

Solomon Islands post-RAMSI: falling down in bits and pieces (part 2)

by Transform Aqorau

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This is the second in a two part series. The first, in which Transform discusses law and justice and governance in the Solomon Islands, is available [here](#).

What improvements are there to the machinery of government?

The machinery of government is intended to restore confidence in government organization, systems, procedures, policies and create a civil service capable of providing “public services” to the general public, be they Solomon Islanders, investors or foreigners. The extent to which this has been achieved is reflected in the ability of public servants to work with confidence and exercise competence in their respective positions. The work that the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM) is doing to ensure public servants are trained in the basic administrative and financial instructions of the public service is also commendable. If the response to the second pillar were to be evaluated on these grounds alone, I would argue that it has been successful.

I would respectfully argue, however, that there are at least two areas in which doubts may be cast on this conclusion. The first is in respect to land allocation, in particular, allocation of urban land where developments clearly reflect corruption, as evidenced by the standard of commercial buildings built by the more recent Chinese arrivals. It is argued that these lands could only have been allocated through corrupt means, as there has not been any government tender of government lands by the Commissioner of Lands in the last ten years. The replacement of residential homes at Kukum Labour Line by commercial buildings that are owned and operated by these new Chinese arrivals could only have been due to corrupt means. There were no tenders, and the fact that the Solomon Islanders who lived there could have been given an opportunity to own the plots of lands on which their homes were located arguably points to corruption. It is argued that government machinery that

disenfranchises its citizens by making them homeless to give way to the new wave of Chinese underlines serious inherent weaknesses in the government systems, particularly in the Lands Department, Physical Planning Division and Honiara Municipal Authority.

The second area is in regard to work and residential permits. A government system that enables people who do not speak a single word of Pidgin or English (or whose command of both languages is limited) to hold a Solomon Islands passport and own property, shops, buildings and businesses underscores a failure in the system. Can you imagine a Solomon Islander arriving in China, Australia or New Zealand without any funds and then suddenly owning businesses and becoming a citizen without being able to speak the language? To that extent, it is argued that a system that enables a person with limited command of Pidgin or English to own land, run shops and hold a Solomon Islands passport illustrates corrosion in the machinery of government. The revelation by a staff member of the Auditor General's Office that corruption is widespread in government arguably supports the contention that Solomon Islands has gone from bad to worse, and therefore, to that extent, its performance on pillar two is wanting. It is beyond the scope of this discourse to ascertain the reasons. I would simply venture to suggest that there is an inextricable link between political behavior and a lack of respect for procedures, processes and regulations by those supposedly serving under political directives.

A question that also needs to be asked is what impact did RAMSI advisors have on the machinery of government and why has the system been abused to the extent revealed by staff from the Auditor General's Office in spite of these advisors? It might be argued that this was a flawed approach because of the huge disparities in the salaries of local public servants and their RAMSI counterparts. RAMSI advisors were often paid ten times more than their local counterparts. These differences distort the relationship between them. I have heard from *wantoks* who worked with RAMSI advisors that, even though the relationship was supposed to be one of equals, it was not unusual to find the RAMSI advisor bossing the local counterpart, often in ways that were culturally insensitive or lacking in respect for local knowledge and expertise. I doubt that one would be able to find reports of this nature because of the tight control that RAMSI has on information, but I know that exit reports by local counterparts have often been critical of their RAMSI advisors. There is no better way to build competence in the public service than to give Solomon Islanders the same level of education as their RAMSI advisors and encourage locals to write policies to raise the standards of the public service.

How have living standards improved as a result of economic growth?

Pillar three is not necessarily easy to evaluate because of definitional issues. What

constitutes economic growth for one person might not be viewed as economic growth by others. Similarly, measuring improvements in living standards is subjective. Thus, someone who receives a royalty payment from logging operations might think that his/her living standards have improved because he/she can now buy corn beef, tea, sugar, rice etc. (even if it is only for a short time). There is also a problem of generalizing the issues because of the uneven distribution of resources throughout Solomon Islands, and imbalances in availability to government services. There are, however, some general ways in which improvements in standards of living may be measured by looking at changes in economic well-being over time. Questions that might be asked to ascertain if standards of living have changed include: is the economy meeting people's needs and, are real incomes improving? It is basically a quantities measure of well-being. Suffice to say there are different ways in which this can be measured.

One baseline measure of standards of living is to look at real income per capita (that is gross domestic product (GDP) divided by the total population). This is to see if real GDP per capita rises when real national output grows faster than the population over a period of time. Solomon Islands politicians have often argued that the Solomon Islands economy has grown, by pointing to the increase in GDP. It is argued, however, that the GDP is not necessarily a measure of economic growth because it does not reflect real changes in society. It is an open fact that the increase in GDP has been spawned by the logging industry at huge environmental and social costs to Solomon Islanders. Economic growth rates in the past five years have been distorted by the rate at which Solomon Islands' natural forests have been removed. The real question is: what improvements have been made to the general population of Solomon Islands as a result of this so called growth? I would argue that the logging industry may have enriched some people, including some politicians, but it has left a terrible legacy of corruption that has permeated all levels of Solomon Islands society. I would argue that policy rhetoric about economic development is not supported by relevant administrative and legislative actions. Thus, reforms to natural resource legislation to enable resource owners to be participants in development and to get a fairer share of the value of their natural resources have never been made and are unlikely to. At the same time, necessary reforms to the Lands and Titles Act (that would make it easier to recognize customary land right holders without having to take their rights way through acquisition of their land) have also not been made and are unlikely to. It is argued that there is a close nexus between economic development, reforming the Land and Titles Act, natural resource legislation and resolving the problems that led to the "ethnic tension". The fundamentals have not been addressed. It is argued that there are clearly more squatters within and on the outskirts of Honiara in 2013 than there were in 2003. There are more Chinese-owned shops and buildings in Honiara,

Munda, Auki, Noro and Gizo in 2013 than there were in 2006. The Commission of Inquiry into the 2006 riots was unequivocal in its conclusion about where polices should be directed; namely, inclusive development, proper planning, delivery of social services and ensuring that the new wave of Chinese businesses move away from being economic rent seekers and become “developers” of well planned and designed shopping malls, so that Solomon Islanders can also participate in the retail sector. Unfortunately, Solomon Islands politicians have been too preoccupied with how much more of the State’s limited funds can be appropriated to the Constituency Development Fund than addressing these fundamental economic problems.

Conclusion

There are elements of bias in looking at the success of RAMSI, and particularly the response of successive Solomon Islands’ governments. I have tried as best as I could within the limits of this discourse to argue what I view as the “measure” of Solomon Islands’ responses to the opportunities provided by RAMSI’s presence in Solomon Islands between 2003 and 2013. The lens I have used is subjective and reflects my own bias; based on what I have observed. My assessment is a qualitative evaluation, and I would caution readers not to read too much into it without a more comprehensive analysis of the arguments I have made to measure the impact of RAMSI on Solomon Islanders. I have tried to show some trends across the three pillars of RAMSI’s Mission statement and I have set out what I believe to be trends that should concern donors and people who might be interested in contesting the elections in 2014. Donors such as the Taiwanese Government should be concerned that their tax money is helping to sustain a situation that will fuel a revolution; a revolt that would be instigated by young Solomon Islanders who are well-informed through social network links as to what is happening within the deepest corners of the Government.

I would argue by way of conclusion that we have missed an opportunity. If there is any criteria against which we can measure respect for the rule of law, and how successfully we have responded to these opportunities, we need only look at the way in which an increasing number of people drink beer in public in front of police officers in total defiance of the law. I would submit, as a final remark, that there are lessons to be learned about interventions that make assumptions about the cultural, political, historical, ethnic, traditional, economic and social conditions of a country. No one in 2003 could have foreshadowed that, by 2013, corruption would have become so invasive in Solomon Islands so as to undermine the good work that has been done by RAMSI.

This post concludes 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](#).

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