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The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 2013
NIC MACLELLAN

Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 2013
DAVID CHAPPELL, JON FRAENKEL, GORDON LEUA NANAU,
HOWARD VAN TREASE, MURIDAN S WIDJOJO

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Solomon Islands

The year 2013 was another trying one for Solomon Islands, with some promising developments and also problematic hangovers from 2012. In the region, national leaders participated in the discussions and activities of the Pacific Islands Forum, the South Pacific Community, and the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG). Nationally, the ruling government reiterated its areas of policy emphasis, formally established a national university, commenced the formal transition of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), and initiated reconciliation efforts in parts of the country, albeit amidst criticism and a range of controversial decisions.

One of the memorable and positive events of 2013 was the country’s
hosting of the South Pacific Pageant, which brought in ten contestants from neighboring Pacific Islands to vie for the South Pacific Queen crown. The contestants brought to the forefront issues facing contemporary Pacific societies. Notably, they all highlighted the widespread concern for domestic violence and its impacts on women, children, and society in general; as the Fijian contestant declared, it “is not acceptable” (SS, 15 Dec 2012).

Solomon Islands was honored to host such an important regional event, and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Home Affairs Manasseh Maelanga reiterated this in his speech welcoming the contestants by stating that “events like this bring together people from the Pacific to the Solomon Islands and reinforce our image as the Hapi Isles” (SS, 2 Dec 2013).

Fiji Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama was the guest of honor during the country’s thirty-fifth anniversary of independence on 7 July 2013. This gesture showed the closeness of Solomon Islands and Fiji as Melanesian neighbors; moreover, it was a statement of their solidarity in the Melanesian Spearhead Group, where Solomon Islands and Fiji have stood by each other’s side during times of trouble. The message behind Bainimarama’s selection might have been directed at the bigger countries in the region and those outside of the MSG family who were not very happy with the Fijian prime minister and his path to power. Prime Minister Bainimarama boldly affirmed the countries’ close relationship by saying, “We are now working with our Melanesian partners—including Solomon Islands—to build a new and better region in the South West Pacific, a stronger region with more economic clout and a louder voice in global affairs” (Fiji Government 2013). There were concerns locally about the cost of hosting Bainimarama and his delegation on his trip. Just the vehicle that was purchased for Bainimarama’s use cost taxpayers approximately US$41,340 (SS, 9 July 2013). (One US dollar is approximately $7.27.) Nevertheless, this invitation and visit by Fiji’s prime minister demonstrated the genuineness of the two countries’ relationship. To some extent, such visits boost Solomon Islands’ image. As Dorothy Wickham told Radio New Zealand (10 July 2013), Bainimarama noted that some ordinary, rural Solomon Islanders have expressed admiration for some of his policies.

Another noteworthy visit was that of King Tupou VI of Tonga in his capacity as chancellor of the University of the South Pacific (USP) to award certificates, diplomas, and degrees to 146 graduates at the USP Solomon Islands Centre in September. It was an important event, as the king represented both his country and the Pacific’s regional university. As with Bainimarama’s visit, people were happy that another neighboring Pacific Island leader visited the country and that King Tupou VI took time to share the experiences of Tonga and the university community with his subjects living in the country as well as with various government dignitaries, including Deputy Prime Minister Maelanga (USP Beat, 11 Oct 2013). The significance of this visit is that Solomon Islands continues to benefit from regional cooperation arrangements and is working closely with
other Pacific Island states on what matters to its people.

The year 2013 also celebrated hidden successes achieved by local and ordinary Solomon Islands businesses. Although these were not very well covered by the local media, there were certain positive changes throughout the country that are worth acknowledging. These are achievements in communities, spearheaded not by political leaders but by visionary Solomon Islanders and community groups in their own ways. One such success that stood out was the purchase and commissioning of a third interisland cargo and passenger vessel by the Isabel Development Corporation (IDC) to service the local population and other remote provinces (IDC, 11 March 2014; SIBC Online, 12 Feb 2014). The Isabel Province–based shipping company has grown steadily since its establishment by visionary leaders forty years ago.

Another commendable success celebrated in 2013 was the move by the Guadalcanal Plains Landowners Association (GPLA) to venture into tourism development. It has long been noted that landowning groups in the country do not always invest money from their resources for sustainable revenue. Indeed, since the establishment of Solomon Islands Plantations Ltd in the late 1960s, landowning groups rarely invested their money in profitable businesses but rather shared it among themselves for consumption. This changed with the emergence of visionary leaders in the group after the civil strife of 1998–2003. The establishment of the GPLA in 2005 saw the diversion of shares by landowners into worthwhile undertakings and investments. In late 2012, the landowners shared dividends to the tune of SI$15 million from their investments—the first return of investment of its kind by landowning groups in the country (SS, 14 Dec 2012). In 2013, the GPLA ventured into the tourism industry by purchasing their first motel/hotel to run, providing a positive model for other groups in Solomon Islands to emulate in order to ensure that services and sustainable revenues are offered to their own people.

The year closed with the nomination and knighting of Paul Tovua in recognition of his service to the nation (SS, 6 Jan 2014). Sir Paul Tovua was recommended for knighthood in 2013 and was appointed Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George during the 2014 New Year’s awards, a fitting award for a leader and statesman who struggled to bring peace back to the country. Sir Paul was a former member and Speaker of Parliament and chair of the Peace Council, among other positions in which he served the welfare of citizens.

On the political front, the age-old game of finger pointing and accusations of corruption and unethical decision making continued to feature prominently in both provincial and national politics. In Malaita Province, Premier Edwin Suibaea was accused of weak leadership and poor financial management, leading to the resignation of two ministers in March (SS, 4 March 2013). Suibaea managed to defer a motion of no confidence at the time, giving him the opportunity to secure enough support to continue ruling (SS, 29 April 2013). Guadalcanal Province has struggled with
an unstable government since 2012. In September 2013, eight executive members resigned from the Stephen Panga-led provincial government (ss, 25 Sept 2013). With some delaying tactics and persuasion, three members joined Panga’s camp in early 2014, although Panga’s deputy also resigned (ss, 10 Jan 2014).

Political wrangling also occurred at the national level. Throughout the year, the opposition group in Parliament and civil society organizations accused the government of making unethical decisions on certain issues, including the diversion of landowner royalty funds by various government ministries as well as compensation claims from former Attorney General Julian Moti. From the royalty funds, a total of “[SI]$3,704,602.53 was paid to the Guadalcanal provincial government, in cash, between 13th February 2013 to 3rd May 2013” (ss, 11 July 2013). The question was why such funds were paid outside of the provisions of the Mines and Minerals (Royalties) Regulations 2011 (SIG 2011). Prime Minister Lilo stepped in and vowed to pursue the culprits, appointing a task force to investigate the issue (ss, 26 Sept 2013). To date, little has been done to catch those responsible.

A decision made in 2007 by the governments of two former prime ministers, Manasseh Sogavare and Derek Sikua, also returned to haunt the Solomon Islands government in 2013: the Moti affair. The current Lilo-led government was reportedly making contact with deported former Attorney General Julian Moti to settle his claims out of court. The government, together with Sogavare, strongly felt that Moti should be compensated and that the national government is obliged to pay. The ruling government sent current Attorney General Billy Titiulu to negotiate directly with Moti on how to settle the claims (SIBC, 24 Dec 2013). Opposition leader Derek Sikua, however, disagreed with the out-of-court settlement, saying that “any claim for compensation in relation to Mr Moti’s 2007 deportation should be made through the courts” (SIBC, 28 Jan 2014). Meanwhile Andrew Muaki, a lawyer and former government advisor, pointed out that no Solomon Islands court has declared Moti’s deportation illegal and therefore the government is not obliged to compensate him (ss, 17 Jan 2014). The government could have settled the issue out of court, but with criticism from the wider community, the issue is being sidelined, at least for the time being. This will likely return as an issue during the 2014 national election.

The Solomon Islands government was able to realize its long-term dream of having its own university in 2013. The Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development introduced a bill in Parliament (SIG 2012) that changed the name of the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE) to Solomon Islands National University (SINU), amending the SICHE Act of 1984 (SIG 1984). The move was met with both criticism and praise. Some congratulated the government on this achievement, though critics mostly pointed to the lack of trained manpower, financial resources, and will to complete the transition from SICHE to SINU. Barely a year after SINU’s founding, critics’ fears began to be seen as well
founded. The government was reportedly faced with financial difficulties, which resulted in its failure to meet its obligations toward Sinu in 2013. The university management was left to deal with student demonstrations over late payment of their allowances and was even forced to ban students from the dormitories if they didn’t pay their fees (SIBC, 7 Feb 2014). It should be stressed that over the years, successive governments have made it a practice to provide full scholarships to students doing teacher training and nursing health studies at Siche as well as to other students in regional universities in Fiji and Papua New Guinea, and even those in Cuba. Otherwise, they face tremendous difficulty in paying tuition and fees and supporting themselves and their families on the student allowances. The move to ask students to pay a certain percentage of their tuition and fees was met with mixed feelings. This year, Sinu students were still calling on the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development and their respective members of Parliament to pay their fees and other essential education costs (SS, 7 Feb 2014). Indeed, the recent decisions by the government to award education fees to members of Parliament exacerbated the “waiting for a free handout” mentality on the part of the students.

At the primary and secondary school levels, teachers and the government were at loggerheads throughout 2013. The teachers staged a sit-in protest to force the government to look at an overdue pay increase following a salary adjustment (ie, a re-leveling exercise) that had been agreed to in 2011 (STO, 7 Dec 2011). The strike was resolved with the intervention of the Ministry of Education promising teachers that their past-due increases would be paid through a S$38 million fund approved by government (SS, 5 Feb 2013). But the government failed to meet the stated deadline, and throughout 2013 the relationship between the state and teachers continued to be a thorny one. The education sector faced a lot of difficulties with its administration and came under much criticism for failing to live up to agreements with the teachers’ association. All national examinations were delayed until November 2013, which ultimately delayed the start of the 2014 school year, progression of students to high classes, and the selection and sending of new students to regional universities (SS, 5 Nov 2013).

The law-and-order situation in Solomon Islands continued to be fragile, although it has greatly improved compared to the tense period of 1998–2003. In 2013, RAMSI announced its transition away from playing a leading role in the three pillars of its intervention: law and order, governance, and development. These functions are now slowly being returned to the Solomon Islands government and its institutions. RAMSI’s transition was initiated ten years after the intervention began in 2003. Speaking at the official commencement of the transition phase, Secretary-General of the Pacific Islands Forum Tuiloma Slade stated: “Solomon Islands is now a secure and stable country, open for business and its people free from intimidation” (RAMSI 2013, 1).

There are mixed feelings in Solomon Islands about the transition, but there is nothing much that the people
or their government can do to halt it, as the decision to proceed was made by Australia and New Zealand, the main sponsors of the intervention project. Part of local skepticism is attributable to the uncertainty over the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force’s readiness to take on the role of policing. However, the police did some things well in 2013. For instance, with the help of the people of the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, the police recaptured three prison escapees who were closely associated with the warlord Harold Keke at the height of the tensions (SS, 8 Nov 2013). The escapees were apprehended after months of terrorizing their own people of South Guadalcanal. Police also attended to many other crimes around Honiara and throughout the other nine provinces. Unfortunately, Edmund Sae, a fugitive who has been on the run since the arrival of RAMSI, has yet to be captured on Malaita. Malaitan communities did not cooperate with the police for fear of their own lives. In his New Year’s speech, Solomon Islands Governor General Frank Kabui called on Mr Sae to do the right thing and give himself up to police (SS, 6 Jan 2014). It should be pointed out that the possibility of another amnesty recently proposed by Prime Minister Lilo might just serve to encourage wanted criminals like Sae to keep holding on to their guns.

There is also public concern over the delay in appointing a new police commissioner. In late 2013, five individuals were shortlisted for the post. One name was selected and forwarded by the Police and Prison Service Commission to the Prime Minister’s Office in a formal recommendation to the governor general for appointment. Unfortunately, the person appointed was disqualified because of an age limit. This did not sit well with some groups in Solomon Islands, especially the Malaita Maasina Forum (MMF), which alleged that Prime Minister Lilo already had a person in mind, resulting in the disqualification of the recommended candidate. Although not substantiated, the MMF continues to accuse the Prime Minister’s Office during the latest round of the search for a new police commissioner (SIBC, 26 Feb 2014), despite the urgent need for a commissioner to enhance the people’s trust in police leadership and the force.

The failure of the government to officially release the 2012 report by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the roots of the ethnic tensions continued to confuse people in 2013. A version of the report was leaked and there is no indication when the report will be officially made public. Meanwhile, the reconciliation between the people of the Weather Coast and the government was criticized as selective and insensitive (SIBC, 17 Dec 2013). Hardy Kona, a critic of the government in this particular effort of reconciliation, stated that “reconciliation must be fair and inclusive otherwise it would only be disadvantageous and discriminatory” (SIBC, 17 Dec 2013).

In Honiara, the basic demands of city living continue to be problematic. City dwellers continue to experience water and electricity shortages and traffic congestion. In 2013, a Parliamentary Task Force was set up to look into the ever-increasing transport congestion in Honiara and the subsequent “short bus routes” taken by buses.
Because of short routes, some passengers are forced to take more than one bus to get to their destination, and a trip that used to cost SI$3 may now cost as much as SI$15. The task force consisted of all members of Parliament, and a report was produced after several consultation meetings. The task force recommended various strategies to address the short bus routes that adversely affect the Honiara traveling public (National Parliament of Solomon Islands 2013). Although the cabinet has yet to deliberate on the recommendations, the continuous insistence by bus owners to exploit the general public of Honiara must be addressed, and government intervention is needed. Whatever the outcome, this issue will continue to be a matter for deliberation in 2014.

On the regional, subregional, and international fronts, one of the critical issues for Solomon Islands was its lack of a clear position on the independence movement for West Papua. The country was accused of having a double standard when it came to discussing the issue in various forums. Unlike Vanuatu, the position of Solomon Islands was not obvious at the United Nations General Assembly. Prime Minister Lilo was also accused of following the wishes of the Indonesian government when a Solomon Islands delegation allegedly used Solomon Islands government funds to pay for a trip to Indonesia, despite Lilo’s claiming that the trip was fully funded by Indonesia. After protests by the public and in the media about the value of spending taxpayer dollars on the trip, the Indonesian government reportedly refunded the monies. Reports confirmed that funds were received from somebody within Indonesia, although whether the source of the refund was actually the government of Indonesia could not be determined (ss, 22 Aug 2013). Earlier in the year, Solomon Islands was again accused of blindly following the interests of Fiji during the Melanesian Spearhead Group’s trip to Indonesia. The trip resulted in much criticism of the MSG, and a proposed meeting to decide on the MSG’s position on West Papuan membership in the organization was delayed. Vanuatu withdrew from the MSG delegation, indicating where it stands on the issue (Radio New Zealand, 13 Jan 2014). West Papua will likely continue to be featured in MSG discussions in 2014.

Issues related to land and economic development continued to be featured throughout 2013. The tensions over environmental threats and pollution by the Gold Ridge mine on downstream and surrounding communities appeared sporadically throughout the year. Media statements, roadblocks, and strikes indicate that there are differences to be sorted out between the company, the state, and affected communities on these various concerns. Similar incidents and disruptions to logging companies occurred in other parts of the country. Disagreements with extractive industries continue to trigger conflicts among community members and companies. In Temotu, a church leader and his followers destroyed a logging company camp after all their attempts to ask the company to stop logging failed to bear fruit throughout the year (ss, 8 Jan 2014). The destruction was estimated at SI$1.1 million, and the perpetrators were arrested and charged (ss, 8
Similar incidents happened in Malaita and Isabel provinces in 2013. The increased incidence of such actions by community groups should serve as a warning that landowner concerns must be attended to when there are initial signs that the community and company disagree. Land issues also frustrate the government’s development efforts: the government’s program on economic growth centers was stymied by land disputes and disagreements. In order for such and similar undertakings to proceed, landownership and disputed area issues must be addressed.

The year 2013 saw the government rearticulate its priorities and what it hopes to achieve during the remainder of its term. Toward the end of the year, Prime Minister Lilo put out a list of priorities that his government will pursue in 2014 (SIBC, 22 Jan 2014), ranging from the forthcoming general elections to multilateral cooperation (OPMC, 21 Jan 2014). The irony is that the national general election will be held in late 2014; why the government only came out with its priorities toward the end of its tenure leaves much to be desired, and one only hopes that at least one of its priorities is achieved before the national elections.

At the close of 2013 and the beginning of 2014, international reggae bands and artists visited Solomon Islands. Julian Marley, the son of reggae king Bob Marley, visited the country and put on a show. Unfortunately, it was marred by stone-throwing fans who were unable to make it into the concert area, resulting in police and youth casualties (STO, 23 Dec 2013). In early 2014, Shaggy (Orville Richard Burrell), another world-renowned artist from Jamaica, visited Solomon Islands. The show had no incidents of bad behavior, in contrast to the Marley performance (STO, 4 Feb 2014). Both of these stars sang songs about love, oppression, politics, and people. One was a very peaceful show while the other resulted in casualties. These disparate outcomes may be an indication of the uncertainty and mixed reactions of Solomon Islanders as they await the results of the 2014 general elections and the RAMSI transition. Whatever happens, time will tell the status of the country’s social, economic, and political situations in 2014.

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tions of corruption within the government increased to unprecedented levels related to misuse of funds, shady land deals, questionable dismissals of public service officials, and the unexplained death of the minister of infrastructure and public utilities, Harry Iauko, rumored to be related to the arrival in Port Vila harbor of a mysterious super-luxury yacht, the *Phocea*, and its detention by the government due to fraudulent ownership documentation.

One of the hottest issues during 2011, which was not completely resolved by the end of that year, was ratification of Vanuatu’s bid to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). The government introduced a bill in Parliament in December and, despite opposition by most of the major non-governmental organizations such as the Malvatumauri (National Council of Chiefs), Chamber of Commerce, Vanuatu Christian Council, and Vanuatu National Workers Union, it passed by a vote of 25 in favor, 20 against (including that of Minister of Justice Ralph Regenvanu), and one abstention (Van Trease 2012). The bill, however, remained unsigned by the president, His Excellency Iolu Johnson Abibil, who had gone overseas for health reasons as the year ended. The acting president (the deputy speaker of Parliament) explained that he could not sign the bill, as the president had left instructions that he would not assent to WTO ratification if it was unconstitutional, which had yet to be determined (VDP, 17 Jan 2012).

According to the Vanuatu Constitution, “when a bill has been passed by Parliament it shall be presented to the President of the Republic who shall assent to it within 2 weeks.” Other-