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### SOLOMON ISLANDS

The Coalition for National Unity and Rural Advancement (CNURA) government entered 2010 with a focus on the national general elections several months ahead. In the last two or so years that they were in power, the government recorded passing a higher number of legislations than any other government since independence. They also stabilized diplomatic relations with neighboring countries, and the case of a former attorney general—which was instrumental in the downfall of the government before CNURA—was brought before relevant authorities. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank have set up offices in Honiara and are working well with the government. The first half of 2010 was occupied with the registration of voters and preparation for the national elections. This review concentrates on events leading up to the national elections, government formation, and some notable developments and events that occurred throughout the year.

Just before the dissolution of Parliament in 2010, then Prime Minister Dr Derek Sikua attempted to push through what was called the Political Parties Integrity Bill, which was aimed at reducing political instability in government—an endemic feature of Solomon Islands politics (SSN, 22 April 2010). Unfortunately (or fortunately), it was defeated because of what Dr Sikua believed to be a move orches-

trated by some of his own ministers and backbenchers. This occurred on 24 April, two days before the dissolution of Parliament (*SSN*, 13 July 2010), and signaled an end to the solidarity of the CNURA, which was enthusiastic to enter the national election as a political group. At their meeting on 5 April 2010, the political parties that had been running the CNURA government (ie, National Party, Solomon Islands Democratic Party, Solomon Islands' Party for Rural Advancement, Liberal Party, People's Alliance Party, and the Association of Independents) had agreed to sign a preelection coalition agreement that would allow them to regroup after elections (*STO*, 7 April 2010). They felt that the CNURA government under Sikua's leadership had achieved a lot and therefore should continue with its good work. The defeat of the Political Parties Integrity Bill ended what could have been a road to political stability in the legislature. Consequently, many more parties emerged to contest the elections, as will be discussed later.

While the CNURA government was still in caretaker mode, a second mobile service provider in the country established its infrastructure. This became possible after the monopoly over telecommunication services was removed in 2009. The Be-mobile company erected towers and set up an office in the country. It also promised to offer coverage for 25 percent of the population by mid-June 2010. There were concerns earlier that the company seemed like it was not making progress after it had obtained a license to operate. Indeed, the company was fined US\$1.5 million for failing to launch its network on time (*STO*, 30

June 2010). Nevertheless, Be-mobile installed its towers and network, and by the end of August it launched its network with the tagline "mifala long hia nao" (we are now here) (*STO*, 31 Aug 2010). Solomon Islands Prime Minister Danny Philip praised Be-mobile, claiming that "the launch of Be-mobile's network has brought the country to a new threshold of a new partnership and a new beginning for governments, the private sector and other stakeholders" (*STO*, 9 Nov 2010). This was a momentous achievement, as telecommunication prices were slashed because of the competition. Recent reports have it that, in the Pacific, Solomon Islands is now second only to Tonga in terms of mobile phone use (*SSN*, 2 Feb 2011).

Another notable development in 2010 was the progress toward reopening the Gold Ridge mine on Guadalcanal. The company was granted a loan of US\$35 million by the International Finance Corporation to facilitate developments toward reopening the mine (*SIBC*, 25 June 2010). By May 2010, big machines and equipment for work on the mining site were arriving in the country. It is hoped that the gold mine will start production in March 2011 (*SSN*, 26 June 2010). The construction of resettlement/relocation villages was also reportedly going well, with a total of 320 houses being built (*SSN*, 23 Aug 2010). Drilling at Gold Ridge was also going well, with the company targeting 320,000 ounces per year by 2015 (*SSN*, 12 Nov 2010). Nevertheless, a number of outstanding issues with landowners might hinder progress toward reopening. In March 2010, landowners and mine workers called on the company to remove

the general manager over allegations of mistreatment of workers (mostly from neighboring villages) and neglect of occupational health and safety requirements in the workplace (STO, 27 March 2010). Three mine workers, believed to have been affected by cyanide poisoning, were taken to a hospital in Honiara. Unfortunately, there was no proper facility to test cyanide poisoning in Honiara, so the doctor recommended they be sent overseas for testing. These events, plus complaints about people getting itchy rashes after using the river downstream, forced landowners to follow through on their threat of roadblocks, which they carried out in July 2010. Their concern was the company's failure to provide water supplies as agreed to earlier (STO, 13 March 2010). Toward the end of 2010, the landowners were becoming skeptical of the company for not addressing outstanding issues, and this could potentially delay the first gold pour expected in March 2011 (SSN, 7 Feb 2011).

Two important commissions trying to find solutions to the roots of the 1998–2003 tensions—the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Commission of Enquiry into Land Dealings and Abandoned Properties on Guadalcanal (CELDAPG)—continued their work in 2010. The TRC, launched by Bishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu in 2009, toured the provinces, talking to people who had been victims and perpetrators/offenders during the 1998–2003 tensions. The commission discovered that many people are still suffering from post-traumatic stress (SSN, 9 April 2010). Moreover, people opened up and

told their stories, including forty-five victims in Gizo, Western Province (SSN, 10 July 2010). Like victims in other provinces, those from Gizo testified about missing members of their families, imprisonments, physical and psychological abuse, loss of properties through destruction or forced removal, and other horrific experiences (SSN, 11 March 2010). Some are still waiting for clues on the whereabouts of the remains of their loved ones. For example, a Malaitan mother pleaded with the TRC to locate the body of her husband who went missing at the height of the tensions (SSN, 26 Nov 2010). The TRC had identified up to 150 grave sites by December, and plans to exhume them are underway (ISN, 8 Dec 2010). Others, like a child soldier from Guadalcanal, revealed their experiences and how they got involved (SSN, 25 Nov 2010). In spite of the tedious and painstaking work, the TRC has achieved a great deal by providing an avenue for people to start their own healing process through its open, genuine, and transparent process.

The other commission, CELDAPG, also started off on a high note after its establishment. The commission is headed by Brian Brunton of Papua New Guinea and assisted by Commissioners Manoa Rabuka and Stephen Tagi of Fiji and Vanuatu, respectively. Technical and support staff are also assisting the commission. At the onset of their work, a prominent Guadalcanal leader, Waita Ben Tabusasi, expressed concern that the terms of reference of the commission fell “short of taking into consideration the intentions of those who authored, negotiated and signed the Townsville Peace

Agreement . . . namely the government and former combatants of both Malaita and Guadalcanal” (STO, 28 Aug 2009). Nevertheless, the commission held consultative meetings in their Honiara office and other regions of Guadalcanal. Unfortunately, its efforts were abruptly stopped in late 2010 amid allegations of misuse of funds and cronyism on the part of the chairman and some local officers. A counsel assisting the enquiry, Ruth Townsend, publicly claimed that employees were defrauding the commission. Examples of alleged unethical deals include the purchase of a computer supposedly worth S1\$389,800, with that amount then deducted from the commission’s funds, and the payment for ten flash drives that supposedly cost S1\$12,000 (SSN, 23 Oct 2010). (One Solomon Islands dollar [S1\$] is approximately US\$.12.) The seriousness of allegations published by Ms Townsend in local media outlets was enough for the government to put a halt to the work of CELDAPG for two months to allow for police investigation (ISN, 29 Oct 2010). Another commission mandated to deal with land belonging to Russell Islands Plantations Enterprises Limited was also suspended indefinitely because its mandate had been extended four times with no concrete findings. As of the end of the year no word has come from the government regarding these investigations or whether or not CELDAPG will continue with its work.

Of course, the peak of Solomon Islands national politics in 2010 was the administration of the national general elections and subsequent formation of a government. With the announcement of 6 August as

the date to elect members of the 9th Parliament, nineteen political parties were registered, and 508 candidates contested the fifty-two constituencies. The total number of registered voters was recorded as 448,259 (STO, 19 July 2010). From the onset, discrepancies in voter registration were noted. For instance, in a presentation at the University of Canterbury, Paul Roughan argued that if the 1999 census report is something to go by, the total number of eligible voters for 2010 would be around 265,000. Likewise, the estimated number of eligible voters for Honiara alone would be around 31,600. However, for the 2010 elections, the number of voters registered for Honiara had increased by 349 percent to reach 110,572 voters, while the number for the whole country increased by 169 percent to 448,259 registered voters (Roughan 2010). With limited time and resources to sort out these discrepancies, the Electoral Commission proceeded with the election. The results of the elections revealed that a majority of elected members of Parliament were newcomers. At the same time, none of the political parties that contested the election emerged with significant numbers of elected members. Only the Solomon Islands Democratic Party won as many as 13 seats, while 19 members were voted in as Independents. Eleven political parties secured 3 seats or fewer, while six parties did not win any seats at all. Given that scenario, the only way to form a new government was through a coalition.

Although the 2010 election was generally peaceful, certain communities received the results with mixed feelings. In North East Guadalcanal,

for instance, a public vehicle carrying passengers and market produce was pelted with stones simply because they were from the winning candidate's neighboring villages. Similarly, in Auki, Malaita, there was an incident of ballot box burning during the counting day. The dissenters argued that there were more ballots than the number of registered voters (*ISN*, 10 Aug 2010). Likewise, in Lata, Temotu, the supporters of a long-serving politician who lost his seat broke into the shop owned by the winning candidate (*ISN*, 6 Aug 2010). These incidents of violence and overt protests over the declaration of some results reflect tendencies in Solomon Islands since the social tensions of 1998–2003.

Lobbying commenced soon after election results were declared, with three political camps visible. One, comprising the Independent members of Parliament, was based at the Honiara Hotel, while a group headed by the leader of the Solomon Islands Democratic Party and prominent members of the former CNURA government camped at the Heritage Park Hotel. The third group, led by the leader of the Reformed Democratic Party, Danny Philip, came together at the Pacific Casino Hotel. Contradictory messages as to who would form the government came from the three camps, with members of Parliament appearing in group photos of the three camps obtained by the local media (*SIBC*, 11 Aug 2010). As lobbying intensified, only the Honiara Hotel and Heritage Park Hotel camps confirmed their intentions to contest the prime minister's position. Members in the Pacific Casino Hotel were absorbed into the other two camps,

with Danny Philip becoming the official prime minister candidate for the Honiara Hotel camp. The election of the prime minister went in favor of the Honiara Hotel group, twenty-six votes to twenty-three, and Danny Philip was duly elected the new prime minister of Solomon Islands in 2010 (*STO*, 25 Aug 2010). He formed the National Coalition for Reform and Advancement (NCRA) after his appointment.

On the international front, the Solomon Islands government officially opened its High Commission in Fiji in December 2010 and appointed His Excellency Moses Kouni Mose as the first Solomon Islands high commissioner to Fiji. The office has become necessary because Fiji has the largest population of Solomon Islanders studying and working outside of the country. Business and trade considerations between these two Melanesian countries necessitated this move as well. Apart from that, the nation's leaders delivered addresses at prominent forums. On 15 November 2010, Prime Minister Danny Philip gave an address to the World Ocean Forum in Busan, Korea, on the importance of marine ecosystems to Pacific Islands livelihoods and economies. During the conference, he echoed the idea that "we are the nursery of the biodiversity and the ecosystem of our ocean" (*SSN*, 16 Nov 2010). Also, the minister of foreign affairs and external trade addressed the 65th Session of the United Nations General Assembly on 27 September 2010. Among other things, he reported to the world forum that Solomon Islands has a "mixed, uneven and off the track" scorecard on achieving the Millennium

Development Goals by the expected 2015 date.

On the regional front, Solomon Islands played an important role in mending rifts among Melanesian political leaders. The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) leaders were on bad terms over who should chair the subregional body. Since the frustration of Fiji's plans to host an MSG meeting under its chairmanship in mid-2010, Fiji and Vanuatu were not on good terms, and Fiji withdrew from participating in MSG matters. Vanuatu was reluctant to hand over the chairmanship role to Fiji, citing the Fiji regime's undemocratic ascent to power. Political events in Vanuatu forced then Prime Minister Edward Natapei out of office, and a more conciliatory person, the Honorable Sato Kilman, became Vanuatu's new prime minister. (Natapei was removed for missing three consecutive sittings of Parliament without providing reasons for his absences.) The Solomon Islands government then intervened in the MSG matter and invited leaders of both Fiji and Vanuatu to Honiara, where a traditional reconciliation was held, after which the MSG chairmanship was handed over to Fiji (SSN, 16 Dec 2010).

Solomon Islands also hosted a meeting of Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus officials in Honiara. This was a summit of senior trade officials from around the Pacific who are to make recommendations to the next Forum Trade Ministers meeting. Opening the discussion, Solomon Islands Minister of Finance Gordon Lilo asked the participants to be conscious of the differences in the development levels

between negotiating partners (STO, 22 Oct 2010). A few months earlier, then Minister of Foreign Affairs William Haomae shared similar sentiments but went further, saying that Australia was not listening to Pacific Island countries with regard to PACER-Plus talks (STO, 1 April 2010). This particular PACER-Plus officials' meeting was an important development since it engaged for the first time with the annual Non-State Actors (NSA) Dialogue. The dialogue was organized with the help of the Pacific Islands Forum to engage the NSA in discussions about PACER-Plus negotiations. The general sentiment shared by the NSA was the need to properly carry out national consultations on PACER-Plus without rushing to finalize the agreement. The chair of the NSA Dialogue over PACER-Plus put it succinctly, stating that "time and money will not go to waste if talks to set up a free trade area between the Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand are not successful" (SSN, 18 Oct 2010).

The NCRA government started office with a slim majority. When Prime Minister Philip announced his cabinet lineup on 25 August 2010, two former militant leaders-turned-members of Parliament were in the group, leaving many people skeptical of the government's intentions. Also on that date, a tragic event occurred when the newly elected member for the Shortland Islands, the Honorable Steven Laore, passed away after a party to commemorate the formation of the government. He had aligned himself with the NCRA government, so the numbers were shaky from day one. Moreover, a number of government ministers are facing court cases for a

variety of alleged crimes. For instance, Jimmy Lusibaea, Mark Kemakeza, and David Pacha all have court cases outstanding but were still appointed as ministers (STO, 10 Dec 2010). Lusibaea was subsequently imprisoned for crimes committed during the tensions with a sentence of two years and nine months but was released in early 2011 by the parole board. His controversial release received immense opposition from professional bodies, prominent citizens, opposition members of Parliament, and civil society (STO, 17 Jan 2011). This contentious case is unlikely to end here and may continue to be featured in 2011.

Another renowned politician, Toswell Kaua, passed away in November 2010. Kaua had aligned himself with the Opposition. Toward the end of the year, the prime minister sacked his minister of forestry, Bobo Dettke, but later reinstated him as the minister of fisheries when Lusibaea was jailed. Dettke continued with the government as minister of fisheries until he and three other ministers resigned in early 2011 and joined the Opposition. The numbers game has dominated Solomon Islands politics so much that the NCRA government has not even started implementing its grand plans (OPM 2010), but they may be able to begin to do so once the 2011 budget is passed in March 2011.

Despite the opportunities and positive developments that emerged throughout 2010, power politicking obscured the leadership's prerogative to serve and direct the nation and its people. Examples of such negative leadership traits can be seen in the recent movements by the members for north Guadalcanal, Martin Sogaghe,

and for Ngella, Mark Kemakeza. Over the course of a month, they both moved twice between the government and the Opposition, making a mockery of parliamentary procedures and office oaths. This sentiment, shared by many people, was well stated by Pastor George Tafoa of the South Seas Evangelical Church when he lamented that "ministers when taking up their oath of allegiance swore before god to remain faithful to their government, only to break this promise by switching to the other side of the house" (ISN, 4 Feb 2011).

With the way things were in late 2010 and early 2011, the ruling government may sooner or later give way to another coalition. At the time of this review, the NCRA government was ruling with a minority after five cabinet ministers had moved to support the Opposition. (A constitutional crisis was subsequently averted with the defection of six Opposition members to the government in early April.) Whatever happens, the question remains: How do Solomon Islands leaders ensure that services are rendered to citizens? The answer may lie in their ability to concentrate on the business of governing and leading instead of expending too much energy on pure power politics. The country's future in 2011 and beyond is in the hands of political leaders. One thing is certain: there is a need for Solomon Islanders to revolutionize the way they have been approaching development since independence and to put people's needs and livelihoods at the core of their deliberations.

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## VANUATU

As 2010 got underway, the issue of the status of the Speaker of Parliament, Maxime Carlot Korman, held over from last year, remained to be dealt with. In late November 2009, the Vanua'aku Pati (VP) prime minister, Edward Natapei, had removed two parties from the governing coalition—the National United Party (NUP) led by Ham Lini, and the Vanuatu Republican Party (VRP) led by Korman. Natapei replaced them with the Alliance Group and its fifteen associated members of Parliament, led by Sato Kilman from the island of Malakula, leader of the People's Progressive Party (PPP), who was made deputy prime minister (VDP, 20 Nov 2009). The position of the Union of Moderate Parties (UMP) within the coalition,

led by Serge Vohor, was strengthened in the reshuffle with the allocation of two additional ministerial portfolios.

In a move most likely aimed at protecting his position as Speaker, Korman declared late November that the prime minister had lost his seat because he had not obtained permission to be absent from Parliament. Natapei had left Vanuatu in November to attend an overseas meeting, which coincided with the last session of Parliament. Natapei protested that he had let the Speaker know and, on his return, had obtained a Supreme Court ruling that the Speaker's decision was unconstitutional (VDP, 7 Dec 2009). However, Natapei found that he was also facing a no-confidence motion tabled by Ham Lini, the new leader of the Opposition. The government had hoped to remove the Speaker at the same time as Parliament voted on the motion of no confidence, which was easily defeated, but Korman was able to manipulate standing orders to avoid a vote on his own position. He remained as Speaker until January 2010, when the government called an extraordinary session of Parliament with the intention of removing him. However, rather than being voted out, he resigned. In the election that followed, the government's nominee for Speaker, Luganville MP George Wells (NUP), defeated Korman, the Opposition's nominee, in a secret ballot by thirty-two votes to nineteen (VDP, 30 Jan 2010).

Resolution of the issue of the Speaker concluded the process of restructuring the government coalition that had begun toward the end of November 2009, but, as the motion of no confidence indicated, the political