Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands survived 2009 reasonably peacefully, with several challenges and achievements. As in 2008, citizens continued to call for decisive and visionary leadership throughout the year. Major issues that warrant some coverage in this review include the Fee Free Education policy; the continuation and conclusion of former Solomon Islands Attorney General Julian Moti’s child sex case; 2009 entitlements for members of Parliament; workers’ strikes (or their intentions for industrial action); by-elections; ministerial reshuffles and election of the new governor-general; the ongoing tug-of-war on the Political Parties Integrity Bill; double standards used by the Solomon Islands government in regional and international politics; lawlessness; and central-provincial government collaborations. By the end of 2009, the focus was once again on national elections scheduled to take place around August 2010.

The Coalition for National Unity and Rural Advancement (CNURA) government in late 2008 adopted the Fee Free Education policy. This was launched and implemented in 2009 despite a number of cautions. For instance, the premier of Choisuel province, Jackson Kiloe, warned that the policy could promote more dependency on aid, as donors were requested to foot the bill (STO, 2 Jan 2009). The implementation of this policy as a priority was reflected in the cabinet’s approval of the largest sector budget in 2009, with a 24 percent increase in the recurrent budget and 12 percent decrease in the development budget compared to 2008 (MEHRD 2009, 3). New Zealand Aid (NZAid) and the Republic of China (ROC) provided additional funds to implement the policy. By June 2009, the prime minister acknowledged that the policy had problems, and again in September he admitted that the Fee Free Education policy was challenging, although it relieved the burden on parents and guardians. The Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD) revealed that a major drawback of the policy was that it led to the misunderstanding that parents were no longer required to contribute toward school expenses (MEHRD 2009, 44). Moreover, the sustainability of funds for this bold move by government has yet to be determined, although SI$66 million was allocated for it in 2010 (STO, 18 Jan 2009). (SI$1 equals approximately US$8.33.)

The Julian Moti case continued to be featured in political commentaries throughout 2009. With the toppling of the Grand Coalition for Change (GCC) government, the installation of CNURA government, and Moti’s eventual deportation to face child sex charges in Australia, the issue has not
really disappeared from political commentaries. However, the deportation has tremendously improved relations between Australia and Solomon Islands. In late August 2009, Moti filed a summary of grounds to support his application for a permanent stay of proceedings with the Queensland Supreme Court. One point Moti insisted on, among others, was the allegation that the Australian government did not want him to play any part in the governing of Solomon Islands. Moti’s lawyers referred to the payment of $1.2 million to witnesses over a two-year period and a SMS (short message service) text sent by a witness to an Australian federal agent as evidence. In the SMS text, a female witness indicated that if her conditions were not met, then she was being “used as a tool by the Australian government for political and neocolonial reasons” (SSN, 22 Aug 2009). Moti’s defense lawyers also insisted that the Australian government had assisted the CNURA government to unlawfully return him to face charges in Australia (SSN, 27 Aug 2009).

Late in September, the Queensland Supreme Court heard that witnesses to Moti’s case called by counsel had been threatened with termination from employment if they gave evidence (SSN, 22 Sept 2009). The Solomon Islands leader of the Opposition reacted to this and called on the police commissioner and the CNURA government not to meddle with Moti’s case. He claimed, “What’s happening is not right and this is probably done right under the nose of the Police Commissioner and I would like to call on him to seriously look at this allegation and to ensure that officers involved in carrying out the deportation of Moti give their evidence without any influence” (SSN, 24 Sept 2009). After a long battle in the Queensland Supreme Court, child sex charges against Moti were dropped on 15 December 2009. Justice Debbie Mullins ruled that the Australian Federal Police payments to witnesses constituted an “abuse of process” (SSN, 17 Dec 2009). The Moti case led to the downfall of the Manasseh Sogavare regime, and it has continued to haunt the Solomon Islands government to this day. In the meantime Moti is out of the way, but the issue may pop up again in 2010 politics. Whatever happens, one thing is clear: Moti entered Solomon Islands illegally, and he was probably shown the exit the same way.

By mid 2009, a highly contentious issue came to light when the Parliamentary Entitlements Commission (PEC) recommended exorbitant entitlements to members of Parliament (MPs) and their spouses. The controversial awards appeared in an Extraordinary Gazette published on 6 July and backdated to 1 April 2009. A particular recommendation to award $50,000 to MP spouses at the end of four years was heavily criticized, as it would add up to $2.5 million (SSN, 14 July 2009). The total amount to be met by the government in these entitlements would be around $20 million dollars, at a time when most economies around the world were going through a recession. Immediately after the announcement of these awards, Transparency Solomon Islands (TSI) slammed the increases. Commending the overwhelming condemnation of the PEC actions, Transparency Solomon Islands stated: “The increase in terminal grants would cost the country $20 million dollars. There is
absolutely no good reason for paying such payments” (SSN, 22 July 2009). Under the new awards, the prime minister would receive a taxpayer-funded new house and a car when he leaves office, plus free gas, electricity, and water bills. Ex-gratia payments for each consecutive MP term were also increased from SI$25,000 to SI$100,000 (SSN, 23 July 2009). Interestingly, Minister for Finance the Honorable Snyder Rini, and another sitting member, the Honorable Francis Zama, chair of the Public Accounts Committee, are PEC members; former MP Danny Philips was the interim PEC chair (SSN, 29 July 2009). The independence of the Parliamentary Entitlements Commission in recommending these awards was therefore severely compromised.

The Solomon Islands Chamber of Commerce and Industries (SICCI) and Solomon Islands Council of Trade Unions (SICTU) issued a joint statement on 10 August pleading for the entitlements to be scrapped. The statement noted, “The SICCI and SICTU are in full agreement that the increases in entitlements are unjustifiable, in the context of current economic and budgetary crises” (NEN, 12 Aug 2009). In addition, civil society organizations under the umbrella of Development Services Exchange denounced the awards, stating: “It is sad to note that our Parliamentarian[s], who [are] suppose[d] to make decisions to . . . [move the] country forward[,] [seem] to be pulling this country down” (SSN, 14 Aug 2009). A whole cross-section of the country felt betrayed by what seemed to be Parliamentarians giving themselves and their families more monetary benefits.

Parliament itself was divided on the issue. The prime minister and his cabinet distanced themselves from the awards and blamed the Parliamentary Entitlements Commission for the decision. During a public forum on 19 August, the minister for education agreed that the entitlements were wrong. But the public was uneasy with government silence over the issue and, with numerous complaints in the local media, the government had to act or be seen as moving to address their concerns. The prime minister’s office subsequently directed the attorney general to seek a high court declaration on whether or not the Parliamentary Entitlements Commission acted within the constitution when setting these awards (SSN, 25 Aug 2009). Meanwhile, mixed messages were coming from Parliament, with signs of a rift slowly emerging in reaction to the prime minister’s request. Certain members wanted him to follow the cabinet decision, that is, to review just three of the 2009 entitlements: “the [SI]$50,000 grants to be paid to spouses of MPs every four years; the [SI]$400,000 gratuity for MPs leaving parliament and the new retirement package for the prime minister” (SSN, 16 Sept 2009). Only one minister of the Crown came out publicly to forfeit awards that he and his spouse would have received under the 2009 Parliament Entitlement Regulations. The Honorable Steve Abana stated, “I walked into Parliament empty handed, so I should return empty handed as well” (SSN, 14 Sept 2009). With all the debates and the attorney general’s application, the case went before the country’s high court. On Thursday, 22 October 2009, the high court quashed the awards. In his ruling Justice Albert Palmer stated, “In view of the blatant
errors committed in the decision making process, the only proper thing to do in the circumstances is to order that they be quashed with immediate effect” (SSN, 23 Oct 2009). This finally laid the issue of entitlements to rest, at least for the moment, with new members appointed to the Parliamentary Entitlements Commission.

The high court ruling on the PEC decision triggered the Solomon Islands National Teachers Union (sinta) and Solomon Islands Public Employees Union (siPEU) to launch threats and notices for strike action. It gave them the impetus to ask for salary increases, as wages had remained static despite increasing costs of living. The public employees union issued a twenty-eight-day strike notice to the cabinet on 24 July. The union demanded housing entitlement awards, and, for 2009, allowances and awards, border claims, tsunami ex-gratia payments, and a variable cost of living adjustment (COLA), which was pitched at 66 percent (SSN, 4 Aug 2009). Likewise, the teachers’ union submitted a two-week strike notice to the government on 10 August for an 18.01 percent COLA salary increase (SSN, 11 Aug 2009). The teachers’ union submissions were outstanding issues but, due to the financial crises, they had not been taken up earlier. The PEC decision left them with no option but to pressure the government to address them or have the Parliamentary Entitlements Commission revoke the gazette awards for members of Parliament. These disputes dragged on for several months, and siPEU claims are being referred to the Trade Disputes Panel, meaning that public officers must return to work and await a decision from the panel. The teachers’ union successfully negotiated a 9.5 percent COLA award payment. The 4.5 percent payment was backdated to January 2009, and an additional 5 percent increase was to be paid starting 1 January 2010 (SSN, 26 Oct 2009). With the current and expected salary increases, the government will spend 30 percent of the total budget on salaries in 2010.

During 2009 two former convicted members of Parliament, who recently served their jail sentences, regained their seats in by-elections. A new governor-general was also elected, and some ministers were reshuffled or relieved of their portfolios. Peter Shannel, member for Central Guadalcanal, and Sir Allan Kemakeza, member for Savo/Russel, both served prison terms, having being found guilty of various crimes in 2008. Shannel was convicted for carrying a dangerous weapon in a restricted area in July 2008, while Kemakeza was found guilty of demanding money with menace, intimidation, and larceny in September 2008. Both vacated their parliamentary seats after sentencing. In 2009, they both contested by-elections and were duly reelected—Shannel in May and Kemakeza in October. The legality of Sir Allan’s reelection while he was on suspended sentence is still before the courts. For Shannel, once convicted he lost his seat as well as his position as head of the Independent Group in Parliament. Isaac Inoke, the member for West Honiara, was therefore appointed to head the Independent Group of Parliament starting in 2009.

There were also several ministerial reshuffles during the year. According to Prime Minister Dr Derek Sikua, such reshuffles were made “in view of the need to speed up implementation
POLITICAL REVIEWS • MELANESIA

of various government programmes and projects in the ministries concerned” (sto, 6 May 2009). Three ministers—Edward Hunuehu, Toswell Kaua, and Martin Maga—were also relieved of their portfolios on medical grounds. In addition, a new governor-general, Frank Kabui, was elected in June to replace Sir Nathaniel Waena, who had served a five-year term. Prior to his election, Kabui was the president of the Solomon Islands Bar Association and was once the attorney general of the country. He officially took over the helm on 7 July 2009. He received his knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II of England at Buckingham Palace in November 2009.

A number of high-level consultations focusing on important legislation were also carried out throughout the year. The Foreign Relations Committee held public hearings on the work of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and the partnership it has with the Solomon Islands government (sto, 13 Nov 2009). A report on this was submitted to Parliament for its deliberations. Another consultation was that of the Constitution Congress (CC) and Eminent Persons Advisory Council (EPAC), two groups established to oversee the development of the draft federal constitution of Solomon Islands. The two bodies deliberated and reviewed the first draft of the federal constitution, concluding the task on 26 June (NEN, 1 July 2009). Members will bring the reviewed first draft to all provinces in 2010 before finalizing it for Parliament’s consideration. These are both works in progress that will carry over into 2010.

A piece of legislation that brought much debate and political commentary throughout the year is the Political Parties Integrity Bill 2009. This bill is aimed at controlling and limiting the movement of members of Parliament from one political party to another, that is, “crossing the floor.” The intentions behind the bill are no doubt noble, as the country’s political history has recorded only one government serving the entire term (2001–2005). However, the introduction of the bill to Parliament was complicated by opposition from academics, lawyers, and certain members of Parliament. Three Australian political commentators, for instance, argued that this piece of legislation could make way for the creation of a dictatorial regime such as that experienced in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and elsewhere. They advised that laws against floor crossing sometimes “have been introduced in the hope of consolidating one political faction but have ended up strengthening another” (Fraenkel and others 2008, 3). They argued that such legislation affords limited leeway to remove unpopular leaders. A local lawyer, Andrew Nori, shared similar sentiments, arguing that certain provisions of the bill would pave the way for corruption (sto, 11 Nov 2009). The government paid little attention to this advice, hoping to push the bill through Parliament. A group of parliamentarians led by North New Georgia MP Peter Boyers opposed the quick introduction of this bill in the November sitting of Parliament. Since it is a constitutional amendment, it will require approval by two-thirds of members to become law. With the likelihood that the bill will not secure the required number of votes, the prime minister withdrew it before Parliament retired for the 2009 Christmas break.
A committee has been appointed since then to review and amend the bill before it is re-tabled in Parliament in 2010.

On the regional and international front, Solomon Islands continues to engage with the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and partners under the RAMSI arrangement. The Solomon Islands government undoubtedly requires RAMSI assistance in its efforts toward peace and security. The review of the partnership in 2009 was a move to strengthen this. In the case of Fiji’s status in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Solomon Islands employed a double standard. On the one hand, as a PIF member, Solomon Islands agreed to a decision to suspend Fiji from the organization, in which Australia and New Zealand were powerful members. On the other hand, as a member of the Melanesian Spearhead Group, the Solomon Islands government approach was more lenient, conveying the impression that things are normal in Fiji. Solomon Islands seemed to be signaling two contradictory messages on the same issue—a notable character of Solomon Islands politics in 2009.

A similar attitude can be seen in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States and their relationships with countries such as Cuba and Iran. The explanation in this case points to a foreign policy of “friends to all and enemies to none.” In normal terms, RAMSI was the Australian and New Zealand response to the United States’ war on terror. RAMSI was created after Solomon Islands was termed a “fragile” and “failing” state in the wake of the social tensions of 1998. While acknowledging the importance of the RAMSI partnership in maintaining law, order, and governance, the Solomon Islands government has gone ahead and strengthened ties with Cuba and Iran—countries from the other extreme of the political spectrum. Cuban doctors are now serving in the country’s health ministry, and more Solomon Islands students are currently studying medicine in Cuba, with Iran covering the students’ airfares. In November, money sent from Tehran into the ANZ Bank in Honiara for the airfares of twenty-five students to Cuba was returned via the Commonwealth Bank in Australia allegedly for “political reasons” (SSN, 17 Nov 2009). After much media speculation on the role of United States on this issue, the US ambassador to Solomon Islands denied any American involvement with the Iran aid. He nevertheless stressed that “if the government of Solomon Islands wants to do business with Iran or Cuba, it’s their business, but we prefer they do not do business with them” (SSN, 19 Nov 2009). Once again, Solomon Islands sent signals of having two tongues when it comes to regional and international politics. The relationships with Cuba and Iran are ongoing, and with Israel’s appointment of a consulate in Honiara and several visits of Israeli officials in recent years, the situation is sure to be an issue for 2010 and beyond.

Toward the end of 2009, Solomon Islands’ relationship with the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan) was also tested. Since the 1980s, Solomon Islands has had diplomatic relations with the Republic of China and not with the People’s Republic of China (PRC, Mainland China). For this reason, Taiwan has been pumping money into the coffers of the Solomon
Islands government. Taiwan is the sole financier of the popular Rural Constituency Development Fund, a discretionary fund for all members of Parliament to use for their constituencies. When added to the Millennium Development Funds and Rural Livelihood Fund, these discretionary funds amount to s$8 million per member per four-year term. Throughout the year, constituents quizzed their members in the media about where such funds were directed. Allegations of misuse and vote buying with such funds were visible in the opinion columns of newspapers throughout 2009. An interesting conversation emerged in late 2009 when Guadalcanal Province signed a fisheries deal with the Guandong Province of Mainland China. The Taiwanese ambassador in Honiara reacted angrily, saying, “Guadalcanal Premier Stephen Panga is a leader who cannot be trusted” (SSN, 17 Dec 2009). In response, the premier claimed that his government had simply revived a long-established relationship with Guandong Province. It was alleged that the provincial premier was reacting to ROC provision of funding for members of Parliament with little attention to provinces. Once again there was discontinuity in Solomon Islands politics, here between local and national levels.

For provincial leaders, 2009 was seen as one of neglect and disregard by the national government (SSN, 1 Oct 2009). For instance, the Malaita Province premier, the Honorable Richard N Irosaea, called on the government to fast-track development projects on Malaita, including the Auluta Oil Palm Project, the Bina Harbour Industrial site, and Suava Bay Fisheries facility. Irosaea observed that “while the Government had been giving budgetary support to the three projects, it appeared to be almost ad hoc with no clear specific goals” (STO, 15 Aug 2009). On Guadalcanal, the premier asked the government not to expand the Honiara city boundary and to apply heavy penalties to land trespassers (SSN, 6 Nov 2009). These issues were contained in the Townsville Peace Agreement, which had put an end to militia activities in 2001, but to date, the government was not doing enough to address them. Overall, premiers were unhappy with the national government’s attitude toward the provinces in 2009. The CNURA government has responded by setting up a new body to pursue the premiers’ resolutions (SSN, 7 Oct 2009). Whether this will improve the relationship between these two levels of government in 2010 is yet to be seen.

In the area of peace-building efforts, major factions within the former Malaita Eagle Force and the Isatabu Freedom Movement have moved toward reconciliation. Following a Wind of Change conference in May, former Guadalcanal militants pledge to pursue peace (SSN, 12 May 2009). Likewise, former Malaita militants and the former Malaitan government reconciled their differences in August (SSN, 20 Aug 2009). It is important to mention here that Solomon Islanders also witnessed the launching of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in late April (SIBC, 29 April 2009). This launch was performed by Bishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu of South Africa. Although the TRC work was delayed
in 2009, it is highly likely that it will commence its work in 2010.

Despite these positive moves, law and order remained a problem even with RAMSI’s presence. Group crimes and thugs continued to cause problems and riots in Honiara despite the Solomon Islands Police Force’s assurances early in April that it was now equipped for unrest (SN, 8 April 2009). A notable criminal event in 2009 was the robbing of the police commissioner’s residence in October by ten masked men (SN, 1 Oct 2009). In November, a riot broke out in Honiara after Malaitan fans were not happy with a referee’s decision during the Solomon Islands Cup soccer tournament. The Solomon Islands Football Federation office was burned to the ground, destroying all equipment, files, and valuables (NEN, 20 Nov 2009). This took place despite RAMSI and Solomon Islands Police presence at that time. It is no wonder that two prominent members of Parliament expressed fears over the possibility of another period of tension if the underlying problems facing the country are not properly addressed (SN, 9 Dec 2009).

As 2009 ended, two exciting developments loom on the horizon: the opening of the telecommunications market, and the 2010 national general elections. In early December, the local telecommunications market was reopened for competition after Solomon Telekom received a new license, ending its fifteen-year monopoly over telecommunications in the country (SN, 8 Dec 2009). A few days after that, a new mobile license was granted to Bemobile Solomon Islands, which was selected over two other applicants, Digicel and Milestone Developments. The company planned to cover 80 percent of the country in its first twenty-one months of operations. This was backed by a $10 million performance bond (SN, 19 Dec 2009). In early 2010, Bemobile’s chief executive officer, Julien Coutsaury, said that “we want to send a message to the Solomon Islands. You can count on us” (SN, 14 Jan 2010). Indeed, this is an exciting development that Solomon Islanders look forward to in 2010.

The 2010 national elections are forthcoming, and the current focus is on who should be elected into the next house. New political parties have formed and old ones have reemerged in anticipation of the elections. Individual politicians and likely candidates are once again making promises to entice would-be voters. As this report was being finalized, voter registration was well underway. A new political party known as OUR Party launched its political platform on 17 January 2010 under the leadership of the Honorable Manasseh Sogavare and the Honorable Patterson Oti. Several other political parties, including the Peace, Oneness and Prosperity Party, claiming to represent women, are preparing to launch in early 2010. No doubt, Solomon Islands is in for another interesting national election. A year from now, we will be in a better position to comment on the programs and activities of a new government. Solomon Islands may be in need of leadership that is radical enough to exert change while at the same time attentive enough to listen to internal and external advice. Without this, Solomon Islands will continue with the kind of politics it had entertained for the past thirty-one years.

GORDON LEUA NANAU
References


NEN, National Express News. Tri-weekly newspaper, Honiara.


Vanuatu

2008 was an active year in politics for Vanuatu on a number of levels. Vanuatu national elections were held in September, followed in December by provincial council elections in Penama, Malampa, Shefa, and Tafea, which served to consolidate the power gained by various parties in the national elections. Municipalities, which have been the subject of various allegations of mismanagement over the past few years, continued to be controversial. The country also had to deal with significant governance issues relating to rising crime levels and difficulties in controlling prisoners. Issues of economic policy also created challenges with Vanuatu’s financial services sector coming under increasing pressure, the rising cost of living being felt quite strongly, and a proposed increase to employment conditions creating uncertainty within the private sector.

Ham Lini’s National United Party (NUP)–led coalition had taken over in December 2004, following a successful vote of no confidence against the government coalition led by Serge Vohor’s Union of Moderate Parties (UMP), which had been elected only five months earlier. Although several reshuffles took place in the intervening years, Lini’s ability to survive to the end of Parliament’s four-year term was remarkable. The previous decade had seen regular votes of no confidence and numerous threats of such votes leading to nine different coalition governments and two snap elections. Lini was able to stay in power mainly because he refused to take action (ie, hold accountable politicians who were members of the coalition accused of mismanagement, corruption, or misbehavior) or make decisions that could jeopardize the coalition. Maintaining political stability was his prime objective.

In the lead-up to the national election on 2 September 2008, some of the loudest voices were urging the public to vote for change—to elect a new, younger group of politicians as the best way to bring about the transformation of Vanuatu politics. As is usually the case in Vanuatu, voter turnout was high—70.4 percent of registered voters cast their ballots. Considering the fact that voting is not compulsory, the regularly high turnout indicates that democratic practices