

The cruel ironies of the 2021 Honiara riots

by Terence Wood

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Clean-up begins in the riot-hit capital of the Solomon Islands

Photo Credit: Fars News Agency

If you're foraging for irony and surprise in the ashes of Honiara's **riots**, there's plenty to be found.

For a start, there are the two main political antagonists: the Prime Minister Manessah Sogavare, and the Premier of Malaita Province Daniel Suidani. Both are (or were in Sogavare's case) demagogues. Both have built political capital with angry rhetoric, focused on national and international issues. Both have managed to do this in a country where domestic politics is usually focused on the local. Voters **rarely vote** on national issues; they support candidates they think will directly help them, their family or their community. And yet both Sogavare and Suidani have amassed support by aiming invective at targets that are national, or international, in scale.

Back when he was at his populist peak in the 2000s, Sogavare's target was, of course, RAMSI, the Australian led international policing mission. So it's no small irony that Sogavare has now called in police and troops from Australia alongside other countries.

Suidani, meanwhile, has **leapt into** an even larger arena: the New Cold War. Suidani opposed Solomon Islands switching allegiance from Taiwan to China, and has subsequently made a show of preventing Chinese investment in Malaita. It's hard to see how this has worked as a populist strategy for Suidani. Some politicians and members of Solomon Islands' small educated elite view abandoning Taiwan for China as a strategic blunder, and worry about debt alongside China's economic influence. But it's unlikely these matters resonate with the average Suidani supporter – someone from rural Malaita. Maybe, as Christians, Solomon Islanders are hostile to the atheism of the Chinese state. Or maybe they fear Chinese extractive industries. Or maybe it's simple Sinophobia, which is present in Solomon Islands as in much of the Pacific. Chinatown got ransacked after all.

But if anyone **bothered to check**, they would find Christians are a tiny minority in Taiwan, which is populated mostly by Mandarin speaking Han Chinese. Many of the

businesses in Chinatown are owned by people of Chinese origin who have lived in Solomon Islands for decades or even generations. They don't work for the Chinese government. The worst damage from extractive industries hasn't been in Malaita. And the companies themselves have often been from South East Asia, not China. Some have actually **been run** by Solomon Islanders. Sinophobia is real in Solomon Islands, but it doesn't explain why rioters also **torched** a major secondary school. And the looting of Chinatown happened in part simply because there's a lot to loot there.

If China did motivate any protestors, it is probably because most Solomon Islanders think China effectively purchased their government's political allegiance. Taiwan used to do the same, of course. But it taps into a very real frustration: governance is poor and corruption a problem. (Political governance was also the spark that ignited the 2006 and 2019 Honiara riots.)

The other source of Suidani's political capital has been his claim that Malaita has been neglected, and should have greater autonomy. The claim of neglect isn't, strictly speaking, accurate. The **best available data** point to poverty being lower in Malaita than in much of the country. There's a sad irony too in a Malaitan premier demanding more independence. The civil conflict at the turn of the millennium started with people from Guadalcanal trying to rid Honiara and its surrounds of Malaitans.

Yet it's easy to see how Suidani's claim of neglect resonates. The recent riots started with a peaceful protest, including a group of protesters from Malaita itself. When the protests descended into riots, and then looting, the majority of those involved appear to have been young men from Honiara's impoverished settlements. (Based on settlement demographics it's likely that many, but not all, of these young men will have been born in Malaita or of Malaitan heritage.)

Malaitans living in Malaita may not be particularly poor by Solomon Islands standards, but by any absolute measure they are deprived of services and opportunities. Infrastructure is run down. And incomes are low compared to actual needs. Life is no better for people living in Honiara's settlements. Indeed, poverty **is higher**. Worse still, as I've **pointed out before**, people's lives aren't getting better.

To top matters off, the government is dysfunctional and corruption a problem.

Poverty, poor governance, and stagnation. A recipe for resentment. Fuel for demagogues too, even when their rhetoric lacks logic.

This is sad. Sad even for the rioters. And particularly sad for the vast majority of Solomon Islanders. People who weren't involved in the riots, but who bear all the

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