

Behind the shine of the Pacific Games lurks poor governance and corruption



Photo Credit: Pacific Games Media Service

by Ruth Liloqula

29 January 2024

Running with the baton as part of the relay in the lead-up to the **Pacific Games**, I felt so proud of my country. Proud of the young people who volunteered in whatever way they could to make the event successful. Proud that Solomon Islands opened the Pacific Games in Honiara, with our youth doing us proud in their performances, followed by fireworks and cultural festivities. Proud of this historic opportunity to showcase the best of our country to the world and to celebrate the best of our Pacific neighbours through sport. This was the moment that I and many other Solomon Islanders had been waiting for, to ask the world not to judge us by what politicians do. This was now truly us — Solomon Islanders.

The 2023 Pacific Games had been years in the making. Bringing together 5,000 athletes from 24 Pacific nations to compete in 24 different sports, it was a giant undertaking for a small country. To help a nation like Solomon Islands host a sporting competition of this scale in state-of-the-art sporting facilities, funding was received from all over the world with China alone **contributing over US\$100 million**. Funds were also provided by Australia, New Zealand, India, Indonesia and even Saudi Arabia.

And while the funding was welcome for this important event, the dark undercurrent of financing for the Pacific Games is another example of the tug-of-war between major powers jockeying for regional influence and security positioning in Solomon Islands and the Pacific more broadly. It has been estimated that the maintenance of the sporting facilities alone will cost taxpayers US\$3 million annually.

Since 2019, my country has become a hotbed for diplomatic tensions and foreign interference, and undue influence. Much of this is related to Solomon Islands **switching allegiance** from Taiwan to China and, of course, the great power competition between the US and China. For the last few years, this competition has seen increased promises of friendship, infrastructure, defence equipment and much-needed aid. These developments have the potential to increase security,

peace and development. But more often than not, the increased competition and presence of Chinese government interests has increased the risk of corruption and threatened the integrity of institutions. That is in addition to questions about the integrity of electoral processes and political leadership in the country.

In November 2021, Honiara was aflame due to [riots and tensions](#) around Chinese influence and youth unemployment. In that year, the Solomon Islands Prime Minister's office [distributed Chinese government money](#) to 39 out of 50 members of parliament for important votes. Then in March 2022, while Australia had its back turned to the Pacific, news leaked of the [China – Solomon Islands security agreement](#).

We've also seen Chinese state-owned companies win contracts to [run our ports](#), take [ownership of mines](#) and [acres of pristine forest](#).

The US has been missing in action for too many years, almost since John F. Kennedy's crash and heroic swim to an island in our Western Province during World War II. [The US is now back](#), so to speak, with JFK's daughter, Ambassador Caroline Kennedy, taking up her [post in Canberra](#) and visiting recently. While it is back, the US has some way to go to familiarise itself with the needs of the country through the lens of citizens and learn to do things with us, rather than for us.

Our once independent and vibrant media is muzzled. Dangerous online misinformation spreads via Facebook and WhatsApp. Social media is also used to amplify false narratives around Western nations and Solomon Islands youth, blamed for the 2021 riots. This severely limits accountability and transparency.

Sadly, all this while Solomon Islands remains one of the Pacific's poorest nations with ineffective governance and conflict to which women and young people are particularly vulnerable. Above all, the people of Solomon Islands do not deserve the deteriorating health services that they have now, worse than before COVID-19, although so many funds went into this sector during the pandemic.

We're also struggling with a rising youth unemployment rate, limited public infrastructure falling into disrepair, extensive environmental degradation caused by unsustainable logging practices, and more frequent climate-change disasters on our doorstep. Many of our graduates are now in either Australia or New Zealand picking apples under labour mobility schemes, not by choice but because of their circumstances.

On [Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index](#), Solomon Islands scores 42/100. In comparison, Australia scores 75/100 and New Zealand 87/100. Government efforts to fight corruption have remained stagnant since 2016.

What's more, 97% of people think **corruption in government is a big problem**. The solution, as demonstrated by the Pacific Games, is to empower our young people — 84% of people think **regular people can make a difference** in the fight against corruption.

Combatting corruption, strengthening institutions, and empowering local communities are key to meeting this challenge.

So, as the country's coffers were being filled with funding for the games, reactions around the country were mixed. This was a prime opportunity to additionally fund public infrastructure, such as roads and water supply, and to invest in governance initiatives. Instead, the **government announced** plans to delay our elections. The elections are now set to take place this year, after a seven-month delay.

Our friendly neighbours Australia and New Zealand have a role to play too, as they **"step up"** their engagement in the region. Providing long-term funding to support elections, helping young people and women to enter politics, and upskilling civil society organisations and youth to be part of the democratic process across the region are just some of the needs the Australian parliament itself has identified through **an inquiry into democracy** in the region. International NGOs and intergovernmental agencies are not the only solutions. Getting behind locally led CSOs to lead the advocacy to address good governance is a must. Only locally led CSOs can ask the questions that must be asked and say what must be said, taking ownership of advocating for change and good governance. But they do need outsiders working in these areas to get behind them.

Elective dictatorship is on the rise. In the dying hours of the 11th Parliament, the executive government rushed a number of Bills through the parliamentary processes, including constitutional amendments, and continues to act in whatever way it pleases because it has majority control. Having more than two-thirds of the elected members of parliament, the concentration of power in the hands of the executive government poses a huge threat to individual liberty and rights and is a big concern.

As was the case during the Pacific Games, it is our young people who will save the day and who hold the future of our country and our democracy in their hands. Empowerment of youth with knowledge of their various rights, be they democratic, political, legal, constitutional, civil, or human rights, is an urgent task needing immediate attention.

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Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/behind-the-shine-of-the-pacific-games-lurks-poor-governance-and-corruption-20240129/>