

# Engineering political stability

By JENNY HAYWARD-JONES\*

**P**OLITICAL instability has long plagued Solomon Islands and hindered effective government and good governance.

The lack of a strong party system, the high turnover of members of parliament at each election, voter expectations of their member of parliament to deliver goods and services, the method of electing the Prime Minister, the abuse of the no-confidence motion and corruption influenced by business interests have made it difficult for Prime Ministers to maintain a strong coalition and govern the country.

Planning and effective implementation of government policies have often played second place to political machinations.

Prime Ministers with slim or unreliable majorities have faced the spectre of no-confidence motions each time Parliament sits.

Some 25 motions of no-confidence in Solomon Islands Prime Ministers have been moved since independence.

This forces them to devote much time to negotiations with members of parliament to secure the coalition and to satisfy the demands of members; time which should be spent on governing for the people of Solomon Islands.

Members of parliament who have an important full-time job in representing their electorates, serving as Ministers or checking the work of the government have been frequently distracted by plans to remove Prime Ministers.

The Solomon Islands public service has often been left to manage itself, without effective direction from a Prime Minister and Ministers caught up in the constant cycle of political wheeling and dealing and without long-term development strategies.

The majority of the population living in the rural areas has been forgotten while members of parliament pursue their political interests in Honiara.

Chronic political instability and uncertainty has probably also dissuaded the reputable private sector, both domestic and foreign, from investing in the future of the country, as the political risk involved in large investments was assessed to be too high.

Australia Solomon Gold mining, for example, has to secure Political Risk Insurance cover in Australia for their mining operations in Gold Ridge.

## REFORMS

Prime Minister Siakua, like his predecessor, Manasseh Sogavare, pledged to introduce reforms that would bring about greater stability in a government's tenure.

The Solomon Islands cabinet appointed a Working Committee on Political Party Integrity early in 2008 to investigate the most appropriate reforms for Solomon Islands.

The National Parliament is due to consider the issue in its final session this year, in the form of a White Paper, before legislative options are finalised.

At the invitation of the Prime Minister, the Sydney-based Lowy Institute for International Policy co-hosted a conference with the Working Committee in Honiara in late September this year on political stability and governance.

The conference, attended by more than 60 participants including members of parliament, civil society representatives, academics and political advisers, explored the potential for reforms to engineer more stability in the parliament and in the government.

Solomon Islands speakers included Sir Peter Kenilorea, Speaker of Parliament and Frank Kabui, who is serving on the Working Committee.

Speakers from Papua New Guinea, former Kiribati President and former Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, Ieremia Tabai and former Australian politicians and academic experts provided advice on political models and reforms elsewhere that could be adapted for use in Solomon Islands.

## INSTABILITY

Participants at the September conference assessed the causes of instability and considered a variety of other models and potential reforms that would make real improvements to the current political system.

They made a number of practical suggestions for reform, some of which would require amendments to the Constitution.

The reforms, if implemented, should instil more discipline and encourage better governance in Solomon Islands politics.

This will help the government and other members of parliament deliver on the expectations of Solomon Islanders in a fairer and more transparent manner.

Greater certainty about their time in power will allow government to plan and implement long-term development initiatives.

The private sector is also more likely to invest and create employment in stable and well-governed country.

The suggested reforms included:

compulsory registration of political parties,

the introduction of a system of preferential voting,

a requirement that the leader of the party that wins the highest number of seats in parliament to be given the first option to nominate the Prime Minister,

a requirement that the Prime Minister be elected in a secret ballot in a formal sitting of parliament,

the introduction of a grace period of at least 12 months after a general election during which no-confidence motions could not be moved against the Prime Minister,

a provision for the dissolution of parliament in the event of a successful motion of no confidence to discourage MPs from voting in a frivolous manner,

abolishing the constitutional position of the leader of the Independent Group in the parliament,

more party discipline over voting patterns of MPs,

strengthening the resources and capacity of accountability institutions such as the Auditor General, Ombudsman and Leadership Code Commission and,

civic education programmes to educate voters about political parties and the parliament.

## PNG MODEL

Papua New Guinea's Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates (OLIPPAC) was a popular model and discussed widely during the conference.

OLIPPAC, in operation since 2001, has certainly introduced greater stability in the Papua New Guinea parliament, which was plagued with similar instability to that in Solomon Islands.

The 2002-2007 government led by Sir Michael Somare and his National Alliance party-dominated coalition was the first in PNG to have served a full five-year term.

The introduction of OLIPPAC, however, has entailed costs in loss of voting freedom to members of parliament and in administration.

The current annual administration costs of OLIPPAC are estimated to be PGK4 million (approximately SBD12.2 million), up from PGK500,000 in 2001.

This level of costs would impose a significant burden on the Solomon Islands national budget.

At a time when public sector resources to assist the basic needs of the people of Solomon Islands are stretched, allocating substantial new public funds for the administration of a new political system may not be popular.

A recent challenge lodged in Papua New Guinea's Supreme Court to the constitutionality of OLIPPAC, although yet to be heard, suggests Solomon Islands would be well advised to consider individual reforms to the Constitution, the National Parliament Electoral Provisions Act, Standing orders and other relevant legislation rather than adopting ambitious new legislation.

The serious concerns expressed by participants in the September conference about the capacity of Solomon Islands to implement legislation similar to Papua New Guinea's OLIPPAC should sound a note of caution to lawmakers.

While learning from external models and assessing the lessons learned by other countries is important and valuable for Solomon Islands, any reforms ultimately adopted by the Parliament on behalf of the people of Solomon Islands must be appropriate for Solomon Islands.

Political reforms that require amendment to the Constitution should also be integrated into the work of the Constitutional Reform Unit, due to finalise its work in June 2009.

Solomon Islands has an opportunity now to change the way it is governed.

The government, parliament and people have a responsibility to ensure political reforms are realistic, affordable and change the system for the better.

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