

RAMSI: A few reflections on its tenth anniversary

by Terry M. Brown

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This post continues our series looking at the [Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands](#) (RAMSI) as it marks its tenth anniversary (23 July 2003), and enters a new period of transition (1 July 2013). The series is collected [here](#).

I supported RAMSI's arrival in the Solomons in August 2003. The conflict on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal was intractable and the ability of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) to work effectively in Honiara and the provinces, including Malaita, was at a minimum, so badly had they been compromised during the ethnic conflict period. The RAMSI that arrived was effective and quickly established good local relationships. Primed by the Melanesian Brothers and others, Harold Keke surrendered on the Weather Coast and effective police stations were re-established around the country. Assisted by the churches and civil society, gun collection continued effectively on Guadalcanal and Malaita and many villages proclaimed themselves "gun free" with public signs. While this disarmament was not 100 per cent effective and may have been overly zealous (did family heirloom Snider rifles from blackbirding days really have to be surrendered?), I believe it is the most significant positive legacy of RAMSI, right up to today. Unlike Papua New Guinea, the Solomons are still largely gun free. Violence from guns is minimal. If RAMSI had stopped there (as seemed to be the original plan – "in" and "out" very quickly), I think I would have no complaints.

Instead RAMSI expanded enormously. The RAMSI headquarters near the Honiara International Airport became a virtual Australian military base in disguise. Armed troops patrolled the streets of Honiara and back roads of Malaita for many years, even when there was no necessity whatsoever. It was a common sight to see armed RAMSI military personnel in the banks and shops of Honiara or Auki, just doing business; or whole truckloads barrelling along the roads. Even when there was no need for the military component of RAMSI, they were kept on, even

expanded, to give a place for Australian Reservists to train. RAMSI eventually became a kind of re-militarization, projecting the view that might-is-right. The Townsville Peace Agreement, probably futilely, outlawed military uniforms for the country. RAMSI brought them.

RAMSI personnel and funding expanded exponentially in RAMSI priority areas: military, police, the judiciary, prison services and the “machinery of government”, especially the Ministry of Finance, Customs and the Electoral Commission, while direct RAMSI support was absent in areas arguably much more important: health, education and infrastructure. While these areas were often covered through bilateral aid, their absence from the RAMSI remit suggested they were a much lower priority. RAMSI lawyers advised on criminal cases but not (often more important) civil cases. Malaita was given a huge new prison in the centre of Auki while the main provincial hospital nearby remains a health hazard, often without doctors, medicine or even water. Famously, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Honiara once asked RAMSI officials, “Why don’t you spend money on keeping people out of prison, rather than all this money on building huge new prisons?”

The “softer” areas of health, education and infrastructure were left to “ordinary” foreign aid and not given as much attention. In the RAMSI priority areas, overseas staff (“advisors”) poured in, highly paid in Australian dollars (A\$100,000 per year tax free was a common figure cited), provided with free housing and vehicles, to “advise” underpaid, disheartened, houseless, vehicle-less, under-resourced Solomon Islands personnel. In one study I conducted in the Public Solicitors office, I found that RAMSI legal advisors were being paid in the range of 13 times that of their local counterparts. They were certainly not doing 13 times the amount of work; locals often resented this high pay and felt that many RAMSI advisors were building up large savings back in Australia while they suffered to survive. Such inequality does not make for real capacity building, though “capacity building” became a RAMSI mantra. RAMSI personnel, especially in the RSIPF, brought an Australian police culture that did not seem to be based on building relations with those being policed but quick armed interventions. Thus RAMSI police became the enemy in many Malaita squatter communities around Honiara and in rural Malaita. One can give many more examples of RAMSI as virtually a neo-colonial intervention. The RAMSI culture and presence also made a significant contribution to inflation, making housing for locals in Honiara virtually unaffordable.

Only in the last year or two has RAMSI begun to dismantle itself. This dismantling needs careful thought. At this point RAMSI has left a mixed legacy and getting out without doing more damage needs reflection. It appears the RAMSI military is in the process of departure. The RSIPF still needs support but often in infrastructure rather than personnel. Ministries that still need support, such as Finance, Education and

Health will continue to receive bilateral aid. I am puzzled why it is so hard simply to say, RAMSI is finished, bilateral or multilateral foreign aid will replace its civilian programmes; and quick military intervention from Townsville is possible in genuine emergencies. As RAMSI is largely Australian-organized and directed, it is almost as though Australia cannot leave. Instead of a tenth-anniversary “celebration”, there should be a carefully thought transformation and a clear break with the past, that is the end of RAMSI, to allow new models to emerge that are not so hamstrung by RAMSI’s ambiguous legacy.

Bishop Terry M. Brown was Anglican Bishop of Malaita, 1996-2008, and stayed in the Solomons throughout the ethnic tension conflict. He then lived in Honiara 2008-2012, working as church archivist. He returned to Canada in November 2012, where he is Bishop-in-charge at Church of the Ascension, Hamilton, Ontario.

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