Solomon Islands, including the new Sogavare government (albeit with some reservations about the economic governance component of RAMSI). Moreover, the improvements in the way that RAMSI operates—as suggested by the dissenting voices considered here—are by no means impossible. There are pragmatic steps that can be taken to address the related issues of RAMSI's poor integration and interaction with the local community and its negative public image. These include improved language and cultural awareness training; an improved community engagement and communication strategy; and greater integration with RSIP and the community as a whole. It is expedient for

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Australian policymakers to consider such measures. Failure to do so will increase the likelihood of further instability in Solomon Islands, to the detriment of all involved, not least of whom are the good citizens of Solomon Islands.

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Notes

- ¹ According to the Pacific Islands Forum Eminent Persons Group which conducted a review of RAMSI in 2005 '[t]here are some critics of RAMSI: some of those criticisms may be valid; others reflect a vested interest in RAMSI's early departure. Although those with such interests are a minority, their potential for causing disruption should not be underestimated' (2005: para 12).
- ² Following the precedent set by the PNG Supreme Court in striking down the immunity provisions for Australian police under the Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP), there have also been challenges to RAMSI's legal foundation. In late 2005 former Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) 'spokesman' and prominent local lawyer and ex-politician, Andrew Nori, launched a High Court challenge to the legality of RAMSI arguing that the Facilitation Act was unconstitutional. The case was recently struck down by the Chief Justice in a lengthy judgment (*Andrew Gabriel Hanaiepo Nori v. Attorney-General and others* [2006]). Before his arrest on charges in relation to the riots, parliamentarian Charles Dausabea, who also had close connections with the MEF, criticised aspects of RAMSI during an interview with Radio New Zealand (Radio New Zealand, 25/04/06). He stated that as a newly-elected MP, he was planning to scrutinise aspects of the Facilitation Act, particularly the Immunity Clauses which grant RAMSI officers immunity from prosecution under the laws of Solomon Islands. It was also widely rumoured that Dausabea campaigned on an anti-RAMSI platform in the lead-up to the April 5th National Election.
- ³ According to the Eminent Persons Group: 'We also heard that the Pacific islanders serving under the PPF are well liked among

Solomon Islanders. In our view this is because Pacific Islanders can relate well to the locals' (2005:para 33).

- ⁴ According to former RSIP Assistant Commissioner, Mike Wheatley, the events of what he describes as 'RAMSI Tuesday' (that is, 18 April 2006) were not the result of a failure of intelligence, but of a failure of commonsense. 'If forces had been pre-deployed as per usual Solomon Islands procedures and operational experience then there would not have been any surprises... The looting and burning of shops in Chinatown after a demonstration of some kind is a known scenario. It has been attempted on many occasions in the past and, each time, successfully blocked by Solomon Island disciplinary forces' (2006:3-4). This raises further questions concerning the relationship between PPF and RSIP officers. To what extent was advice sought from, or proffered by, RSIP officers? To what extent was such advice followed by PPF commanders? What is the nature of communication between RSIP and PPF?

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