



Personal Reflections on Political Economy and Nation-Building in Solomon Islands

Transform Aqorau with Stewart Firth

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The following speech was delivered by visiting fellow Dr Transform Aqorau on 26 August 2022 at the Department of Pacific Affairs, The Australian National University. It is followed by an epilogue by Stewart Firth.

Dr Transform Aqorau was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Australian National University on 15 July 2022 ‘for exceptional contributions to the promotion of marine resource sustainability in the Pacific Islands region’. Aqorau is best known as the originator of the Pacific’s greatest success in applied regionalism, which is the transformation of the region’s major tuna fishery from one in which foreign fishing companies overwhelmingly benefited to one in which the member states of the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) increased their share in the proceeds of the tuna catch from US\$60 million in 2010 to nearly US\$500 million in 2019, and continue to benefit. The agreement and its application have been the work almost entirely of Pacific Islanders, now directed from a new PNA headquarters in Majuro, Marshall Islands, opened in 2021. The PNA scheme has nothing to do with aid and everything to do with Pacific commercial initiative.

In his account of this program and its negotiations, Dr Aqorau is typically candid: ‘It may sound unorthodox, but this is the Pacific Islands where our people have the propensity to speak more outside of the meeting room than in it; where they will not tell you in the face that they disagree with you, but will take you along for a ride, making you think that they are agreeing with you when in fact they don’t’ (Aqorau 2020: 8). It was in this Pacific political atmosphere, where key decisions often emerge outside the meeting room, that Dr Aqorau was able to chart a new and lucrative course for the nine countries that benefit from the Nauru Agreement: the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and the New Zealand territory Tokelau.

Stewart Firth

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to those of you who are here and those who have joined us by Zoom here and overseas. At the outset, let me sincerely and respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we stand and gather, and thank the traditional owners and their ancestors for their ongoing protection and guidance over us.

I am delighted to be here this morning, and I am particularly delighted to be addressing this forum on a subject that is emotionally connected to me as a Solomon Islander. My talk today on the ‘Political Dynamics of Solomon Islands: Nation-Building, Economy and Implications for Australia’ hopefully will help unpack some of the factors that have influenced political developments in Solomon Islands in recent years, the complexities surrounding nation-building and the confluence of interests often at play that can exacerbate public policy formulation. It may be of interest to some in the audience, whether you are involved in foreign policy formulation, development or

just wanting to know about the political economy of Solomon Islands and how it is influencing the regional security debate.

It would be of interest to the Australian audience because, for the first time in its history, political developments in Solomon Islands were an election issue in Australian politics, and because of that I have noticed during my stay in Canberra this time that a lot more people know about Solomon Islands. Moreover, and perhaps quite significantly, Australia has been an important player in the development of Solomon Islands across several economic and social sectors, but also especially because it is the major supporter of peace efforts to quell successive civil disturbances that have occurred in the archipelago in the past 25 years. Australia has supported efforts to put down civil unrest and social disturbances in Solomon Islands beginning in 2003, and again in 2006, and I think if I am not mistaken in 2019, and more recently in November 2021. The political consequences if Australia had

not intervened to support the Royal Solomon Islands Police after two and a half days of non-stop looting and rioting in November 2021 would most likely have resulted in the prime minister having to step down which, in my view, would not have been the right thing for him to do, but that might have been the best option available to him in the circumstances.

Thus, Australia is a friend in times of need, but it goes without saying that it cannot constantly be a de facto police force for Solomon Islands, providing short-term security support each time there is civil unrest that is politically motivated, or spawned by the lack of decisive political leadership — not just the current leadership, but past, present and future.

In the context of the current situation, there is a perception, rightly or wrongly, that Australia continues to prop up the incumbent government with its financial support for the presence of Fijian and Papua New Guinean forces that are helping to maintain peace and law and order in Honiara. It should be noted that after the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) treaty expired in 2017, Australia and Solomon Islands signed a security treaty that provides for assistance to be given upon written request.¹ No doubt Australia now finds itself in a very tight spot, and is in an uncomfortable position of being ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ because should Australia’s support be withdrawn, it is likely there would be further unrest in the coming months over issues that could potentially be connected to the log of claims by the people of Guadalcanal. These were presented to the national government in 2021 and were about more decentralisation of powers. There is also the recent log of claims from the Malaita Provincial Government that includes greater sharing of powers, including by addressing the implementation of the Townsville Peace Agreement of 2000, where certain commitments were made about giving Malaita and Guadalcanal more autonomy; the possible delays to the elections scheduled for 2023; and the subsequent election of the prime minister following the general election. The contents of the log of claims, which includes 15 points, have been reported in the media (Waikori 18/8/2022).² Without Australia’s support, China could potentially be asked to step in to fill the gap under the auspices of the recent security agreement that continues to remain a secret, even though it has the potential to affect the individual rights of Solomon Islanders.

At some stage, the Pacific Islands Forum and Australia should demand greater accountability — and more importantly, responsibility — from Solomon Islands and its leaders, because the problems cannot be ignored and neglected: problems about land, internal migration, and myriad challenges including the high levels of corruption that are allegedly taking place that are causing these incidents of civil unrest. There must be some personal responsibility on the part of leaders for the problems and challenges that the country has faced and continues to go through, that keep requiring external intervention from Australia and Forum Island countries. We may have missed that point

now, and Australia finds itself in an uncomfortable position because it will likely not want to see the support it has been providing for Solomon Islands security to be replaced by China.

The question is: how did it get to this point? What are the influences that have shaped the political economy of Solomon Islands? Before I dwell on these factors, I wish to say that there are many positive things about Solomon Islands, and despite the challenges that continue to confront the country, I have always believed that it does have a bright future. The problems and challenges it confronts provide the opportunity for some innovative and creative thinking on new development pathways, including in its relationship with Australia and Pacific Island Countries.

The potential for more tourism, agriculture and mineral (and, dare I say, forest) resource development, some good anchorage for additional port developments to stimulate trade, a young and growing population, proximity to Australia, and lower labour costs all provide ingredients for the development of a potentially economically powerful, and might I say, influential country, if only its leaders and politicians could get things right. I have always believed in the resilience of Solomon Islanders, and indeed Pacific Islanders, that despite the classical narrative of their under-development, they continue to shape and reconfigure their situation so that they are not necessarily passive observers in development. As my good friend Lincy Pendevevana said in his seminal thesis on the participation of the indigenous people of the Guadalcanal plains with Guadalcanal Oil Palm Plantation Limited (Pendevevana 2021), people are continuously configuring and reconfiguring their livelihoods and adapting to changes in the environment that impact their economic and social wellbeing. People, however, should not be left entirely to their own devices, because it is the job of elected politicians to ensure that the proper foundations are laid for the people through laws and policies. Thus, while people might continue to shape and reshape their livelihoods, it behoves their politicians and leaders to enact appropriate laws and policies to support people’s livelihoods, and also ensure that investments are made in infrastructure, health, education, and law and order. This is essentially what governments exist to do: to provide adequate security, basic social services and sound economic management. These are all important areas where investments must continue to be made, if Solomon Islands and her peoples are to enjoy a prosperous, peaceful and secure future.

In this respect, it is well for Solomon Islanders to ask what sort of future they want for their children. What sort of health service do they want? Is it one where they turn up at a clinic and find it does not have any medication, or one where they know they will get the treatment they need? A strong and vibrant economy needs a healthy population and in order to have a healthy population, the country must promote healthy living and, importantly, ensure that its people have access to the best available medical services.

While not all citizens of Solomon Islands have the privilege of overseas medical treatment that its politicians, ministers and their families get, the very least its people should have access to is adequate levels of medical services – not having to go to the National Referral Hospital and sleep on the floor of the emergency department. No responsible government should ever confine its peoples to such indignity. Even amid political and economic struggles, people must be treated with courtesy and dignity in hospital. It is well to ask what sort of government system people want for their children, and what kind of political system best suits Solomon Islands, with 80 different languages and dialects, and geographically dispersed islands. These are some of the questions that its founding fathers asked in shaping the constitution and that document perhaps reveals their vision for the country, but like so many newly independent countries, Solomon Islands has faced some challenges.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with young states struggling, especially with different cultures and languages, which invariably present difficulties for governance. As a Solomon Islander and an optimist, I always hope for the best and sincerely believe that our better days are ahead of us!

Respect for human rights, the rule of law and the idea that all lands in Solomon Islands and its natural resources belong to its people were envisaged by the framers of the Solomon Islands constitution as underlying guiding principles. The founding fathers of the country probably did not envisage how Solomon Islands' political trajectory would morph, 44 years after independence.

Upon reflection, it is probably fair to argue that people are wiser in hindsight, but there is certainly unfinished business in the construction of the constitution that needs to be addressed in earnest – and that is the issue of decentralisation and the empowerment of states or provinces. I would argue that this is unfinished work and addressing it could lead to the laying of a stronger foundation that would contribute to a more secure and peaceful Solomon Islands. This is a longstanding issue that predates the independence period when the western Solomon Islands agitated for decentralisation and a federal system of government. In fact, Western Province threatened to break away from the rest of Solomon Islands if its demands were not met. The compromise was the establishment of provincial governments, which is a form of decentralisation, but still leaves much of the control over resources and major development to the national government. I sincerely believe that decentralisation can be achieved while maintaining the unity of the state in a manner that is cost effective and more realistic. A lot of financial resources have been expended on the development of a new draft federal constitution and while there has been strong support for its adoption and implementation, I doubt that, given its length (300 pages), it would achieve the efficacy and effectiveness desired. What is more important, I would argue, is to ask those who will

have to live through a future in which the complexities of the economy and society will be exacerbated by climate change: what kind of constitution and government system would they want?

When Solomon Islands got its independence, the British government bequeathed to the people a robust administrative government system. It may not have been perfect and there are people who might feel that the colonial government should have done better, and having grown up around parents who were very much part of the colonial service, I know that they could have done better. But at least they left the country with a functioning, merit-based public service, with strong extension networks for agriculture, an independent Public Service Commission free of political interference and patronage, and an administrative structure that brought social services closer to the people. It was not perfect, but it worked, and I would suggest that people had a lot of respect and regard for the government because they felt its presence.

The Turning Point

Ten years after independence when I joined the Solomon Islands public service as a legal officer in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the administrative cadre and the general provision of social services were still robust and government accountability systems were religiously adhered to. There were few incidents of public accountability issues regarding public finances. A year earlier, a prime minister had stepped down over allegations of abuse of position to influence where cyclone relief funds were allocated. Abuse of office and corruption were relatively unheard of. International communication was by post and telex; there were no computers and no internet. I remember how excited I was when the first fax machine was purchased by the ministry. I recall telling a friend about this new machine that was incredibly smart, where you simply push a document through it, and it comes out at the same time to the person you send it to. Those were the days, but technological developments have changed the landscape of countries, international engagements and also the mode of work.

All the communications received by the ministry went through a circulation file in which the minister, permanent secretary and senior staff would go through all the correspondence received and allocate it to respective staff to action. It was often a subject of curiosity for us to read the incoming correspondence that the registry clerk would subsequently put in a file and send to the relevant officer for actioning. At the end of the week, the registry clerk would place all the letters and minutes that had been actioned that week and circulate it in a running file that was shared with all staff. As a result, staff were made aware of the issues that were attended to by the ministry. Each staff member had their own running file in which the registry clerk filed their correspondence. The administrative systems were basic, largely manual and essentially paper based, but the system worked efficiently and effectively. The public was served without expectation

of kickbacks, and staff were generally kept informed about public policy issues. Appointments through the rank and file in the public service from the cleaners to the permanent secretaries were merit based and managed independently by the Public Service Commission, which was difficult to politically influence. The permanent secretaries were career civil servants with a wealth of knowledge in the government machinery, general orders of the public service, and the laws and public financial management systems, and had the experience to transform public policy directives into drafting instructions for regulations and bills that were eventually enacted by parliament.

A combination of policy changes in the early 1990s as well as the introduction of contracts for permanent secretaries have led to changes that arguably affect the quality of governance and the political independence of the public service. While in theory the Public Service Commission still has independent oversight in the appointment of permanent secretaries, there is a lot of political influence in the decision-making process with caucus also getting involved in the election of candidates. The idea of putting permanent secretaries on contract was largely motivated by perceptions that career civil servants were a constraint to the implementation of policy, and therefore having people specifically appointed with the support of the political parties and minister would ensure that government policies were fast tracked and implemented according to the directions of the ministers. This has led to political patronage and clientelism where appointment by merit has been replaced by a system where individuals need to have political support to be appointed to these key positions.

The emergence of caucus, a body with strong political influence that is constituted by ministers and government backbenchers with its central role now in policy implementation and formulation, has added a layer of complexity in the political dynamics in Solomon Islands, as it has in other liberal democracies. While cabinet is charged by the constitution as the body responsible for policy formulation and execution, no policy instrument is now made without it going through caucus. Governing through political patronage and clientelism is also seen in a more recent phenomenon in the state institutions through the appointment of political advisers in a number of sectors in the prime minister's office who have effectively usurped the functions of technical officers in the line ministries. The theoretical underpinning of having political advisers to ensure that government policies are coordinated across the different line ministries might be well motivated and noble, but the reality is, it's a means of rewarding political supporters with government jobs, as there is generally no continuity for them after the formation of a new government. This together with the introduction of what are known as rural constituency development funds (RCDFs) has placed a disproportionate level of policy control and influence over the development budget in the hands of an elite group of Solomon Islanders. RCDFs have become the

major channel through which development projects are implemented under the guidance and management of members of parliament. The allocation of projects is often driven by electoral considerations on the part of members of parliament rather than more rationally conceived and implemented development plans. Such an approach leads to uneven development, undermines bureaucratic service delivery and promotes localism over nation-building. The RCDF is an instrument that has become a symbol of power and influence, and it has transformed the role of Solomon Islands politicians from lawmakers to facilitators of services in their constituencies. The demands for material goods and services that are normally expected of Solomon Islands politicians are fuelled by the RCDF, and its central role in the relationship between politicians and the electorate is going to complicate negotiations for greater power sharing between the national government and provincial governments. I would argue that through the mutation of the RCDFs and access to resources by an elite group of Solomon Islanders — a group that encompasses politicians and their political and business associates who have become powerful and wealthy — any attempt to divest power and access to state resources through the decentralisation of state functions will be challenging. These are some of the complexities confronting Solomon Islands that affect the quality of governance and thus public policy for the greater good of its people.

State Capture by Vested Interest Groups and Individuals

State capture by vested interest groups is one of the major influences in the political landscape of Solomon Islands. It is not unusual for government officials and politicians to be courted and treated by certain foreign missions and businesses to advance their interests. It was hoped with the switch that China would not subsidise the politicians' discretionary funds which the Taiwanese funded. The Taiwanese appropriated financial resources to a discretionary fund managed out of the prime minister's office. It was not unusual for some foreign missions to bypass the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and deal directly with the prime minister's office. It was hoped that this would stop with the new engagement with China. It has not. There is a foreign relations secretariat in the prime minister's office that deals largely with the ongoing relations with China.

Allegiance and loyalty can be influenced through scholarships. When the Chinese embassy published its list of scholarship recipients, it included the children of those with close political connections. It is not unusual when certain foreign missions host lunches and dinners for government officials and politicians, that they lavish them with gifts. This is how loyalty and allegiance can be extracted, and arguably can give these foreign missions and businesses undue influence and control over the way policies may be shaped.

The extractive industry is also known to be engaged in state capture. This is manifested in the inextricable

tapestry that connects key individuals in the government to the industry that the country depends on, thus entrenching the control that the industry and key individuals have over the economy and political institutions. Arguably, if one can control the economy, and have influence over state institutions and systems, one can shape the way policies are developed.

Manipulating the Electoral Process

It is argued that manipulating the electoral process can influence electoral outcomes. Understanding how this is played out is critical to appreciating the complexities of Solomon Islands politics, which is fluid and largely unstructured. One of the features of Solomon Islands politics today is that candidates must either have a lot of money or access to a lot of money to win in the national elections. Although there are exceptions, they are not the norm. This phenomenon is not unusual, as big businesses and rich individuals contribute to political parties in developed countries. The difference in those countries is there are strict accountability measures in their governing systems, although perhaps these are not always effective, or in some instances are weakening. While political campaigns are theoretically regulated in Solomon Islands, in reality the constraints to spending are not monitored. There is a limit to the expenses that candidates can claim for reimbursement after the elections, but there are other costs, often described as 'traditional gifts', that are not accounted for, but which have a large influence in the outcomes of the elections. Those with access to funds and other resources will exploit them to the fullest. This is where influence for control of the political establishment and economy can be initially exerted and shaped.

Solomon Islands politicians are rarely voted into parliament on account of policies. While individuals might campaign on the policy platforms of their political parties, they are not elected on account of the policies of their political parties. Solomon Islands elections are never contested on a level playing field. Incumbent members of parliament generally have a significant advantage over other candidates. In recent years, two factors have seeped into the political landscape which compound this advantage. The first is the flexibility in what is known as cross-border registration for the electoral roll. Amendments effected to the electoral laws allow people to cross over to another constituency to vote. Thus, candidates can register voters in a constituency where they have little association, except to bolster the votes of a particular candidate. Not all candidates, however, can afford to do this; only those who have access to a lot of money, as the registration process entails transport costs because people must be physically registered in the electoral roll in the constituency itself. Generally, incumbent members already have their core voters resident in the constituency. The additional voters brought in from other parts of the country are there to bolster support. This process gives those with access to financial resources an advantage over those candidates who do not. The second factor is the

discretionary funds that incumbent politicians have access to while they are in parliament. There is no cut-off date prior to the elections when those discretionary funds cannot be disbursed. The resulting effect is that incumbents can spend these funds just before the election period, thus giving them an advantage.

A concern leading up to the next parliamentary elections due in 2023 is the source of those discretionary funds. While a substantial proportion of the funds are appropriated from domestic sources, the government of Taiwan, and now China, contribute to the funds. It would not be surprising given the geostrategic contest, and the suggestions of a possible, albeit unlikely switch back to Taiwan, that the discretionary fund could be increased from external sources to influence the election outcomes through those funds. Allegiances and obligations are thus established before the ballots are cast. In the context of the current situation in Solomon Islands with suggestions there might be a switch back to Taiwan, which seems implausible, a massive injection of funds from businesses with links to China could influence the outcome of the elections.

Funding the Camps in the Election of the Prime Minister

It is rare for a political party to win outright during elections. Thus, unlike countries with more established political party systems, the prime minister is not normally invited from the party with the most seats. Instead, the choice of prime minister is determined during a period in which politicians move into what are known as camps at the hotels in Honiara. This period of 'horse trading' leading to the election of the prime minister can be expensive while members of parliament coagulate in their respective camps. Some may move from different camps. Lists are circulated with names of the members of the different camps. These can change, as members of parliament place demands in return for their allegiance. It might be a ministerial portfolio, the chairmanship of a parliamentary committee or a political appointment for a crony member of the party. These machinations are often the genesis of how a government might pan out. Independent political observers can infer from the composition of a camp what the leaning of a particular grouping of politicians will be: whether they will be pro-logging, pro the status quo or reformist-minded. The camps are also occupied by assorted supporters, political strategists and advisers of the various political parties who not only add to the expense, but who are also involved in framing the parameters around which a coalition can work.

These camps are expensive, and it therefore raises the question: who is meeting the costs of these camps? This is where the extractive industry becomes involved, as it is the only group that can likely afford to support the camp costs, but it also has a vested interest in who is going to be in government. A number of key local Chinese business houses are known to be influential and have close links to the political establishment,

and may or may not contribute at this stage. What is important to note, however, is that obligations and commitments are created at this stage, and if the extractive industry and some of these local Chinese businesses are indirectly involved in this process, then developing policies inimical to the interests of their protectors is a challenge for politicians.

It is important to understand how these issues and connections are at play and the drivers behind them. Solomon Islands politicians are often heavily indebted because of the huge expectation for material goods that their constituents have from them. It is not unusual for members of parliament to seek favours from local business houses, often Chinese-owned and having close links to businesses in China, thus creating dependencies that are repaid through political favours. It is argued, therefore, that because of the dominance of the Chinese in the commercial sector in Solomon Islands, these political favours would naturally have the propensity to favour Chinese businesses and, indirectly, China. This is a situation the Western alliance will find challenging to deal with, so long as power is concentrated in Honiara.

The Current Economic Outlook and Prospects for the Future: Rethinking a Pathway for Development

There are of course challenges, and these are made complex by the political dynamics that have shaped current institutions and the backdrop against which they operate. But where there are challenges, there are also opportunities for the development of new pathways for Australia to engage with the Solomon Islands people.

It is worth noting the current outlook on the Solomon Islands economy, which should also inform thinking on the development of different pathways:

- Domestic activity remained weak in the first half of 2022, with key sectors (logs, palm oil, cocoa, copra) recording declines except for the construction and communication sectors. The impacts of the November 2021 riot and COVID-19 pandemic linger on.
- The national current account position remained in deficit (10% of GDP) due to very weak exports, although the level of foreign reserves remained comfortably high at around 14 months of import cover. A high level of foreign reserves stems mainly from donor support.
- Given the late passage of the 2022 budget in April, there has not been any large capital expenditure executed by the government, apart from donors' support. Revenue was down 14% and expenditure was down by 23%. The budget deficit is estimated to be around 9% of GDP by the end of 2022, with an estimated low revenue while high spending pressures are expected.
- The standard of living has deteriorated as indicated by a low level of consumption, while prices have shot up quite significantly, owing to high import prices on food and fuel.

- Economic growth projected for 2022 is minus 4.3% but is expected to grow by 2% in 2023. An easing of border restrictions and the construction of the Pacific Games facilities have cushioned what could have been a worsening growth projection for this year.

Challenges include:

- The possible widespread re-emergence of COVID-19.
- Persistence of the Ukraine War, which could lead to further increases in fuel and food prices.
- A deterioration in livelihoods, which could lead to undesirable social outcomes.

The economy could deteriorate further if the right reforms are not implemented now.

Opportunities include:

- The pandemic has provided an opportunity to do things differently and to think differently. For example, COVID-19 has made us think digital. Use of digital platforms as a conduit for investment in sectors like the extractive industries and tourism is something the government can start investing in and promote.
- Legislative and tax reforms are crucial for the post-pandemic and post-Pacific games period.
- Legislators and policymakers can be encouraged to 'think innovatively' and move away from old ways of doing things. To take back control of the forestry industry from Asian operators, there is the opportunity to invest in a massive reforestation program across Solomon Islands in areas logged by commercial logging companies. This would entail a mix of planted forest estates and enrichment planting on the main islands. The program could be integrated with agricultural cash crops and potentially be the biggest mobiliser of rural labour and, if labour is paid for, be the biggest employment sector in the country. This large national reforestation program could comprise a new forestry governance framework working under either a new statutory body or one of the existing plantation forest companies (Eagon and KFPL); site identification and plantings of estates, woodlots, enrichment plantings and conservation areas; training and research; and reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) — all with joint funding from the Green Climate Fund, the US Millennium Fund, and bilateral and multilateral grants. The program could potentially mobilise a big portion of rural labour, create more employment and yield measurable returns. These kinds of development pathways will require fresh and innovative thinking.

Solomon Islands and the Pacific islands should continue to engage in the process of closer economic and social integration with Australia. While China has the capacity to invest in major infrastructure projects and other businesses, Australia can engage with Solomon Islands and other Pacific islands by building on the gains of the seasonal workers scheme, and the

proposed special entrants' scheme, by issuing visas on arrivals, extending the working holiday visa program and even allowing graduates from the Pacific to work for two years in Australia to build their technical capacity, which they can take back home. This will also open the way for strategic public-private partnerships to be developed among the Solomon Islands diaspora, the seasonal workers and those who come to Australia, to increase Australian investment in small business ventures in agriculture and tourism. While it might be challenging to compete against the stakeholders who have captured control of the Solomon Islands economy, it is possible to develop a new pathway that will allow Solomon Islanders to take back control of their economy.

The new development pathway could involve engaging Australia and New Zealand to further open their labour markets to young Solomon Islanders to gain experience and develop skills, with potential pathways to permanent residence. There are both social and economic gains to be had in growing a diaspora in Solomon Islands' developed neighbours. It is a fact that the Solomon Islands economy cannot absorb the large number of young people entering the workforce annually and Australia and New Zealand have labour shortages that Solomon Islanders could help address. The longer-term growth of a diaspora of Solomon Islanders in Australia and New Zealand would have mutual benefits economically and in other ways. One only need look to how Polynesian countries with few natural resources have benefited from their diasporas.

There is also the potential for Australia and New Zealand to support research institutes and universities to collaborate with Solomon Islands institutions to create more space and opportunities for serious dialogue about Solomon Islands' development and other challenges and how best to meet them. These could provide opportunities for Solomon Islanders to present potential solutions – including, for example, political reform – and lead processes of positive change and problem-solving rather than depending on external assistance all the time. This could possibly lead to the establishment of a Honiara seminar series, an annual forum where Solomon Islanders and other researchers can present evidence-based solutions to the myriad social and economic challenges facing Solomon Islands. It would foster a new level of people-to-people contact between Australia and Solomon Islands.

Conclusion

The challenges found in the political landscape of Solomon Islands are exacerbated by the control that an increasingly small group of elites have over the economy, fuelled by the complex web of relationships between businesses, the extractive industry and the elites. This is not likely to change after the elections as this is now part of the fabric of the political system of the country. There are of course solutions to these challenges, and the strong push for decentralisation, even possibly secession, by some provinces will lead to negotiations to address what is unfinished business in the development of the 1978 constitution.

There are, however, opportunities to be had in thinking about a new development pathway that can be supported by Australia and Solomon Islands' other development partners.

Endnotes

1. The treaty recalls the friendly relations between the two countries, the contribution of RAMSI to Solomon Islands security, and notes 'the Parties' desire to establish a future basis upon which Australia may provide assistance to Solomon Islands in case of a major security challenge, humanitarian disaster or similar circumstances'. Article 20 provides for the involvement of a 'third state' to contribute, at the invitation of Australia and with the consent of Solomon Islands.
2. Point 1 calls for an act of parliament to deal with implementation of Part 4 Section 1(a) of the Townsville Peace Agreement, which is the part that deals with autonomy for Malaita. Point 10 expresses opposition to the suspension of Section 73(3) of the constitution, which allows for the extension of parliament. Point 12 calls for the revocation of the security deal signed with the People's Republic of China in April 2022.

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Epilogue

Stewart Firth

Above is the text of a public lecture given by Dr Transform Aqorau, who applies knowledge of his own country to identify barriers to success and reforms to transform its prospects. The barriers he sees are the emergence of rabid abuse of office (in contrast to the early years after independence); the politicisation of appointments to the public service and access to scholarships; direct payments by government of rural constituency development funds to members of parliament instead of proper funding of public services through government departments; state capture by the extractive industries and also by foreign embassies; money politics in elections; and the way in which a prime minister and his ministers are chosen by the exchange of cash after an election in a process of open buying and selling political support, a system that breaks the direct connection between votes and the election result found in Western democracies (Kabutaulaka 2008).

And what are some of the potential reforms? One is massive reforestation funded by the Green Climate Fund, the US Millennium Fund and others, following the despoliation of the country by timber companies; a second lies in the promise of labour migration but also the migration of Solomon Islanders to Australia under a permanent settlement visa, as envisaged by the new Australian government through the 2022 Pacific Engagement Visa; a third is the long-discussed decentralisation and devolution of power to states or provinces; and a fourth is making Solomon Islands the subject of serious intellectual inquiry, something already happening that needs to be expanded and deepened.

Aqorau is addressing the fundamental questions that have occupied the minds of Solomon Islanders, international observers and, especially during the period of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), 2003–2017, foreigners from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific operating an intervention force alongside the elected government of the country in order to restore stability and lawfulness after the tensions of 1998–2003.

How could a small island country, with a population at independence of fewer than 220,000, fall so quickly under the sway of leaders in the pay of the timber companies? How could the essentials of the Westminster system of government and a neutral bureaucracy be so rapidly distorted to serve the interests of the few and to leave the vast majority of Solomon Islanders neglected? Why, despite the intervention of RAMSI and the general popularity it enjoyed, did its achievements only partly endure in favour of a return to disorder in 2021? Why has disorder been largely confined to just two islands, Malaita and Guadalcanal?

In his lecture Aqorau pleaded for more searching analysis of his country and its problems. This epilogue seeks, in a modest way, to take up that challenge, drawing on insights that have already been offered by scholars on a number of these issues.

Placed in the wider context of development, the situation for Solomon Islands at the end of the 1990s was dire. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in December 1999:

The Human Poverty Index for the Solomon Islands is 49.1 which places the country among the poorest in the Pacific, and at par with some of the poorer African countries ... Most (nearly 80 per cent) of the population live a subsistence lifestyle in remote rural areas, without access to basic social services such as clean water, health services and education. Over twenty percent of children are malnourished, and seventy percent of adults are illiterate. (ADB 1999: 2)

The ADB and other donors were convinced that their policy formula would dig Solomon Islands out of the fiscal and development hole into which it had fallen by 1998: privatisation, retrenchment in the public service, and generally 'placing the government's financial affairs in order' would fix the trouble (*ibid.*).

In fact what happened was a worsening of political tensions in 1999, followed by a coup in 2000, which had the effect of overthrowing the democratically elected government of Bart Ulufa'alu. A few more years of disorder followed, and then RAMSI came in 2003 with all its resources, a regional police-led intervention with military support, and Solomons returned to stability except for a riot in Honiara following the 2006 election. RAMSI was a great success, and there is little doubt that, if they could have chosen, the majority of Solomon Islanders would have liked it to stay. Uninfluenced by the competitiveness of local politics, and focused on the whole country, RAMSI was capable of bringing the order and economic achievements that it deserved. The whole exercise was a venture in state-building in a territory that had few of the prerequisite characteristics of either state or nation (Dinnen 2008). Given its colonial history, a half-hearted affair in a distant and small island protectorate to which the British accorded little importance, Solomon Islands could hardly have had a different post-independence trajectory (Bennett 2002). Things were different in Fiji, a British Crown Colony with a clear colonial focus on economic development.

The sequence of events before RAMSI and since suggest the primacy of politics in the affairs of Solomon Islands, at the price of a weak economy and limited development, was subsequently exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–22.

As has been pointed out (May 2022; Nelson 2006), outcomes of this kind were long ago predicted by the historian Hugh Tinker, who foresaw the emergence, in some places, of 'broken-backed states' in the wake of independence in the colonial world. May surveyed the

literature and the argument about state weakness in an article entitled 'Weak states, collapsed states, broken-backed states and kleptocracies: General concepts and Pacific realities' (May 2022).

The Pacific realities in the case of Solomon Islands were the ones we all know: the startling lack of fit between nation and state, leaving the 'nation' as a kind of mythical concept; the emergence of conflict between Guadalcanal and Malaita; the formation of militias on both sides; a coup by a group of Malaitans in 2000 that overthrew the elected government; the persistence of disorder 2000–2003; and finally the intervention of a regional assistance mission led by Australia and designed to restore the key characteristics of the viable state in the form of stable public finances, the arrest of criminals, the imposition of law and order, the retraining of the police force, and much else (Allen 2013; Dinnen 2002; Fraenkel 2005; Moore 2004). More would need to be done if RAMSI were to be a long-term success. Some countries — typically the artificial products of colonial rule — were simply unsuited to a rapid transition to statehood. As Dinnen put it, 'in the process of annexing large swathes of territory around the world, colonial powers created arbitrary borders and imposed external systems of governance with little, if any, consideration as to their fit with existing polities and other forms of indigenous social organisation' (Dinnen 2008: 6).

Hank Nelson's 2006 paper 'Governments, States and Labels' also drew on the idea of 'broken-backed states' but qualified its application to Papua New Guinea by pointing to the different forms taken by the state: optional, incomplete, alternate, with diminished traditional base, without clerks, with a fallible ballot and so on. Of these, perhaps the most powerful insight was the 'state without clerks', where the humdrum but vital workings of the bureaucracy were highly inefficient or absent, and government services declined or disappeared over time.

Once it is applied to the Pacific Islands and in particular to western Melanesia, comparative politics betrays a lack of explanatory power. A recent book that deals with state fragility attempts to shoehorn Papua New Guinea into a comparison with countries such as Lebanon, Burundi and Sierra Leone. The authors seem confounded by a country that so clearly demonstrates 'the difficulty of forging a national identity and creating effective state institutions where state weakness and societal fragmentation are dominant' (Bizhan and Gorea 2023: 221). They can only conclude that Papua New Guinea, as would be the same for Solomon Islands, must be placed in the special category of 'stable-fragile' states, young countries 'in transition' that await further maturation in the business of becoming a state (ibid.: 240).

Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands are atypical modern states, highly decentralised in terms of power and the inheritors of numerous highly decentralised societies — societies where life continues in ways that are modernised but also characterised

by the customs, observances and symbolic activities of tradition. In Solomon Islands, as in many parts of the Pacific, politics operates at a number of levels: the modern level is much assisted and studied by aid agencies and from it much is hoped. This is the sphere where elections occur, governments are formed and bureaucracies operate, and where the political activities of people are readily recognisable. The customary level is where people (mainly men) compete for positions of local status and influence, and where justice of a local kind is dispensed in a local way. In the more hierarchical societies of Fiji and Polynesia, the customary level of politics is often absorbed by competition for traditional titles and is easier to discern.

In the end we are driven to the historical and the anthropological to give us the most satisfying explanation of 'the state of the state' in Solomon Islands. We cannot depend on self-contradictory formulations such as 'stable-fragile' but must confront the diversity and individuality of particular societies. We must also confront the way they interact with 'government', which many people identify with their local member of parliament (MP), the one person they know with a direct conduit to the resources of the national government.

'Government' in Solomon Islands comes down to a mosaic of distinct interfaces between government and localities. In this context the much-maligned rural constituency development funds make more sense as the source of government resources, manifestly corrupt in Western terms as they are. If the political community consists mainly of the local MP and his constituents, the personalised soliciting of government resources by voters and the personalised distribution of them by the MP seems, to some observers at least, a way for the 'modern state' to operate.

Under these circumstances, Aqorau is not wrong to write about Solomon Islands in both a negative and a positive tone, and to propose major reforms that might endow his country with a better future. Meantime let the analysts and the scholars build upon the solid and perceptive foundation of understanding 'the state of the state in Solomon Islands' that has already been created.

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