For Solomon Islands, 2008 was dominated by the establishment of a new government, the mending of diplomatic relations, an attempt to improve governance processes, and the continuing challenges associated with post-conflict development and a struggling economy. For most Solomon Islanders there was an expectation that political leadership, especially at the national level, would improve. This was seen as the core of the country’s challenges.

In late 2007, the Manasseh Sogavare-led Grand Coalition for Change (GCC) government, which had been in power since April 2006, was ousted in a motion of no confidence. Many of the cabinet ministers in the Sogavare government withdrew their support amid controversies over the appointment of Julian Moti to the position of attorney general and Jahir Khan as commissioner of police. In late 2006, the appointment of Moti, an Australian citizen wanted for child sex charges, strained relations with Australia and led to a diplomatic row that saw the declaration of the Australian High Commissioner to Solomon Islands Patrick Cole as persona non grata in the Solomon Islands. This and other issues, including concerns about the GCC government’s “dictatorial” leadership style, led to Sogavare’s ouster.

Sogavare was replaced in December 2007 by Dr Derek Sikua, a longtime public servant who was in his first term as a member of Parliament. Sikua formed a Coalition for National Unity and Rural Advancement (C-NURA) government that faced many challenges, including how to deliver services and salvage relations with neighbors like Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea. Yet expectations were high for improved governance under C-NURA leadership. The failure of the Sogavare-led government to deliver on its “Bottom Up Approach” policy, the controversial manner in which it filled important positions, and its mishandling of diplomatic relations had caused widespread skepticism in the government, and placed pressure on the C-NURA government to turn the tides of public opinion. There was also a dire need to salvage Solomon Islands’ reputation in the international arena, improve the delivery of social services, and provide credible leadership.

In January 2008, the C-NURA government launched its policy statement, outlining a broad number of issues that it hoped to address. One of the first things the Sikua-led government did was dismiss Julian Moti as attorney general and replace him with Gabriel Suri as acting attorney general. This was part of an attempt to give credibility to the Office of the Attorney General and to mend relations with neighboring countries, especially Australia. The commissioner of police,
Jahir Khan, who had been appointed under similarly controversial circumstances, was also asked to resign. Immediately after assuming office, the Sikua-led government set out to mend and strengthen relations with governments of neighboring countries and donor agencies, which had been strained under the previous administration. As part of the government’s efforts to mend relations, in January 2008 Sikua visited Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea, and met with his counterparts in these countries. This was vital because Solomon Islands depended on Australia, New Zealand, and other aid donors to finance its development programs. In its 2009 national budget, for example, Solomon Islands development expenditure of SI$2.7 billion was to be funded entirely by development partners. (One Solomon Islands dollar is the equivalent of approximately US$0.14.)

At the national level, the prime minister wanted to reassure the country of his government’s commitments as stated in its policy statement. Therefore he visited Malaita and the Western Provinces and met with provincial leaders. This was a move designed to familiarize himself with issues that were pertinent to those provinces and at the same time share with provincial leaders the national government’s visions and development policies.

For Australia, the advent of a new Solomon Islands government provided an opportunity to mend and strengthen bilateral relations. Australia’s Foreign Affairs Minister Stephen Smith made his inaugural visit to Solomon Islands to review the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in February 2008. During the visit Smith reiterated Australia’s commitment to provide “an environment of peace and stability and security to enable the Solomon Islands to get back on its feet again in terms of building itself as a nation” (Pacnews, 22 Feb 2008). Smith’s February visit was complemented by the inaugural meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum Ministerial Standing Committee on RAMSI. The committee was tasked with overseeing the Australian-led assistance mission. During that meeting, the committee agreed that RAMSI would now report directly to the Solomon Islands government. This, it was envisaged, would ensure that RAMSI post-conflict reconstruction efforts were aligned with the Solomon Islands government’s development plans and priorities.

Australia Prime Minister Kevin Rudd visited Solomon Islands in March 2008. The Labour Government in Australia, which came to power in 2007, had pledged to work cooperatively with its Pacific Island neighbors. Rudd reaffirmed his government’s commitment, saying that relations with Pacific Island countries would be based on partnership: “I will use the visit to underscore Australia’s commitment to work in partnership with our friends and neighbours in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands on regional challenges, including economic sustainability, effective development and climate change” (Pacnews, 3 March 2008).

Meanwhile, Taiwan was also keen to ensure that a change in government did not mean a change in Solomon Islands policy to accord diplomatic
recognition to Taiwan. Consequently, Taiwanese Vice President Annette Lu visited Honiara in January 2008. During that visit, Prime Minister Sikua told Ms Lu that Solomon Islands would continue to support Taiwan’s bid for membership in the United Nations and defend its interests at the international level (Pacnews, 4 Feb 2008). In March, Dr Sikua visited Taiwan, where he met the Taiwanese president, vice president, and government ministers. In a show of goodwill, the Taiwanese government offered to finance the completion of the multimillion-dollar Stage 2 of the Solomon Islands National Parliament Building Project. Stages 2 and 3 of the building project included the construction of offices for members of Parliament as well as amenities for recreational activities, such as a gym, swimming pool, and tennis courts (Pacnews, 4 March 2008). The offer was made on the condition that Solomon Islands agreed to host the 2009 Taiwan–Pacific Allies Summit, which it agreed to do. In the meantime, Taiwan continued to provide about $50 million annually, to fund the Rural Constituency Development Fund, as well as provide financial support for the agriculture and education sectors.

Despite its success in normalizing relations with Australia and New Zealand, the Sikua-led government was criticized for its moves to strengthen bilateral ties with Iran, a country that US President George W Bush had branded as a member of the “axis of evil.” Opposition leader Manasseh Sogavare condemned the move: “I’m shocked that a government that boasts itself to believe in the principles that other members of the international community believe in—democracy, good governance, anti-terrorism—can entertain a country that works against every principles that all right thinking governments of the world believe” (Pacnews, 29 Oct 2008). The c-nura government defended its plan to sign a bilateral cooperation agreement with Iran. Foreign Affairs Minister William Haomae called for Iran’s assistance in dam construction, training skilled personnel in oil and gas industries, and trade.

As of this writing, Solomon Islands has yet to establish diplomatic relations with Iran, although it has signed a cooperative memorandum to allowed the two countries to explore specific cooperative arrangements, including the possibility of formalizing diplomatic relations. Iran and the Solomon Islands are both members of the Group of Developing Countries at the United Nations. Hence, the cooperative memorandum was seen as within the spirit of “South-South Cooperation” (Pacnews, 31 Oct 2008). Meanwhile, Israel Ambassador Michael Ronan, during his visit in November, commented on Solomon Islands' relations with Iran, saying that his country was “not worried at all [and] that Solomon Islands is an independent country and is at liberty to choose its diplomatic friends” (Pacnews, 28 Nov 2008).

Within the Pacific Islands region, the Sikua-led government announced the establishment of the Solomon Islands High Commission Office in Fiji in August. However, by March 2009 the office was still without a high commissioner. Meanwhile, two important international organizations, the World Bank and Asian Development
Bank, opened their offices in Honiara in 2008 and expressed the desire to work closely with the Solomon Islands government.

As the government attempted to mend and strengthen its international relations, in Honiara a group of people from Malaita demanded compensation for an allegedly offensive note left near the Honiara Magistrates Court. The group threatened to start a violent demonstration if the national government did not meet their compensation demands. The government convened a series of meetings with the Malaita provincial premier, the minister for home affairs, the Lord Mayor of Honiara, and various Malaitan chiefs. The cabinet eventually paid approximately S1$42,000 to the group in January 2008 (Pacnews, 28 Jan 2008). However, many people felt that this was a political ploy orchestrated by disgruntled supporters of the former Grand Coalition for Change government to destabilize the c-nura government. Many also felt that the compensation payment perpetuated the mentality that any group could demand and receive compensation from government without the due process of law.

There were other domestic challenges such as the rehabilitation of communities in the Western Solomons that had been affected by the tsunami of April 2007. It was revealed that a year after the tsunami many of those affected had not yet received assistance, despite millions of dollars allocated for rehabilitation. Both provincial and national authorities expressed concern about the administration of relief assistance. Governor-General Sir Nathaniel Waena, for example, said that he regretted the “serious negligence” shown by responsible authorities and relief agencies toward the tsunami victims. Many were still living in tents a year after the tsunami destroyed their homes. The leaders of the Titiana community who were among the worst hit said that the tents they were living in were intended to be used for only three months, and that after a year of exposure to the elements most of the tents were unfit for further use. In response, the prime minister announced that the governments of Australia and New Zealand would provide S1$18 million for reconstruction efforts (Pacnews, 2 April 2008).

In the meantime, the leaders of the Western and Guadalcanal provinces expressed concern about the administration of funds allocated for development more generally. The two provincial premiers jointly renewed calls for the c-nura government to increase grants to the Western and Guadalcanal provinces in view of the fact that they host many of the development projects from which the national government generates revenue. They also called on the national government to give priority to the proposed federal constitution that would facilitate the establishment of a federal system of government. They urged that the draft federal constitution be presented to Parliament for debate in 2009 (sIBC News, 22 Dec 2008). During the first session of Parliament on April 2008, the prime minister revealed that the final draft of the federal constitution would be completed and delivered to the government in July 2009. Sikua
said that a Constitutional Congress and an Eminent Persons Advisory Council were working on finalizing the draft federal constitution. The congress consists of provincial nominees and national representatives, while the council is made up of some prominent citizens, including former governor-generals, some former politicians, and representatives from a wide cross-section of society, including women and youth.

During the second sitting of Parliament in July 2008 a motion to review the Facilitation of International Assistance Act was passed. Sikua said that the motion sought approval from Parliament to refer the International Assistance Notice to the Foreign Relations Committee for inquiry. The review looked at “the composition of the assisting countries,” “public purpose,” and the “agreement which covers the operations and activities” (nps1 2008a). Sikua indicated that the Foreign Relations Committee would also explore ways in which RAMSI could develop programs that are aligned with Solomon Islands’ plans and aspirations.

During the July meeting of Parliament, the Opposition put forth a motion of no confidence in the prime minister. The motion was convincingly defeated by 39 votes to 8—an overwhelming show of confidence in Dr Sikua’s leadership. Opposition leader Manasseh Sogavare, in accepting the defeat of the motion, said that the Opposition was satisfied because it was able to raise issues that it wanted the government to address. Sogavare said that the motion was not an attempt to regain power; rather, it was meant to remind government of the need to address outstanding issues facing the country (Pacnews, 12 Aug 2008).

At the final annual sitting of the Parliament in November 2008, a national budget worth approximately US$53 million was passed (rnzi, 10 Dec 2008). This was the country’s biggest budget since independence. “The 2009 budget comprises an estimated recurrent expenditure of about one-point-six billion dollars, and a development budget of about two-point-two billion dollars. [The] Finance Minister, Mr. Rini, said the government is expected to collect more than one-point-six billion dollars in domestic revenue and additional support of more than one-point-seven billion dollars from development partners” (sto, 11 Dec 2008; for budget details, see nps1 2008b).

There were challenges in financing the budget. Although government was expecting to fund 100 percent of its recurrent budget from domestic revenue, the forestry sector, which accounted for 66.6 percent of total export revenue in 2007, is forecasted to decline by 2010 (CBSI 2008). The Central Bank of Solomon Islands (CBSI) warned that the Solomon Islands could lose its largest export industry in forestry if the government did not take immediate actions to reduce the rate of logging, assist reforestation projects, and develop the non-logging sector to cushion the economy given the potential decline in export revenue.

Meanwhile the Gold Ridge gold mine, another major development project, was facing numerous chal-
Unresolved issues such as land acquisition, a resettlement scheme, the tailings dam, landowner demands, and political indecision led to delays in getting the mine back into production (CBSI 2008). Since 2005 the company concentrated primarily on constructing housing and security infrastructure, resolving outstanding land issues, and raising financing overseas. In February 2009, the Gold Ridge landowners expressed concern about the delay in reopening the mine and requested the developer to provide an explanation: “Australia Solomon Gold has an obligation to tell this nation why they haven’t started actual mining at the gold ridge.” They added, “Landowners of gold ridge want a serious and reputable investor in return for sacrificing our land for this national project amidst these trying times when the world is facing the global financial crisis” (STO, 25 Feb 2009).

While these discussions were taking place on Guadalcanal, substantial progress was made on the proposed development of Auluta Palm Oil Project on Malaita. On 27 February 2009, an agreement was signed between the commissioner of lands and Auluta Basin tribal groups, which saw the conversion of tribal land into a perpetual estate lease arrangement. Each of the two main tribes received S1250,000 as a token of appreciation from the government. This project, if successful, would be the first major development on Malaita.

In the services sector, the cost of telecommunication continued to rise. This was said to be one of the major disincentives to private sector expansion. A strike by workers of Our Telekom in June further affected services and caused security concerns (Pacnews, 19 June 2008). Acting Police Commissioner Peter Marshall warned that essential communication services were affected because of the industrial dispute. He made the warning after the emergency 999 phone number and standard phone lines to some police posts stopped working (Pacnews, 26 June 2008).

Law and order improved significantly in 2008 with the presence of RAMSI. This was due in part to the recruitment of new police officers and the fact that most guns have been taken away from communities. In spite of this progress, ensuring long-term security remains a challenge as there is an evident increase in house break-ins in Honiara, in the production and sale of home-brewed alcohol (known locally as kwaso), in the use of drugs like marijuana, as well as in unemployment and other social problems.

The police continued to investigate allegations of abuse of public office by some political leaders. Three members of Parliament (MPs) were charged in 2008. In April, former East Honiara MP Charles Dausabea was found guilty of conversion and sentenced to eighteen months in jail. In court, Magistrate Michael Scott said he was satisfied with the crown case that Dausabea fraudulently converted S140,000 of government funds, entrusted to him for the church, to his personal bank account. Dausabea appealed the magistrate’s decision, but the High Court ruled against him. Dausabea subsequently lost his seat in Parliament (Pacnews, 23 April 2008). Central Guadalcanal MP Peter Shannel also lost his parliamentary seat after being sentenced to
a nine-month jail term in July 2008. The Honiara Magistrates Court found Shannel guilty of carrying a dangerous weapon in a restricted area (Pacnews, 27 Aug 2008). Similarly, the High Court found the former prime minister and member for Savo-Russels, Sir Allan Kemakeza, guilty of demanding money with menace, intimidation, and larceny. These crimes were committed during the ethnic tension when he was prime minister. Despite sentencing Sir Allan to eighteen months in jail, the court initially ordered that he serve only five months imprisonment. The court then ordered that Sir Allan serve only two months, with the remaining three months suspended. In September 2008 Sir Allan was jailed, and consequently, he lost his Savo-Russell Islands parliamentary seat (Pacnews, 3 Sept 2008).

Although RAMSI contributed substantially to improved law and order, in early October 2008 a People’s Survey conducted by the Australian National University compared attitudes about RAMSI in 2008 with those in 2007. The survey showed a drop in support for RAMSI’s presence in the country from 90 to 86 percent. The number of undecided people increased from 4 percent in 2007 to 6 percent in 2008. In Malaita, the support for RAMSI declined from 87 percent to 76 percent, while on Guadalcanal, the support for RAMSI decreased by 3 percent, from 97 percent in to 94 percent in 2008 (Pacnews, 17 Oct 2008). The survey was conducted in Central, Guadalcanal, Malaita, Western, and Honiara provinces. A total of 4,304 Solomon Islanders were interviewed and seventy-four focus group discussions were held.

By December, Solomon Islanders, like people elsewhere, slowed down and celebrated Christmas and New Year with their families and relatives. It was also a time when parents became anxious about their children’s school fees and other back-to-school expenses for the next year. To the relief of some parents, the C-NURA government launched its fee-free education policy in January 2009. At the official launch of the fee-free education, the prime minister said that his “government has made it one of its flagship policies to provide fee-free education in the Solomon Islands [and] today marks the implementation of this historic policy initiative.” He added that apart from the subsidized school fees, the government would continue to give other, additional grants in support of its fee-free basic education policy. NZAID, Taiwan, and the Solomon Islands government contributed funds to implement the basic education policy (sto, 15 Jan 2009).

In terms of livelihood, an increasing proportion of Solomon Islanders continue to experience hardships in the face of increasing inflation, weakening national currency, looming negative impacts of the global financial crisis, and the negative impacts of natural disaster for which the country is highly vulnerable. After one year in office, the C-NURA government is providing fee-free basic education, has normalized diplomatic relations, explored options for establishing political stability, strengthened accountability institutions, and signed a land-lease agreement with land-owners on Malaita, which paved the way for developing a major palm oil
industry. Whether or not the c-nura government will remain in power until the next general elections, scheduled for April 2010, remains to be seen. But one thing is certain, Solomon Islands needs a good government, the commitment of its citizens, and the continued support of its development partners in order to achieve sustainable socioeconomic development.

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