

Jigsaw that won't fit

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After three years of calm in the Solomon Islands it is disturbing to see television footage of rioting in Honiara, with homes and shops ablaze and police cars torched. For Australians it is naturally upsetting to see the injuries suffered by our nationals deployed as part of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

We need to draw breath and work out the implications of the unrest for RAMSI – and for Australia, as we are the mission's main sponsor. The Pacific Islands Forum provided valuable assistance and cover, but the plan was devised in Canberra and implemented mainly by Australians. Many of RAMSI's personnel and almost all its principals have been Australians, and we are bearing the lion's share of RAMSI's cost, amounting to more than \$200 million per year, not to mention the two Australian lives lost over the course of the intervention.

There are several conclusions to draw from this week's events. The riots certainly demonstrate the continuing fragility of the Solomon Islands political system. The national elections on 5 April were largely free of corruption and intimidation but in the post-election period the Honiara elite returned to business as usual. Various big men manoeuvred for advantage amidst claims of money changing hands, and an insider was elected prime minister despite the recording of a large anti-government swing in the poll.

Clearly the security situation is not as robust as officials had believed. Law and order has previously been RAMSI's strong suit. In contrast to international missions in Cambodia, Haiti and Kosovo, RAMSI was able to establish a secure environment in the first weeks of the operation in July 2003 and this remained the mission's greatest achievement.

No observers predicted this week's riots; however it was clear that the election and its aftermath would represent an important test for the mission, and in retrospect RAMSI's security presence should have been reinforced during the period. Canberra and other regional capitals have acted quickly to rectify that with the insertion of fresh police and soldiers. Now RAMSI needs to re-establish security so that it can get on with economic and institutional reform, corruption investigations and capacity building – areas where the mission was already open to criticism. It also needs to accelerate the assistance it has begun lending to Solomon Islanders seeking to address the root causes of the tensions, including inter-communal problems and land ownership. All this will require a skilful hand in dealing with the new government.

Finally, the unrest reminds us that state-building is very hard. It is hard for foreigners to build strong indigenous institutions and we should not fool ourselves that it can be done quickly or without cost.

There are also some conclusions we should not draw from the last few days. We are not back to square one. Three years ago the Solomons was a failing state: leaders were accosted by armed gangs; government services had largely ceased; the capital had been paralysed for months; firearms were freely available and had caused an estimated 150-200 deaths; and the national GDP had shrunk by a quarter despite a rapidly increasing population. This week's developments were ugly and very damaging but to date, thankfully, they have not been lethal.

RAMSI was not the target of the unrest. The evidence indicates that the riots were directed toward certain Solomon Islands politicians and RAMSI officers put themselves in the way of the violence in the course of trying to maintain order. RAMSI personnel are not perceived as foreign occupiers. The mission remains broadly popular amongst Solomon Islanders and is certainly

trusted more than most local politicians. Sovereignty concerns have been voiced mainly by politicians whose interests are threatened by the prospect of clean government and economic reform.

Some observers believe we should step in and clean out the poisoned political system. But intervening in the Solomons' democratic processes and picking winners would pose serious risks – to the development of self-reliance on the part of Solomon Islanders and to Australia's chances of ever extracting itself from the country. In time it would probably lead to the kind of backlash against foreigners that we have so far been spared. Ultimately the revival of the Solomons will depend on the actions of Solomon Islanders and their elected representatives.

Equally, however, this would be the worst possible time for us to draw back from the Solomons. To Labor's credit it has provided rock-solid support to the Government on this point. Our public servants are doing important work in the Solomons. We must seek to prevent neighbouring states from failing, because state failure brings not only lawlessness, corruption, breakdown of government services, economic meltdown, and human suffering, but also transnational crime, unregulated movement of people, and regional instability.

Staying the course is in Australia's interests for another reason: we have chained our credibility in the Pacific to success in this endeavour. Canberra elected not to take this issue to the UN Security Council in 2003, partly because of concerns China would veto the resolution in light of Honiara's ties to Taipei, but also because it preferred to lead a regionally mandated operation. Having stepped up into this role of lead nation, the accountabilities are clear and we cannot afford to fail.

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