

Kanak. Periodical of the Parti de Libération Kanak (Palika).


Solomon Islanders

Solomon Islanders have not experienced a worse start to a year in decades. In January 2000, Solomon Sunaone Mamaloni, one of the country’s veteran politicians and its first leader, passed away. Sir Peter Kenilorea’s approbation of his friend and schoolmate as “the father of modern politics in Solomon Islands” could not have been more apt (SS, 18 Jan 2000, 5). In politics, Mamaloni was an all-rounder. He was a real “man of the people.” He would fit most Solomon Islanders’ honor list. When in need, Solomon Islanders, especially ordinary villagers, found him most accessible, even when he was prime minister. And without fail, Solo (as he was endearingly dubbed) would go an extra mile to help another wantok. Solo had long fiercely defended Solomon Islands’ sovereignty and the right of Solomon Islanders to “do their own thing.” If they learned from their mistakes, they should not fear making them. His experience during British colonialism taught him an important lesson—it was far better for Solomon Islanders to carve their own futures and destiny than be subject to ignominious racism, vacuous high-mindedness, and mindless arrogance, which Solomon Islanders detested. Mamaloni has left a leadership lacuna that will be difficult to fill for a long time, as events that unfolded in subsequent months have attested.

The 1999 census revealed that the population of the country had increased by 43 percent overall, from 285,176 in 1986 to 409,042. The growth rate declined markedly from 3.5 percent per year to 2.8 percent per year. Some 41.5 percent of the population is aged under fifteen years. But the census showed that only 23 percent of the population (57,472) were paying taxes. Conversely, 45 percent (111,905) were involved in unpaid labor (SS, 8 Sept 2000, 3).

The sporadic ethnic fighting that began in late 1998 between the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) and the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) continued. However, it was limited mostly to areas around and peripheral to Honiara. In February, the Malaita Eagle Force claimed responsibility for several killings at Pelaha and Lunga areas (SS, 23 Feb 2000, 1). These intermittent insurgencies and killings merely escalated animosity between the two groups. In early July, the Malaita Eagle Force mounted opera-
tion “Eagle Storm.” A bulldozer was converted into a “tank,” which helped them mount raids. The Malaita Eagle Force was able to gain greater control of the area from Alligator Creek to Solomon Island Plantations Limited (SIPL; ss, 4 July 2000, 1).

On 5 June a “civil takeover” of the government of the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change occurred. Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa’alu was put under house arrest and asked to “voluntarily” resign within forty-eight hours by the newly formed Joint Military Operation (JMO), which comprised the Malaita Eagle Force and members of the Paramilitary Force (ss, 4 July 2000, 6). The main reason given for the takeover was Ulufa’alu’s delay in seriously and urgently addressing the ethnic uprising. The Joint Military Operation claimed he seemed to have done very little to stop the conflict. Meanwhile the Isatabu Freedom Movement continued to harass or kill innocent people and brew mayhem around the capital.

The Joint Military Operation seized the Rove police armories and weapons on patrol boats and controlled the country’s telecommunication facilities. It also called for the removal of the police commissioner who, like the prime minister, seemed not to have done much to abate the conflict (PIM, June 2000, 12).

The expulsion of the prime minister instilled fear in the capital. Later in the month there was a mass “release” of prisoners from Rove prison. Soon foreign nationals began leaving the country. Australians, New Zealanders, and Canadians were evacuated by HMAS Tobruk (ss, 4 July 2000, 6). Many Solomon Islanders found this confusing, if not amusing. It was clear from the start that the foreigners were not the target. It was a row between Solomon Islanders.

On 30 June an election was held to choose a new prime minister. Three candidates, Manasseh Sogavare, Bishop Leslie Boseto, and former prime minister Billy Hilly stood. The first two were from Choiseul, and Billy Hilly from Western Province. He later decided to withdraw. In a close election, Manasseh Sogavare emerged as the new prime minister, with 23 votes to Bishop Boseto’s 21 (ss, 30 June 2000, 8–9).

From the start, Sogavare was clear. His new government would concentrate on “regaining peace.” It would strive for a cease-fire, followed by the signing of a peace agreement, surrender of arms, and then the return of police to their normal duties of maintaining law and order. Compensation demands would be addressed, not from legalistic concerns, but by using Melanesian perspectives of “conflict resolution” (ss, 11 July 2000, 3).

The Isatabu Freedom Movement lost no time in contesting the legitimacy and legality of the election, which they alleged was undemocratic because it was carried out under duress. The Isatabu Freedom Movement had learned that, because of fear for their security, six members of the former prime minister’s team were unable to attend and vote. To accept the result of such an election would be a mockery of democratic principles and processes. The Isatabu Freedom Movement decided to refuse any dealings with the new government (ss, 5 July 2000, 4).

Sogavare retorted that the governor-general had given members of parliament plenty of time to attend. The
The election itself was carried out in a proper democratic manner without intimidation. “I was democratically elected,” Sogavare declared (SS, 5 July 2000, 4). But the election for a new prime minister was held after the illegal ouster of Bartholomew Ulufa’alu, a fact that should not be easily erased from the “national memory.”

As time goes on, crime increases, affecting the country in many ways, particularly national investments. A vessel of Solomon Taiyo, the biggest fishing company in the country, was raided. Three armed men boarded a pole-line fishing boat in Maravovo Lagoon and forced the captain to take them to Honiara (SS, 1 Aug 2000, 1). Solomon Taiyo decided to suspend operations in August. It was further alleged that lives, safety, and the security of its employees and property had been threatened by militants (SS, 23 Jan 2001, 1). The government would just have to take control of the operation.

In early July a more heinous human atrocity was perpetrated on the weakest in society. Gunmen walked into the national referral hospital and shot dead two patients who were members of the Isatabu Freedom Movement (SS, 11 July 2000, 1). The killings were in retaliation for other murders.

Later in August, a group of men in camouflage uniform forced their way into Honiara Casino and stole $1,000,000 (SS, 29 Aug 2000, 1). The mid-afternoon incident highlighted the immediate and critical need for law and order in the capital. On 5 October, a prominent furniture factory was burnt. The owner, one of the few successful Solomon Islands businessmen, lost millions. Later in November, the owner of the Placemaker Building lost it to arson. Andrew Nori’s Bridge Law Firm was housed there. The perpetrator sought protection in police custody, but members of the Malaita Eagle Force forced their way in and shot him.

Due to damage, the reopening of the Gold Ridge mine was delayed. Resource owners have decided to revise the mining agreement, claiming that they were not adequately compensated under the previous agreement. As the member of parliament responsible for that area explained, the returns to his people were severely underestimated. There were more gold reserves than had been projected (SS, 24 Nov 2000, 5). Resource owners also claimed that compensation ought to be paid for the tailing-dam area, timber trees, taboo sites, and loss of income from alluvial mining. Furthermore, former IFM members demanded $120,000 from the mine for providing security during the ethnic crisis. As Patteson Tara explained, “without our presence, Gold Ridge Mining Ltd could have lost everything because some have decided to burn down the whole site” (SS, 30 Nov 2000, 6).

Although other provinces expressed interest in becoming independent states, the Malaita premier committed the province to remaining part of a united Solomon Islands. During a Malaita Leaders Conference, he called on Malaita people to be more self-reliant. He called on other provinces to understand the position of his people, adding that “if we have done you wrong forgive us, and we will do our best to bring peace once again in Solomon Islands” (SS, 17 Aug 2000, 1).

As the conflict dragged on, a number of provinces saw an opportunity...
to declare statehood. Choiseul and Western Provinces declared their statehood, signaling disapproval of the provincial system of government. They wanted a system that devolves more functions to the provinces, and state government was their choice (SS, 6 July 2000, 7). Makira Province also indicated its preference for state autonomy. Even Temotu Province in the Eastern Solomons had an interest in state government. Despite this enthusiasm, there were disagreements.

Some said that the size and population of some provinces would make it politically and economically unwise for them to separate (SS, 17 Aug 2000, 4). Some suggested that public education was needed so that people would well understand the decision they would be making (SS, 24 Aug 2000, 5). Others mentioned that state government alone would be inadequate. Solomon Islanders need to address issues such as land tenure, migration and mobility, and the need to maintain unity and build a sense of nationalism through education (SS, 30 Aug 2000, 6). Finally, one mature writer summarized most people’s aspirations: to achieve the “ultimate goal of living together in harmony” (SS, 8 Sep 2000, 5).

The peace process was ongoing, even at the height of the crisis. The government and the churches have been deeply involved. As part of its ongoing contribution toward peace, the Solomon Islands Christian Association organized occasional church services “for all religions to come together to pray for peace.” Some churches also declared twenty-one days of national humiliation, prayer, and fasting. During that time, all mature Christians in all churches were asked to abstain from one or two meals each day and devote their time to prayer (SS, 15 Aug 2000, 5).

The National Peace Conference called on all parties to assist in the restoration of peace and normalcy to the country, for the unity of Solomon Islands as one country, and for the upholding of democratic principles. Communities, women, nongovernment organizations, and churches were urged to be proactive participants in peace activities (SS, 29 Aug 2000, 1).

The Solomon Islands Christian Association continued to be concerned with the increasing break-ins in the capital. The property of non-Melanesian ethnic groups was targeted during the social unrest. The Peace Office also reiterated the need to restore law and order: “restoring the rule of law is an immediate priority in the peace process” (SS, 31 Aug 2000, 1).

Mention must be made of the extraordinary patience, bravery, and selflessness displayed by Solomon Islands women in brokering peace, long before their menfolk embraced it. The women slowly brought the two warring sides to “see” their common humanity. The women started with food, the basic but most fundamental commonality. Brushing aside fear, very early on 1 August thirty-eight Guadalcanal women walked to an MEF bunker waving a white flag. To their surprise, MEF members not only met them but escorted them to town to do their shopping (SS, 2 Aug 2000, 3). In a big way, that began the process of peacemaking.

Even before the Townsville Peace Agreement was signed, optimism and hopes were high. Included on the teams representing the warring groups,
especially the Isatabu Freedom Movement, were people the former government should have engaged right from the beginning. The Malaita Eagle Force had their leading attorney, Andrew Nori, as their spokesman. This time, the Isatabu Freedom Movement engaged their dynamic academic, Tarcisius Tara, as their spokesman. It was obvious that these were two people who were not only well respected but among the most well-educated and experienced Solomon Islanders. Unlike previous peace agreements, this time hopes were high for a lasting peace. And lasting it was.

The thirty-page agreement, among other things, narrated the roots of the ethnic tension and how it spread, the failures of past peace accords, and the attempts of governments in search of lasting solutions. There is provision for the granting of amnesty conditional to the surrender of arms and ammunition and demilitarization on Guadalcanal and in other provinces (SS, 18 Oct 2000, 6). On arriving home, Andrew Nori declared that the “war” on Guadalcanal was over. “As far as the MEF–Joint Operation is concerned, the war on Guadalcanal is over. I have said this in a telephone interview in Australia and I repeat it again here. Everyone in the Solomon Islands should be happy about this agreement. The IFM delegation to the talks is also satisfied with the agreement” (SS, 17 Oct 2000, 1).

“Peace has come, war has gone. Solomon Islands is heading on the right path.” That was the joy expressed by General Secretary of the Development Services Exchange Casper Fa’a-sala (SS, 20 Oct 2000, 3). Rintu Talofai wrote, “no country in the world had entered into fierce fighting and in less than a week were hugging each other, crying with tears of joy, handshaking, . . . celebrating peace together.” The Isatabu Freedom Movement and the Malaita Eagle Force combined in a celebration that extended along the Honiara road from White River to Gold Ridge, the Central Development Corporation, and the Balasuna area, and lasted for three days. It laid the ground for forgiveness, genuine respect, and mutual trust for members of both sides (SS, 3 Nov 2000, 4).

On 18 December 2000 the national parliament passed a bill granting amnesty to former militants. Members of both the Malaita Eagle Force and the Isatabu Freedom Movement, the Joint Military Force and advisers are all covered. But the granting of amnesty was subject to conditions: first, all weapons and ammunition and stolen property in the custody of militant groups must be surrendered and returned to the International Peace Monitoring Team within the period specified in the peace agreement; second, criminal acts committed during the conflict were qualified under clause 3 of the bill. However, the minister of police, who introduced the bill, was cautious: “We have gone through the most trying times in our nation’s existence. It is not for me to judge whether what had happened is right or wrong. I shall leave that to others, to history and to God . . . . What is important now is to learn from what happened and work hard together to ensure that this situation does not revisit the Solomon Islands in the future” (SS, 19 Dec 2000, 1).

The statement received a backlash from Amnesty International headquarters in London, among other
international organizations, which described the blanket immunity for crimes and human rights abuses committed in two years of ethnic conflict as “a black day for human rights... Impunity for torture, rape and killing of civilians, including children, is an outrage and contributes nothing to lasting peace or reconciliation.”

Compensation was a critical and foremost issue for reconciliation in the twenty-two-month conflict. To be sure, the formation of the Malaita Eagle Force occurred after the former Ulufa’alu government did not respond to claims for compensation by the Malaita people affected. On the HMAS Tobruk, a substantial compensation payment was made. Some S1$6 million was paid to Malaita Province and another S1$3 million to Guadalcanal Province (SS, 10 July 2000, 2).

However, compensation claims appear to have been inflated and complicated in terms of righting past wrongs on the one hand and the temptation to make a “fast buck” given the “broad” goodwill of the government in its desire to achieve lasting peace.

Toward the end of the year, it was obvious that government coffers were straining to keep up with multiple payments of one form of compensation or another. The government was therefore forced to seek monetary assistance from anywhere possible. It decided to ask the Republic of China (Taiwan) for $300 million—$175 million in grant assistance and $129 million in the form of a loan. The main reason for such a desperate move was the need to meet commitments under the Townsville Peace Agreement (SS, 30 Oct 2000, 3). In early November, Solomon Islands opened an embassy office in Taipei to galvanize diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Equally fortuitous, the Solomon Islands received a Stabex allocation from the European Union to the tune of $200 million. Commenting on the occasion, a huge relief in terms of development assistance, Minister for National Planning and Development Michael Maena said, “We have been waiting for this day somewhat impatiently and also eager to realize the beginning of a new chapter of relationship between EU and Solomon Islands government. The transfer is signed at no better time than now when the government is desperate to have assistance from its kind development partners.” In December, the Sogavare government sought $62.2 million in its Supplementary Appropriation Bill 2000. Again, most of this was to meet the costs of Townsville commitments and the peace process (SS, 14 Dec 2000, 6).

After rebounding from a twenty-two-month conflict that almost sunk the country’s polity and economy, the Sogavare government received recognition and support from outside and respect from inside for its tenacity and diligence. At the beginning of a new millennium, the nation of Solomon Islands seems to have just begun—again.

John Moffat Fugui

References

PIM, Pacific Islands Monthly. Suva.