

The reality of governance in Solomon Islands today

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Conventional history has it that Solomon Islanders gained their independence in 1978. In reality what was gained was a central governing authority, which first came in the guise of the British colonial powers. But for thousands of years prior to first contact with Europeans, Solomon Islanders were living in small, politically organised communities independent of each other, scattered throughout the chain's six main islands and its smaller islands. Each of these communities lived according to precisely defined but unwritten principles, norms and traditions. So, it could be said that apart from a central government, official independence in 1978 also brought with it a written constitution and the complications of interpreting such a document.

Governance of Solomon Islands and the national constitution

The system of government adopted in Solomon Islands at independence is modelled on the Westminster system. The Queen is head of state, and is represented by the Governor-General. Our national constitution provides for the separation of powers between the legislature, executive and the judiciary.

But 17 years after this document was adopted, its shortcomings are becoming increasingly apparent. The most recent and glaring example of this is the constitutional crisis which occurred last year when the Governor-General attempted to sack the elected Prime Minister.

National parliament

Solomon Islands is divided into 47 constituencies. General elections are held every four years to elect a single member from each electorate to the national parliament. There is no upper house. The Prime Minister, who is elected by 47 members of parliament, needs to have 24 members to form a government. Those who do not support the Prime Minister form the official opposition in parliament. There is an unusual provision in our constitution for independent members to form an officially recognised group of independents.

Political parties or groupings

In the current parliament the 47 members are divided into seven political parties and a group of independents. These political

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parties are not in any way as developed, organised or structured as their counterparts in the west, including Australia and New Zealand.

While candidates in Solomon Islands will more often than not campaign under the auspices of a political party, voting is usually on the basis of support for the individual. Therefore most successful members of parliament do not feel any great obligation or allegiance to a party that may have given them in reality very little practical support, and may in fact have been adopted as their party of choice just prior to the election campaign. This is a situation that makes party discipline of members virtually impossible. As a result, in Solomon Islands we are destined to have coalition governments.

Accountability

As the political system currently operates in Solomon Islands, national governments are not truly accountable to the people in the way in which they were intended to be under our independence constitution.

There are several factors behind this situation. First, voters are really only able to express a choice in terms of individual candidates. Because of the lack of developed political parties they are not in a position to influence, except indirectly, the final shape of the government.

Voters also have no control over members who may decide mid-term to forge a new alliance with other members, changing the government without any reference to the electorate.

Even if a candidate has been elected on the basis of his or her party affiliation there is no constitutional barrier to a member who wishes to switch allegiance within parliament at any time.

The second major factor contributing to the lack of accountability in Solomon Islands is the level of political education of the population. Eighty per cent of the population still live in remote rural areas. Formal education is still a privilege rather than a right and many members of society remain pre-literate.

As a result, people's understanding of a system of government introduced less than two decades ago and, indeed, of the pressing issues of development and economic policy at a national level, remain sketchy at best. This is further hindered by the undeveloped state of Solomon Islands' media. Two non-daily newspapers and a national radio service are doing a less than adequate job in keeping Solomon Islanders informed, and therefore, of making leaders accountable.

Constraints on implementing economic policies

The first problem encountered by any government which tries to put together a coherent set of economic policies is the very short time that Solomon Islands, as a nation, has been attempting to manage a national economy; our post-colonial track record has not even reached the end of its second decade. In terms of data, in terms of experience, in terms of a frame of reference for both electors and the elected, this is a very short time indeed.

Of course, this is also the case for the fundamental physical requirements for economic growth. The United Kingdom left us very little in terms of national infrastructure at independence and 17 years has proved too short a time to overcome this major handicap to economic development.

More than 80 per cent of land in Solomon Islands is customary land which is usually held collectively under tribal ownership.

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This also acts as a disincentive to economic development because potential investors do not feel secure about investing substantial funds in economic activities which may take place on customary land. At the same time, customary landowners are not able to use their land to secure any financing to develop their land.

Probably the greatest frustration and most limiting factor for any government wishing to implement a consistent set of economic policies is the very short time the majority of our coalition governments remain in office.

The greatest enemy of ordinary people in the developing world is corruption. Like many other developing countries, Solomon Islands, with limited resources which are not even fully developed, has to support a fairly large population—which now is not that far from approaching half a million.

For a foreign company, corruption can often be the quickest and cheapest route to large profits. It is quite often easier to ‘take care’ of a minister than it would be to comply with a country’s laws.

But for a country such as Solomon Islands, which is already struggling to meet the basic needs of our people, corruption comes at a huge cost which we can ill-afford. The costs of corruption are very real and can be counted in terms of loss of revenue, loss of opportunity and of potential and ultimately loss of sovereignty.

When there is corruption in the public service, and someone is promoted not on merit but for other reasons, it means the country is not being served by the best possible person. When a licence is issued to a logging company or a fishing concern, not on merit but for other reasons, the country loses the revenue to which it is legally entitled. When ministers and officials who are charged with the responsibility of protecting the nation’s economic interests make decisions which are in their personal

interest and not that of the country’s, we lose control over our own resources. When a member of parliament crosses the floor, not on a point of principle but because they have been bought, our sovereignty is compromised, our nation is diminished and our system of government made a mockery of.

Corruption is not just something we need to guard against in Solomon Islands. It has already arrived and is on the rise.

Forestry: a case study

To illustrate what I have just outlined, I wish to make reference to how Solomon Islands has lost control of one of our most valuable resources: forestry. As the immediate past Minister of Forests, Environment and Conservation, I have experienced first hand the difficulties of trying to formulate and implement a sound policy on the harvesting of our timber resource. Our main objective as a government was to harvest our primary forests in a way which was sustainable but would also provide the resource owners and the nation with an ongoing source of revenue.

The first problem was the fact that most of the timber is situated on customary land and therefore a system had to be established to cater for and protect the interests of the landowners, the country and the investing party, most often a foreign company.

The next obstacle to overcome was in getting an accurate picture of the overall size and quality of the resource.

On the basis of the size of the resource, a sustainable level of harvesting then had to be established. In addition to that, a code of practice needed to be set up to ensure that trees are harvested in a sustainable manner. Once all these things were in place, there needed to be a system and adequate resources allocated to enforce the code of practice and to monitor the export of round logs. The final consideration was a commercial

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as well as environmental question of whether to continue with the export of round logs or to switch to downstream processing.

During my time as Minister, foreign logging companies persistently showed a blatant disregard for the nation's laws, regulations and policy of the government of the day. Confident in the knowledge that our resources were limited, and our ability to monitor their activities almost nonexistent, they preyed on ill-informed communities and plundered in months a resource which could have provided these people with an ongoing income for decades.

During my time as Minister the estimated sustainable harvest for our primary forests was 325,000 cubic metres annually. The reality was in stark contrast to this. By the end of 1994 more than 600,000 cubic metres had been extracted and exported.

When my colleague, the Finance Minister, attempted to recoup some of the revenue lost through transfer pricing, under declaration of export logs and other illegal but largely undetected practices, by increasing the export duty on round logs, the logging companies chose to defy the elected government of the day and withheld shipments, demanding the tax be removed.

As Minister responsible, I directed that the code of conduct be drafted and there was already new legislation in the form of drafting instructions awaiting passage through parliament. That was as far as I could get before there was a change of government in October last year—this was, I believe, the making of foreign logging companies.

Since the change of government, logging companies in Solomon Islands have been given a free hand to harvest as much of our primary forest as they can. Extraction is limited only by a company's capacity. The single most important government body charged with monitoring the industry, the Timber Control Unit, now faces the prospect of being axed itself.

The consequences for the country's primary forests is devastating. In 1992 Solomon Islands was estimated to have 13 million cubic metres of harvestable timber stock. As a direct result of the pace and unfettered rate of extraction it is now likely that this stock will be exhausted within five years. I am sad to say that precisely the same scenario is now being played out in Solomon Islands' other major renewable resource, tuna.

Conclusion

Solomon Islands does not have to be a poor country. As a developing nation it has the potential to develop and maintain a vibrant economy based on our natural resources, capable of meeting the basic needs of our population. The two things which will thwart, and are already thwarting, this potential are the failure to manage government finances properly and the mismanagement of our natural resources.

Our independence constitution was clearly designed to provide checks and balances throughout our system of government. These are proving inadequate. In such a situation there is a need for pressure groups outside of parliament to assist in the national endeavour to keep government accountable to the people. I believe that it is now imperative that the churches, the trade union movement and other non-government organisations in Solomon Islands take up this challenge.

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