

Manele's leadership in Solomon Islands: opportunities and challenges

by Tarcisius Kabutaulaka

27 May 2024



Australian Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles met with Solomon Islands Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele on 21 May 2024

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Solomon Islands' new prime minister Jeremiah Manele brings a new leadership style to the position, compared to the abrasive approach of his predecessor, Manasseh Sogavare. However, policies are unlikely to change, and his major challenge will be the rehabilitation of the country's economy and improvements in service delivery. He also has the unenviable task of keeping together the Government of National Unity and Transformation (GNUT) coalition.

One of this government's most important but daunting assignments is to mend the country's ailing economy. In April, the Governor of the Central Bank of Solomon Islands (CBSI) [described the economy](#) as "precarious". While the economy grew by four per cent in 2023, the deficit more than doubled to seven per cent of GDP from three per cent in 2022. A 3.5 per cent rate of inflation might seem low, but it has contributed to a rising cost of living most Solomon Islanders can't afford. Many people, especially in urban centers, no longer live from paycheck to paycheck. Rather, they live from debt to debt or, in Pijin, from *kaon* to *kaon*. The government's dire fiscal situation has led to poor service delivery. In the health sector, there are shortages of drugs and other medical supplies at the National Referral Hospital in Honiara and around the country.

Manele knows the economy is bad. In his inaugural [official reception speech](#), he said GNUT's "most important priority ... is economic transformation," and called on stakeholders to help the government grow the economy. However, "economic transformation" will require more than a willingness to work with stakeholders. It will entail policies and strategies immensely different from those followed by the previous Sogavare-led government that Manele was part of as foreign minister. The country's financial woes are structural and characterised by a narrow economic and tax base, high unemployment, continuous fiscal deficits, low production, low

demand, shallow markets, a shallow financial system, and weak monetary policy transmission mechanisms. To address these issues, Manele must chart a different path. That will be difficult because this government is essentially the same as the previous one, except for a few new faces.

In order for the economy to grow and be sustained, there is also a need to address governance and administration issues that have long marred the state's performance. This will involve the depoliticisation of the public service and ensuring the Public Service Commission is independent from the executive government. Over the years, the public service has become highly politicised and executive positions, including permanent secretary roles, were often awarded to political supporters. Furthermore, allegations of rampant corruption in the public sector must be addressed by implementing reporting and enforcement mechanisms provided for by the country's *Anti-Corruption Act (2018)*. Manele's previous career in the public service gives him invaluable knowledge about how it does and should function.

Safeguarding media freedom is also vital. Under Sogavare's leadership there were attempts to curtail media freedom or allow foreign governments to dictate relationships with the media. For example, the Solomon Islands government allegedly **forbade the national broadcaster** "from publishing stories critical of the government." This prompted outrage from local and international media. In May 2022, when China's foreign minister Wang Yi **visited Honiara**, media access was restricted during the press conference organised for the visiting Chinese delegation. The Media Association of Solomon Islands subsequently urged its members to boycott the conference. In January 2024, a diplomat at the Chinese Embassy in Honiara attempted to stop a **local newspaper** from publishing a story about the Taiwan elections and offered embassy versions of the stories for the paper to publish instead. The Solomon Islands Ministry of Foreign Affairs then released **a press statement** reaffirming Solomon Islands' adherence to the One China policy. Such treatment of the media not only restricts media freedom but corrodes democracy. Manele will do well to build a respectful and constructive relationship with the media.

In foreign policy, the Manele-led government will likely maintain the policies of the previous government. What will be different however is Manele's leadership style. Prior to entering politics, he had a long career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a diplomat, including serving as the Chargé d'Affaires of the Solomon Islands Permanent Mission to the United Nations. His receptive diplomacy could allow constructive engagements with all development partners, even where there might be disagreements. This was demonstrated during the recent visits by New Zealand's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister **Winston Peters**, and Australian Deputy Prime Minister **Richard Marles**. The two countries separately

pledged their support to Solomon Islands. Japan's ambassador to the Pacific Toshihisa Takata also made a courtesy call to Manele on 20 May.

If Western countries think Manele's receptive diplomacy will reduce Honiara's engagements with Beijing, they are mistaken. China is an important development and trading partner for Solomon Islands. Furthermore, Beijing often delivers quickly on its promises, which Solomon Islanders find persuasive. The relationship between Honiara and Beijing will likely strengthen, including the maintenance of the China-Solomon Islands Security Agreement. Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific Islands Forum countries will continue to be important security partners, as seen during the recent elections.

One of Manele's challenges is to maintain the cohesion of the GNUT coalition, which consists of three political parties and independent members. Coalition governments in Solomon Islands have a history of collapsing. This might not necessarily happen, given the fact that the OUR Party, People First Party and Kadere Party had a stable partnership in the previous government. The loyalty of the independent members will, however, be tested. Furthermore, there is always the possibility of challenges to Manele's leadership from within his own party.

Manele has the opportunity take Solomon Islands on a different journey, in search of alternative and better outcomes. The voyage will however be treacherous because of domestic challenges, crisscrossing geopolitical currents, and a crew that might refuse to go with their captain on this journey. Solomon Islanders can only hope for a better future.

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