

Solomon Islands – an incumbent’s defeat and resurrection



Photo Credit: *Facebook/OUR Party Solomon Islands*

by Jon Fraenkel

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Solomon Islands’ elections are normally principally domestic affairs, but the polls held on 17 April 2024 threw the country into the international spotlight. They were **widely predicted** to yield a victory for Manasseh Sogavare, the four-time prime minister who brokered his country’s 2019 switch from recognizing Taiwan to diplomatic links with China and who then signed a security deal allowing the deployment of Chinese security personnel and naval vessels to the island group. After the switch, the bigger powers around the Pacific Rim panicked, sending a host of high-level dignitaries to the country in the hope of encouraging a change of direction. Commentators warned that Sogavare was a **“budding dictator”** and a **“Lukashenko-in-waiting”** who was likely to **steal the election** with Chinese support. Disoriented New Zealand foreign affairs officials even **asked French authorities** to intervene, a striking turnaround for a country that once protested against French nuclear testing in the Pacific, against the 1985 bombing of the Rainbow Warrior in Auckland and against continuing French colonial rule over New Caledonia and Tahiti.

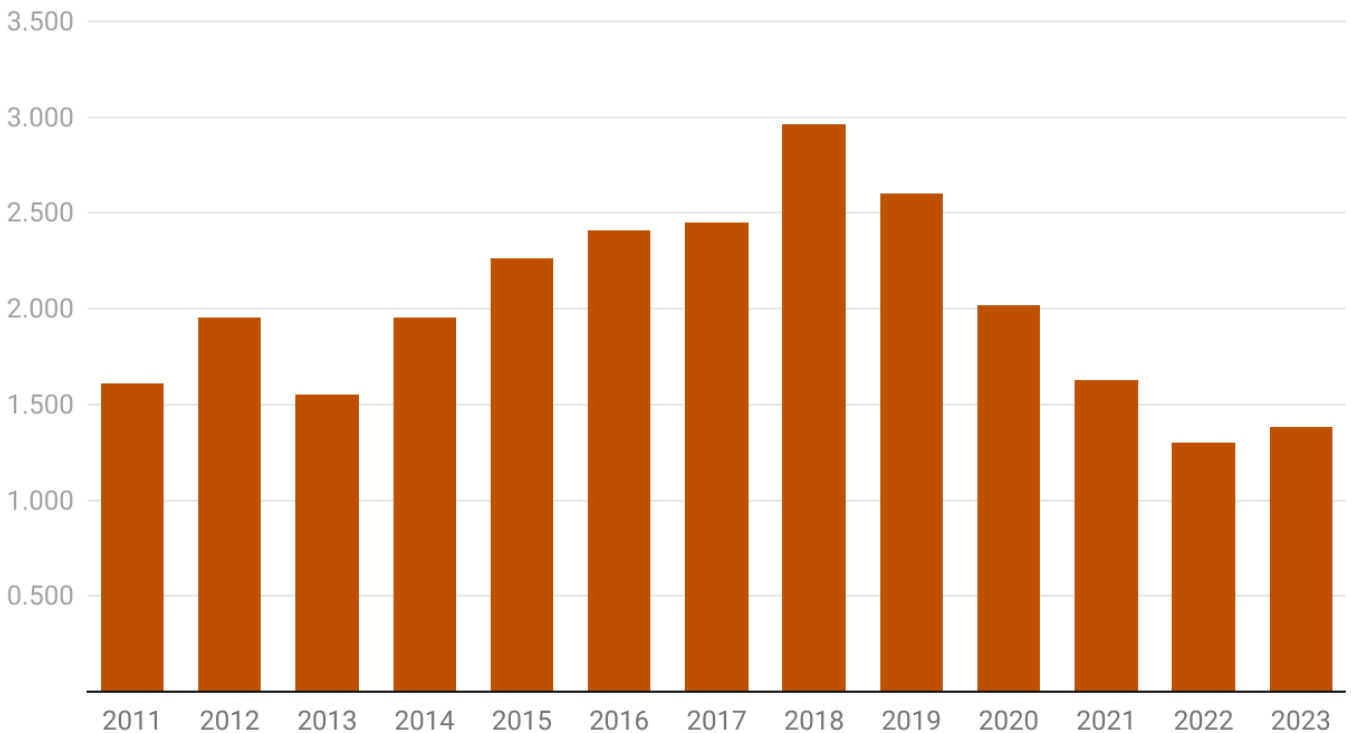
Neighbouring powers had good reason to anticipate a landslide victory for Sogavare. Bankrolled by Beijing, his position previously looked unassailable. **He survived** a no-confidence challenge in late 2021, allegedly after **SI\$250,000** (US\$30,000) payments into the bank accounts of supportive MPs. He engineered his major pro-Taiwan rival, Premier of Malaita Daniel Suidani, **out of office** in February 2023. At that time, one of the provincial ministers was **recorded on a mobile phone** acknowledging sizable bribes on offer from the national government. Sogavare even proved able to amend the constitution to earn himself an extra seven months in office. Never before had a Solomon Islands government gone to the polls so unified behind a single party, the Ownership, Unity and Responsibility (OUR) Party. Festooned with yellow T-shirts and draped in star-spangled green, yellow and blue national flags, OUR Party supporters organised **campaign launches** across the country that promised a future of economic prosperity for a country united behind a Beijing-aligned “friends to all, enemies to none” foreign policy.

Yet the result of the election was an emphatic defeat for the incumbent government. Solomon Islands may have a shiny new sports stadium in Honiara courtesy of Chinese aid, but **a severe contraction in GDP** during 2020-23 cast doubt on Sogavare's claims of a developmental miracle being unleashed by the diplomatic switch. Eighteen of the OUR ministers who contested the 2024 election were defeated. None of the party's newer candidates were successful. The ousted Malaitan premier, Suidani, was re-elected to his provincial assembly and his replacement as premier, Martin Fini, lost his seat. Acknowledging the severity of his defeat, Sogavare stepped aside after the election, giving way to the softly spoken former foreign minister Jeremiah Manele who became the OUR Party's candidate for the prime ministerial portfolio and won by 31 votes to 18.

Those ministers who did manage to secure re-election were wary of pinning their fortunes to those of Sogavare, who is a polarizing figure not least because of his fraught relations with Australia. There were **riots after his election** in 2019. Further riots, fuelled by controversies over the China switch, occurred in 2021 and saw rampaging youths target the prime minister's own residence in eastern Honiara. This was what initially prompted him to **accept Chinese offers** to send riot police. Sogavare was once the hero of those under-employed urban youths who inhabit the squatter settlements of eastern Honiara. Now they have mostly turned against him. The OUR Party won in none of the three Honiara constituencies, although the closely aligned Namson Tran, a Vietnamese-born businessman who runs a local casino, regained his seat in West Honiara contesting as an "independent". **Recent revelations** by the US-funded Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project that Sogavare's real estate deals in Honiara could not have been funded by his prime ministerial salary further fuelled that urban disquiet.

Most countries in the Oceania region recognise Beijing and welcome Chinese aid, but no other Pacific state has become so dependent on China as Solomon Islands. Since most of the country's exports go to China and because there are so many Chinese migrants in the urban centres, diplomatic ties with Beijing offer advantages, but over-dependence can open the path to external manipulation. On the campaign trail, **OUR Party candidates warned** that an opposition victory would provoke stricter Chinese biosecurity quarantine **measures that would cripple** the log export industry, the country's major foreign exchange earner. Solomon Islands Central Bank data shows log exports in 2022-23 **have declined** to less than half what they were in 2018 (Figure 1). However, this was primarily due to **a broader slowdown** in the Chinese real estate market rather than country-specific retaliatory sanctions.

Figure 1: Solomon Islands log exports, SI\$m



Source: Central Bank of Solomon Islands, Quarterly Reviews • Created with Datawrapper

It is on the security front that Solomon Islands finds itself most trapped in an unhealthy external dependence. During the 2003-2017 Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) years, the country **first became hooked** on foreign assistance in policing. The scale and cost of the RAMSI policing operation was way beyond anything that the cash-strapped Solomon Islands government could subsequently sustain. At the conclusion of that mission, Canberra signed a bilateral security treaty with Solomon Islands enabling a continued Australian Federal Police presence. The riots of 2019 and 2021 have subsequently compounded that dependence. Following the signing of the Chinese security deal in April 2022, Canberra and Beijing **competed with one another** to provide water cannons, rifles, vehicles and other equipment to the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force.

Solomon Islands may have ditched an anti-Australian prime minister, but his replacement has staked his reputation on closer relations with China. New Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele was opposition leader during Sogavare’s 2014-17 stint as prime minister, but he became a key player brokering the 2019 switch to China. He has promised to continue the foreign policy orientation of his predecessor, and Sogavare is likely to remain a powerful presence in cabinet. Sogavare is not only a black belt karate expert, but also a master in the arts of political survival. This is his second tactical sidestep to avoid being consigned to a period on the opposition benches. In 2017, he was ousted in a no-confidence vote, but then – after a swift

regrouping — **got back into government** as deputy prime minister and finance minister and then, in 2019, returned as prime minister.

Popular disquiet about government may have abated owing to Sogavare having for now relinquished the top office, but Honiara remains an easily combustible cauldron. Large numbers of jobless youths roam the streets and could be easily sparked into large-scale looting. If major riots do again ensue, the government can expect little help from the 12 or so Chinese police presently deployed to Honiara. By contrast, the Australian Defence Force sent 300 soldiers for the election and an additional 300 police officers arrived from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and Australia. That was **a temporary deployment** scheduled to end after the election. Some smaller-scale renewal of that commitment is now likely. As long as Solomon Islands remains a focus of geo-strategic rivalry in the Pacific, neighbouring governments will be reluctant to withdraw their security forces.

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