


——. 1993c. 50 pct Equity Decision Is Final. PC, 13 August, 51.


SOLOMON ISLANDS

New Year’s Eve 1992 brought havoc to the southeastern parts of Solomon Islands as Cyclone Nina passed through. Parts of Malaita, South Guadalcanal, Makira, Temotu, and Rennell and Bellona were devastated. For the people in these islands, a season of celebration and reflection became overnight a time of disaster and lost hopes. Homes and schools had to be rebuilt, new gardens had to be cleared, and short-term assistance was necessary. The much-needed assistance was given promptly when the whole nation pitched in and, with some help from other governments and organizations, pledged S$1.5 million toward the government’s rehabilitation program (SS, March 1993). As in the aftermath of other natural disasters, Solomon Islanders looked to the future with optimism as they rebuilt their homes, churches, and schools, and hoped for better fortune in the year to come.

Another kind of storm—a political one—was awaited with equal uncertainty. The national general election took place on 26 May 1993. Seats in each of the 47 constituencies throughout the country were contested by some 280 candidates. The state of uncertainty lasted for some time after the results were announced over national radio. Solomon Mamaloni’s party of National Unity won the most seats, but with only 21 of the total of 47 it did not have a clear majority. Of the other parties, the People’s Alliance Party led by Nathaniel Waena won 7 seats; the new National Action Party of Solomon Islands (Francis Saemala) and the United Party (Ezekiel Alebua) won 5 each; the Labour Party (loses Tuhanuku) won 4; the National Front for Progress (Andrew Nori) and the new Solomon Islands Leaders Fellowship (Reverend Michael Maeliau) won 2 each; and 1 was won by an independent (Francis Billy Hilly). A coalition government had to be formed.

Uncertainty and political speculation were fueled by strong indications that veteran politician and incumbent Prime Minister Solomon Mamaloni and his party might lose their parliamentary majority. The first sign of impending doom for Mamaloni came with the election for Speaker of the House, which was held a few weeks after the general election and before that for the new prime minister. In the election for the Speaker, the two contending groups, the Government for National Unity led by Mamaloni and the National Coalition Partnership group whose leader was yet to be named, fielded their respective candidates. Waita Ben, who was then Speaker, was the nominee of the Government for National Unity, and Paul
Tovua, who had just lost his Malango (central Guadalcanal) constituency seat, was nominated by the National Coalition. When Paul Tovua was elected Speaker, political gurus were left with little doubt that, if the coalition (especially its new members) held together and survived the intense lobbying, political intrigue, and wantok manipulations that characterized the period leading to the election for prime minister, it would have a chance to lead the next government. When the votes for prime minister were counted, Mamaloni’s party for National Unity was ousted by the narrowest margin since independence—24 votes to 23. On 18 June, a new government was formed, led by the 45-year-old member for Ranongga and Simbo, the Honourable Francis Billy Hilly.

The new coalition government consists of the existing parties—People’s Alliance Party, United Party, Labour Party, National Front for Progress—and the independent member, plus two new parties—the National Action Party of the Solomon Islands and the Solomon Islands Leaders Fellowship. (Though a political anomaly, the last insisted it not be called a political party.)

Though Hilly was new as prime minister, a post dominated by Solomon Mamaloni or Sir Peter Kenilorea since 1974, he was not a novice in politics. After a Bachelor’s degree from the University of the South Pacific and almost two years of employment with the government and the Solomon Trading Company, Hilly entered politics in June 1976 as member of Parliament for Ranongga and Simbo. He was returned for a second term in the 1980 elections and became the leader of the independent group in Parliament. In this second term, he became deputy prime minister and served as minister for the Ministry of Home Affairs in a coalition government led by Peter Kenilorea. In August 1981, Hilly resigned from the coalition, serving as an ordinary member, and did not seek reelection in the 1984 elections. Instead, he successfully ran in the Western Province elections and became president of the Western Provincial Assembly. In 1989, he ran unsuccessfully for the National Parliament. At the time of the elections in May 1993, he was running a family business.

One of the chief aims of the parties that made up the coalition was to oust Mamaloni’s strong Government of National Unity, and they closed ranks to do it. Among other matters, such as allegations of corruption, the Mamaloni government appeared to have allowed prime land sites in and around the capital to be bought and occupied by foreign investors. Eager to change the situation, and guided by their new vision and new policies, the coalition was determined to lead the country and carry the developmental trajectory in a different direction.

The new government led by Francis Billy Hilly did not acquire political power without having its mettle tested and its unity shaken. From the beginning, the Mamaloni camp gave clear indications that power would not be yielded easily; a catalogue of election petitions was lodged in the High Court and political horse-trading ensued. The election petitions included one by Mamaloni himself, challenging the legality of Hilly’s majority and that his
The election as prime minister was unconstitutional (SV, Oct 1993). The High Court settled in favor of Hilly. As if this were not enough, Dennis Lulei, leader of the Alliance Party in Parliament and new minister for education, was terminated by the coalition leaders for insubordination after challenging the government's leadership and decisions. And Allan Paul resigned from the Hilly government but later decided to rejoin.

Despite these wrangles, things seemed to be settling down as months passed and most of the petitions to the High Court failed, and the coalition's position appeared much more secure. Because of the nature of politics in Solomon Islands, where allegiance can change overnight, a former member of the Government of National Unity, Walter Folotalu, accepted the portfolio left vacant by the withdrawal of Dennis Lulei to become minister of education. A successful petition against the member for East Honiara, the Honourable Charles Dausabea (a spokesman for the Government of National Unity group and a staunch supporter of Solomon Mamaloni), alleging illegality of voting practices, further strengthened the coalition's position. At the end of the year, it was again strengthened by the approval of three additional ministries during the December sitting of Parliament, and the Mamaloni camp seemed resigned to their defeat, if not exhausted. All of these power struggles took up a good six months, which the government could have put to better use in serving the country and its people.

On the domestic front, the coalition government's policies include a number of reforms as well as immediate and long-term priorities. The immediate goals include investigation into corruption, malpractice, and abuse of power; establishment of a new national planning strategy; effective control and use of government assets and utilities; review of permanent secretaries; review of the taxing regimes; review of the provincial establishments; convening of economic, religious, and youth summits; reengagement of doctors who had earlier resigned; formulation of a new foreign assistance policy; and review and assessment of Solomon Islands' overseas representation. A ministerial consultative committee will monitor the implementation of these policies.

The long-term goals include self-reliance, decentralization, and improvement of government services around the country. The economic policy of the government is designed to promote self-reliance. Importantly, government assistance to rural areas is guided by the principle of self-reliance and is not viewed as a government handout. The decentralization strategy involves maximizing linkages to the rural masses and requires the development of a new decentralizing formula to allow a more direct and meaningful sharing of ideas, powers, and responsibilities with traditional leaders and resource owners (villagers who are landowners) throughout the country. Hilly's government recognizes the importance of the resource owners to the country and believes they should be afforded maximum benefits from their resources.

In support of its goal to improve government services, the coalition gov-
The Hilly government places great importance on state-church relations and the need to strengthen this link. The government has announced it will provide assistance to the churches, for example in the training of their leaders, and will encourage the churches to take an active role in linking the government to the rural communities. The government also sees the state and the churches as the most important agencies of development, and hopes that close state-church relations will result in greater participation by Solomon Islanders in the political process.

The chief thrust of the new Solomon Islands foreign policy can be characterized by the slogan, Friendship by Reciprocity. Central to this approach is an emphasis on the use of foreign assistance for economic development. A beginning will be made through reconciliation with foreign governments. Particular importance is attached to Papua New Guinea, with whom previous relations had soured, especially over the Bougainville crisis and the spillover effects when three Solomon Islanders were killed in September 1992. The coalition government produced a six-point initiative to aid in resolving the Bougainville debacle: (1) to normalize relations with Papua New Guinea through dialogue rather than confrontation; (2) to restore respect for the laws, customs, and immigration regulations of Solomon Islands that have been violated since the beginning of the border problem. The Bougainville Humanitarian Office is to be closed down and replaced with a peace office. (3) to encourage the convening of the proposed pan-Bougainville leaders' conference as a necessary avenue for a meeting of minds from the different sides on Bougainville; (4) to restore normal services on the Solomons side of the border, including immigration and customs control; (5) to establish an honorary consulate in Port Moresby as a center for bilateral discussions between Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. This office will also cater for the interests of Solomon Islanders living in Papua New Guinea. (6) to work toward the establishment of a proper border treaty with Papua New Guinea (SN, July-Aug 1993).

Beside the attempt to restore Papua New Guinea–Solomon Islands relations, especially with an eye to working together to resolve the Bougainville crisis, the government has also pledged to increase dialogue with regional and global friends in order to renew friendship and gain respect and support. A new foreign policy paper will be introduced to lay the foundation for furthering Solomon Islands' image and integrity overseas, and relations with all overseas donors will be improved.

After taking office, the government decided to slowly phase out logging, to encourage local processing of logs, and to conserve forest resources. To effect its policy on timber and forest resources, the coalition would place a moratorium on the granting of licenses to logging companies, effective early in 1994 (SS, July 1993). A lot had gone wrong with forest exploitation in the country. For instance, the permanent secretary for the Ministry of Natural Resources had revealed that the coun-
try was losing SI$15 million a year from underpricing of its timber exports. Companies operating in the Solomons achieved this through collaboration with overseas companies. Not only did landowners lose money, but the government also lost revenue because of undertaxation. For example, the government had to ask Kalena Timber Company to pay SI$900,000 in understated duties and royalties (sv, April 1993). In other cases, many of the Asian companies operating in the country did not follow the legal procedures required by the Forest Resource and Timber Utilization Act. Some were operating on lands not covered by their permits and licenses (ss, Jan 1993).

Other coalition government policies are influenced by cost-containment measures. Soon after the new government took office, it decided to suspend construction of the new State House, contracted to be built for SI$15 million, which it claimed would be a burden on the government's purse. Individuals or companies adversely affected would be compensated accordingly. The permanent secretary positions that had been contracted out by the Mamaloni government were revoked in October (ss, Oct 1993) and were reestablished under the normal public service employment structure. For the new positions, sixty-seven applicants vied for fifteen vacancies. Most of the former permanent secretaries were rehired, with only four of them unsuccessful. Permanent secretary salaries, placed on a permanent basis instead of contractual employment, were reduced from SI$60,000 to SI$43,000 a year (ss, Oct 1993).

The proposed Melanesian Trade Bloc, whose objective is to improve the economies and trade of member countries, is expected to be an economic milestone in the relations between the member countries of the Melanesian Spearhead Group. Each country will export products in which they have a competitive advantage. The countries presently involved are Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands, but others such as Fiji and Kanaky (New Caledonia) could be included if they wished. Under such an arrangement, Vanuatu beef could be exported to Solomons and Papua New Guinea; Solomons tuna to Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, and so on.

In education, the World Bank approved US$16.9 million (approximately SI$52 million) for the construction of more secondary schools in the country. The Implementation Project Unit in the Ministry of Education is to be responsible for the different phases of the project. The process will be slow and cautious to avoid the misappropriation of funds or bungling of contracts that happened with an earlier World Bank project in the mid-1980s. The Honiara Town Council established an innovative program to absorb Standard 6 dropouts so that they can be taught the basic skills they will need in the workplace. Essentially, middle schools will provide an alternative avenue for these students; it has yet to be decided whether these schools will form a bridge to get the students back into the mainstream of schooling, toward advanced studies.

The long-running dispute between the national doctors and the government finally came to an end in October. Prime Minister Hilly personally invited the doctors to discuss the condi-
tions of the new contract with him. Dr Quan, a spokesperson for the doctors, later informed Solomon Voice that they were happy with the new contract, which if implemented would for the first time place them among the most highly paid professionals in the country (sv, Sept 1993). With an improved pay package of between S$30,000 and S$60,000 (sn, April–May 1993), the doctors were required to take up the new offer and resume work no later than 29 October (ss, Oct 1993).

In March, history was made when John Muria became the first indigenous chief justice of the Solomons. From Guadalcanal, Muria was educated at the Catholic St Joseph’s Secondary School in Honiara and the University of Papua New Guinea, from which he graduated in law in 1979. He had worked for a short time in Papua New Guinea and was a public solicitor in Honiara before his appointment. He is 37 years old and married with three children.

A well-known anthropologist who did extensive work among the Kwaio people on Malaita, Professor Roger Keesing, died on 7 May during an academic meeting in Toronto. His ashes were taken to the Solomons by his partner, Christine Jourdan, and his children and buried at Ngarinasuru, Malaita (ss, Aug 1993).

In September, the Solomon Brewery was officially opened by Governor General Sir George Lepping. The brewery is owned partly by the German company Brachaus and partly by Nauruan interests. Dignitaries from Nauru, Brachaus, and the government were present at the official opening ceremony (ss, Sept 1993).

In line with the emphasis on state-church relations, Provincial Premier Mathias Ramoni of Makira encouraged the churches to establish schools in his province. Speaking during celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the province, the Honourable Ramoni commended the Anglican, Catholic, South Seas Evangelical, and Seventh Day Adventist Churches for running the schools in the province. In addition to the primary schools, the churches operate some vocational and pre-theological colleges, an example being the Stuvenberg Rural Training Centre in East Makira. The South Seas Evangelical Church proposed to establish a secondary school. The premier highly commended this kind of initiative (ss, Oct 1993).

The Tourist Authority collaborated eagerly with Dr Robert Ballard of the United States National Geographic Society on his book, *The Lost Ships of Guadalcanal*, in the hope of finding out whether Iron Bottom Sound (a major Second World War battle site) might eventually become a vast underwater museum. As the general manager of the Tourist Authority predicted, “We are sitting on a gold mine if only we can turn technology and vision to Solomon Islands’ advantage.” He was very optimistic: “The international exposure for us is priceless. This is right next to Honiara and suddenly Dr Ballard is putting us on the world map” (sv, Oct 1993).

Overall, the political wranglings and delayed implementation of the new policies of the Hilly government, which are innovative and pragmatic in many ways, made the overall achievements of the country seem slow and few. But
given the complexity of the country and the many hurdles the new government had to overcome, 1993 may be regarded as a year of preparation for the Hilly government to start with a clean slate in 1994.

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References


Vanuatu

Maxime Carlot Korman’s government retained office during 1993, despite tensions between the coalition partners, Korman’s Union of Moderate Parties (UMP) and the National United Party (NUP). These tensions, combined with those within the coalition parties, repeatedly distracted attention from problems of economic management and development.

Prime Minister Korman began the year with a ministerial reshuffle, the first since his government took office in December 1991, intended to consolidate his position and to rein in two ministers whose conduct had been capricious. Korman took over the foreign affairs portfolio from his leading rival within the Union of Moderate Parties, Serge Vohor, shifting him to the new post of minister for economic affairs. He made his move while Vohor was on an official visit to Noumea. He retained Willie Jimmy as minister for finance, but reduced his responsibilities by transferring external trade to the new economic affairs ministry (PR, Jan 1993; VW, 9 Jan 1993, 1).

In the course of the year Korman carried forward his foreign affairs responsibilities with reasonable success. He consolidated relations with France, and developed links with New Caledonia, including by opening a consulate in Noumea in April. But France maintained a relatively cautious approach, notwithstanding the hopes of some UMP supporters, and the fears of some critics of the French presence in the region, and despite the return to power of the conservatives in the French elections in March. Korman and his government also maintained harmonious relations with Australia, Vanuatu’s leading aid donor, avoiding a recurrence of the tensions that had twice arisen in 1992 (Fry 1993, 396, 399; Henningham 1993, 427). Australia’s Minister for Development Assistance and the Pacific Islands’ Gordon Bilney visited Vanuatu in June and described bilateral relations as “good and improving” (VW, 19 June 1993, 5). In addition, the Korman government sought to develop and consolidate Vanuatu’s external relations more widely, with some success.

If Vanuatu’s external relations were generally constructive and serene during 1993, this was not true of domestic affairs. Walter Lini’s National United Party proved anything but united. Its internal problems had unsettling effects on the governing coalition, as did tensions between anglophone-educated and francophone-educated ni-Vanuatu. During the course of the year Lini repeatedly demanded that Korman