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Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 2017

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Solomon Islands

The year 2017 has been one of intense political maneuvering in Solomon Islands, which had impacts on the functionality of the state apparatus. This started with media reports early in the year, revealing that the country was experiencing cash flow problems due to financial mismanagement (Aatai 2017a). It was alleged by former Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo that the government’s reserve had been reduced within two years from SI$1.5 billion to SI$150 million (SI$100 = US$12.63). As a result, the government had to borrow to pay its bills and settle other financial commitments (SIBC 2017b). Minister of Finance Snyder Rini assured the general public that government finances were stable and under control. This was contrary to the government’s actual financial performance throughout the year because the government continued to delay the payment of bills and meeting its financial commitments. For example, the Solomon Islands Government (SIG)—sponsored students studying inside the country at Solomon Islands National University and at regional tertiary institutions such as the University of the South Pacific continued to experience delays in the payment of their allowances (SFB 2017c; Abana 2017). The Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC), the country’s national broadcaster, took drastic measures to ensure that it continued to operate, despite the government’s cash flow problem (Runa 2017).

Apart from the country’s financial situation, the decisions of the Democratic Coalition for Change Government (DCCG) on a number of political issues were questionable. One of the government’s decisions was to purchase a fixed-term estate title held by Levers Solomon Limited and acquire 20 percent shares in Russell Islands Plantation Estate Limited. The deci-
sion to purchase the land was for the establishment of a bomb disposal training facility, a World War II memorial park, and a sporting facility. The agreement to settle the land purchase, signed in Brisbane between government officers and a Levers Solomon Limited representative, was questionable because there was no justification as to why the government opted for an outright purchase of the land while under law it could reassume possession of the land for a public purpose (see section 142a, Land and Titles [Amendment] Act 2016).

There was also no evidence of any due diligence checks being undertaken before the government signed the agreement to acquire the land and the 20 percent shares (SS 2017a).

Another issue was the undersea fiber optic cable project to provide faster and cheaper Internet connectivity (Kafo 2017). Initially, the Asian Development Bank approved a loan for the project but later withdrew it because of bidding irregularities (Solomon Times Online 2017b). However, in 2016, through the Ministry of Finance, the DCCG created a private company, the Solomon Islands Submarine Cable Company (siscc), to implement the project. In January 2017, it announced that Huawei Marine would be contracted to carry out the fiber optic cable project work (Solomon Times Online 2017a). Huawei Marine signed a contract with siscc in July to do the project. Australia raised security concerns that Huawei might have links to the Chinese government and would not allow the company to run the cable from Sydney to Honiara (ABC News 2017). The DCCG’s reaction was to consider an alternative strategy. There was also an allegation that Huawei had given monetary political donations to the prime minister and his senior ministers, but this was denied by the prime minister (SFB 2017b). Despite such denial, it was apparent that Minister of Finance Snyder Rini played a key role in shaping the commercial arrangement. The creation of siscc as a commercial arm of government could be subject to political manipulation since its establishment was through the Ministry of Finance.

An important event in 2017 was the exit of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) on 30 June. The purpose of the RAMSI intervention had been restoring law and order as well as state rebuilding through the strengthening of government machinery. As pointed out by the RAMSI coordinator, Quinton Devlin, RAMSI’s purpose was not about creating a perfect state but rather restoring stability and assisting “in establishing institutions that the Solomon Islands can continue to develop themselves” (Wyeth 2017). Following RAMSI’s withdrawal, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare traveled to Canberra in August and signed a bilateral security agreement with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. The agreement provided for the rapid deployment of Australian security forces in the event of a civil conflict. This could only happen based on a request from Solomon Islands Government and subject to Australia’s acceptance of it. While this was a positive step, the immediate ratification of this agreement in the Solomon Islands context by the National Parliament was not possible because of the chal-
lenge posed by the political instability that started to show during the month of August. The political instability was triggered following Prime Minister Sogavare’s sacking of Minister of Infrastructure and Development Jimmy Lusibaea and Minister of Mines David Dei Pacha due to corruption allegations and the reshuffling of other ministers (RNZ 2017d).

Allegations of corruption against government officers and members of Parliament continued to be featured in the news media and discussed on social media in 2017. For example, Magistrate John Numapo highlighted the fact that “corruption was not only spreading through Solomon Islands society but it was also slowly eating away once highly prized and respected societal values” (RNZ 2017a). According to Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index Report, Solomon Islands was ranked 72 out of 176 countries in 2016 in terms of perceived levels of public corruption (Transparency Solomon Islands 2016); in 2017 it was ranked 85 out of 180 countries (Transparency International 2017). Such statistics indicate that corruption is endemic and a huge problem that has negative impacts on governance structures and service delivery in all sectors. Operation Task Force Janus was launched in 2016 as a joint initiative between the Royal Solomon Islands Police and the Ministry of Finance and Treasury to address corruption within the government. It focused on investigating alleged corrupt practices relating to the government’s tendering and procurement process. This has led to a number of arrests including, in June, that of Minister for Provincial Government David Tome, who was charged for stealing money from his constituency (Buchanan 2017). Members have raised concerns in Parliament about Janus’s function and workings. Prime Minister Sogavare defended the work of Janus and reassured members “that the role of Taskforce Janus was simply to carry out investigations in collaboration with the Director of Public Prosecution” (RNZ 2017c).

Prime Minister Sogavare urged members of Parliament to consider Solomon Islands’ poor rating on corruption as a challenge to encourage them to be champions in the fight against corruption (SIBC 2017e). He emphasized that “this is a commitment—a crusade—the DCC Government had pledged to pursue and we will deliver on it as we have promised in our manifesto” (SIBC 2017a). While the DCCG’s plan to fight against corruption was an important policy, it was a challenge getting members of Parliament to support proposed legal instruments such as the Anti-Corruption Bill (ACB); the Integrity Whistle Blower Bill; the Ombudsman (Special Provisions) Bill; the Leadership Code (Further Provisions) Bill; the National and Provincial Election (Further Provisions) Bill; and the Freedom of Information Bill (Transparency Solomon Islands, 11 Jan 2016). The ACB was withdrawn from Parliament in May 2016 due to lack of support from members (RNZ 2016). During the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) Resumed 7th Session of the Implementation Review Group (IRG) in November 2016, the deputy secretary to the prime minister, Derek Futaiasi, stated that the “Anti-Corruption Bill, Whistleblower
Protection Bill and Leadership Code Bill [were] all ready to go for enactment by Parliament in March 2017” (Futaiasi 2016). Such a time frame was overambitious because the political situation on the ground was not conducive to ensuring that the ACB would be enacted. Most parliamentarians of the DCCG as well as the opposition and independent groups were unwilling to support the bill due to fear of being prosecuted.

In August 2017, Prime Minister Sogavare made a motion on the floor of Parliament to withdraw the Anti-Corruption Bill for the second time. The leader of opposition, the Honorable Jeremiah Manele, and the leader of the independent group, the Honorable Dr Derick Sikua, objected. Dr Sikua suggested that withdrawal of the bill was not in the interest of good governance (National Parliament of Solomon Islands 2017). The prime minister, however, strongly rebutted the objections, stressing that the ACB required further amendments based on recommendations from the Bills and Legislation Committee. He pledged to bring back to Parliament a revised version of the bill during its next sitting (RNZ 2017c). Sogavare’s decision triggered widespread criticism. Civil society groups rallied public support to protest the prime minister’s decision. A petition signed by more than four thousand people asked the DCCG to bring the ACB back to Parliament. This was delivered to Acting Prime Minister Manasseh Maelanga, who promised that the DCCG would pass the ACB during Parliament’s next sitting. Despite such assurance from the government, there was no guarantee that the bill would be enacted by Parliament due to continuing political differences. During the months of August and September, there were already signs of differences between the political parties (Kadere Party, United Democratic Party [UDP], and Peoples Alliance Party [PAP]) that make up the DCCG. Kadere and the UDP are the two major coalition partners in the DCCG.

While enacting the Anti-Corruption Bill was one of the issues about which members of Parliament could not reach a consensus, perhaps the most central issue that stirred a rift among the political parties was the decision by the prime minister to fire three of his ministers and reshuffle nine ministerial portfolios in August. According to the Office of the Prime Minister, the reshuffle was necessary to “enhance the administration of Ministries that have been underperforming and improve efficiency to support the implementation and delivery of key policy objectives by the DCCG” (SFB 2017a). Although the reshuffling exercise appeared to be well intentioned, it was a challenge getting the UDP to support it. The UDP opposed Sogavare’s proposal to reshuffle Minister of Finance and Treasury Snyder Rini and Minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources John Maneniaru. Rini is a member of the UDP, and Maneniaru is a member of Kadere. The UDP expressed the view that Sogavare’s plan to move Rini to the Ministry of Fisheries was nonnegotiable. This was because, prior to the formation of the DCCG as a coalition, one of the deals with the UDP was that Rini would get the finance minister portfolio, while Sogavare, who contested the 2014 election as an independent candidate,
would become the party’s wing leader in order to be eligible for the prime minister’s post. What this demonstrates is that after every election cycle, governments in Solomon Islands are formed out of loose coalitions of individual members with highly personalized political motivations rather than being grounded in discrete and disciplined political parties with common political principles and policies.

Prime Minister Sogavare, however, reshuffled Rini and Maneniaru in mid-October (88, 2017c). Although it seemed that the UDP submitted to Sogavare’s decision, the move provided the impetus for further political instability. The test of Sogavare’s political power transpired at the end of October 2017. This happened when nine ministers along with government backbenchers resigned. The ministers who resigned included Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs Manasseh Maelanga, Minister for National Planning and Aid Coordination Danny Philip, and Minister for Fisheries and Marine Resources Snyder Rini (Pacific Media Watch 2017b). These ministers had been very influential in the Sogavare administration. They explained that their resignation was because of Sogavare’s leadership style. According to Mealanga, “The Prime Minister seems to be listening to certain Ministers and outsiders in his decision-making instead of consulting all Cabinet Ministers and all three Coalition partners in the Democratic Coalition for Change Government” (Oso 2017).

In a press conference on 30 October 2017, members of the opposition and independent groups sat together with members who had resigned from the DCCG in a clear show of solidarity and unity. They publicly announced their newly formed allegiance and filed a motion of no confidence against Prime Minister Sogavare. This political situation shows that political parties have no strong and direct influence on their elected representatives.

There had been a coalition agreement between the UDP, Kadere, and the PAP to form the DCCG in 2014, but it had limited impact on the behaviors of members of Parliament. The resignation of ministers and government backbenchers showed that members switched allegiance purely by reason of personal interest and personal choice. This reflects a weakness of the Political Party Integrity Act of 2014, which was enacted to regulate the operation of political parties. There is no punitive provision under the act to regulate instances in which members switch party allegiance or to restrict members’ crossing the floor. As a result, political instability continues to be a normal feature of governance in 2017. It was apparent that the DCCG no longer had the numerical strength to remain in office. However, about two days after the mass resignation, eight new ministers were sworn in, in an attempt to consolidate power. Two of these new ministers initially resigned and later rejoined the DCCG. Such political maneuvering, often referred to as grasshopper politics, contributes to why it is difficult to monitor the political behavior, preferences, and sympathies of members of Parliament. Members are commonly found to contradict themselves either by making statements on which they later go back, by supporting a political view that they previously opposed, or
by switching sides in Parliament, contrary to their own expressed political principles.

What followed was a week of intense political rhetoric between the DCCG and the opposition over who had the numbers to run the government. Sogavare was unwilling to consider any calls to surrender and step down. Both the opposition and the DCCG continued to claim “majority support,” although it was obvious that one group had more members than the other. Despite the obvious tipping of government numbers, the prime minister remained defiant in the face of a clearly strengthened opposition group. In an attempt to get public support and to discredit the intentions of the defectors, the Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet released a press statement asserting that the mass resignation by ministers had been an attempt to disrupt the revised Anti-Corruption Bill that was ready to be brought back to Parliament (SS 2017b). The office further stated, “Some of these resignations come as no surprise [because] some of these same Ministers were responsible for undermining the progress of the ACB” (SIBC 2017d). But Maelanga, who resigned as deputy prime minister, responded by stating that ministers and government backbenchers “resigned based on individual grounds and personal convictions” (SIBC 2017d). They no longer had trust and confidence in the prime minister. While the reasons for resignation as revealed by Maelanga seemed genuine (despite the fact that it took a very long time for these individuals to arrive at this judgment), they were not enough to guarantee that the defectors from the DCCG, the opposition, and independent groups would form the next government.

Dr Derek Sikua made a motion of no confidence against the prime minister on 6 November. As to some of the issues why members of Parliament had no trust and confidence in the prime minister, he outlined the controversial Nazar Gold and Skyline Company deal, the prime minister’s text message to mining investors, and the employment of the prime minister’s nephew as chief of staff in the Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. In response, Sogavare expressed his view that “reasons for the defected Members of Parliament (MPs) who regrouped with the opposition bench to oust him were rooted from corruption” (Aatai 2017b). He alleged that former Finance Minister Snyder Rini and former Minister for Development Aid Planning Danny Philip “were involved in some dirty dealings to rip-off government coffers” (Aatai 2017b). He also revealed corruption regarding the allocation of shipping grants; some members of Parliament had applied for such funds for personal gain (Aatai 2017b). The issues raised by both Sikua and Sogavare were important indicators of the corruption and quality of governance at the national level, which ultimately led to the removal of Sogavare as prime minister following a successful vote of no confidence. The vote followed almost nine hours of heated debate during which members of Parliament from both the government and opposition groups made allegations of corruption against one another (see RNZ 2017b).

Two political groupings were
formed after the removal of Sogavare as prime minister. One group was the Heritage Park camp, comprising Kadere and the People’s Alliance Party, which were part of the former DCCG. The other group was the Honiara Hotel camp, comprising the Democratic Alliance Party (DAP) and the Solomon Islands People First Party (SIPFP), who were the original opposition group, as well as defector parliamentarians of the DCCG and the independent group. Not long after the formation of these groups, the DAP and the SIPFP switched to join the Heritage Park Hotel camp. MP Rick Houenipwela, speaking on behalf of the DAP, explained that they moved from the opposition due “to a lack of consultation over a proposed cabinet line-up”; as a result of the switch, the Heritage Park camp increased its numbers from 23 to 30 (Pacific Media Watch 2017a). Houenipwela was nominated as their candidate. The opposition, now comprising the defected members of Parliament and the independent group, nominated John Moffat Fugui as their candidate. The election for a new prime minister was held on 15 November. Houenipwela became the new prime minister with a total of 33 votes, which brought back into power the former DCCG but under a new coalition name, Solomon Islands Democratic Coalition for Change government (SIDCCG). The key objectives of SIDCCG would be “to maintain political stability, rectify the country’s fiscal situation and stamp out corruption” (SIBC 2017c). While the new government provides hope for positive change, it is still too early to comment on whether the leadership of Houenipwela will effectively address its objectives as Solomon Islands moves from 2017 into 2018.

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The year 2017 in Timor-Leste was dominated by a round of national elections and a major breakthrough in the country’s long-running dispute...