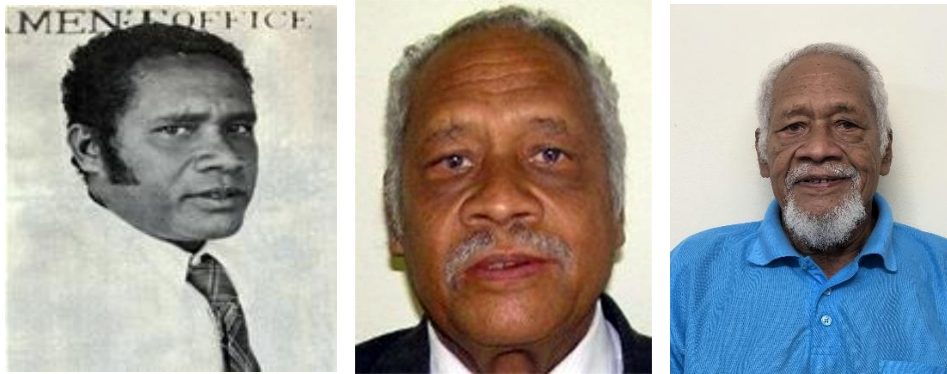


# Obituary for Sir Francis Billy Hilly, (1947–2025)

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Francis Billy Hilly in 1978, in the 1990s, and in the 2020s.

## Early Years, 1947–76

Francis Billy Hilly was born on 20 July 1947 at Vonunu Methodist mission hospital on small Liapari Island off Vella La Vella Island, Western District, in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. The child of George Hilly and Grace Wilmot, he grew up in Koriovuku, a new Methodist village on northern Ranongga Island, established by his father, a village headman, who helped relocate people affected by a 1952 earthquake. The new village was situated on what had been Emu Harbour plantation, begun in 1912 as a 640-acre leasehold colonial-era copra plantation. Koriovuku has become one of the largest settlements on Ranongga. His father went into business buying and transporting copra, relying on his kinsmen and hiring labourers from Choiseul (Lauru). By the 1960s and 1970s, George Hilly had become indebted to Gizo-based traders of Chinese origin and suffered financially in the late 1970s global drop in copra prices. However, Sir Francis' lifelong business interests and acumen followed a long family tradition.

His first schooling was at a village school on Ranongga and then at the Government Primary School in Honiara (1958–62), King George VI School (1963–66), and at University of the South Pacific (1968–73), where he was a representative on the Students' Council and the first Solomon Islander to graduate, with a B.A. (Administration) from USP. Initially, the BSIP administration expected Hilly to train as a school teacher. Instead, influenced by one of his lecturers, he chose administration as his major, convincing the BSIP government that expertise on localisation was a greater need. The USP opened in 1968 and Hilly was the only one of the first five BSIP students at USP to graduate.

Before entering politics, he worked as a District Officer (1974), and Clerk to the Eastern District Council (1975), next joining the British Solomons Trading Company in Honiara (1975), and in Gizo (1976). His friends from these early years remember him with affection. He spoke several languages: Luqa and Kubokota (Ghanongga) from Ranongga, Roviana (the Methodist *lingua franca* in the Western Solomons), Marovo (the lagoon home of his mother), the Simbo language, and English, but initially probably not Solomons Pijin. For many of Hilly's generation in the West, Solomons Pijin was learnt later in life, not in

childhood. Hilly is fondly remembered by fellow students from his KGVI School days, for his role in the USP Student's Council, and for his prowess in soccer. Another side of him was his membership of Nelson Major's bamboo band, composed of young men from Ranongga, who made a famous recording with SIBC. Several people who knew Hilly well told me that it was always joyful to be in his company. Gentle and caring by nature, he had a warm smile and a good sense of humour.

### **Leadership Aspirations, 1976–93**

Back in the 1970s there were only a small number of national leaders, many in the public service, who moved on to be politicians. For instance, at the same time that Peter Kenilorea became District Commissioner for Eastern District in 1975, Francis Billy Hilly went on leave from his position as clerk to the council, and married. Soon after Hilly resigned from his Kirakira-based position, intending to stand in the 1976 general election. For a short period, Ezekiel Alebua replaced Hilly as clerk. All three became prime ministers, with Hilly the fourth person to take over the role in 1993–94. In a complex web of chief ministers and prime ministers, Solomon Mamaloni from Makira was the first chief minister in 1976, then the second prime minister, 1981–84, and again in 1989–93 and 1994–97. Peter (later Sir) Kenilorea was the second chief minister (1976–78) and first prime minister (1978–81), then again in 1984–86. Ezekiel Alebua held the prime minister's position in 1986–89 and was premier of Guadalcanal at the time of the uprising that led to the Tensions.

During the years immediately before and after Independence on 7 July 1978, Britain's last Protectorate was dealing with volatile issues. Hilly entered the Legislative Assembly as the member for Ranongga/Simbo in 1976, one of the original members of the modern parliament. He was appointed Minister for Home Affairs in Chief Minister Kenilorea's 1976 government and was a delegate at the September 1977 Independence Constitutional Conference in London. In early 1978, Hilly and other Western members walked out of the Legislative Assembly during a debate on the Independence Constitution because it did not contain provisions for provincial-style governments. Hilly resigned from cabinet in May 1978 because of the slow progress towards developing a provincial government system. He supported what became known as the Western Breakaway Movement, which lobbied for greater regional control of resources and decision-making, not a dominant national government. The Western argument concerned regional finances and fears of Malaitan dominance of the new national government through their high population level. The movement was also influenced by a Bougainville secessionist movement, although it was always unlikely that any new nation-state combining PNG's North Solomons Province and Western District, would emerge.

One event followed close after Hilly's resignation: the publication of the notorious poem 'Ode to the West Wind', written by a Malaitan, and published in the government-owned *Solomons News Drum* on 9 June 1978. The scurrilous 'Ode' ridiculed the people of the Western Solomons and their supposed desires for independence. While retaining his seat in the Legislative Assembly, Hilly also contested and won the Western District Council seat of South Ranongga in 1979 and subsequently became president of the council. The Kausimae Committee on Provincial Government in 1977–79, which provided recommendations for a future governance structure, and a government compensation payment for the insensitive 'Ode', helped diffuse some of the tensions between the people of the West and the rest of the nation. But bitterness lingered, and in March 1978 the Western Council passed a motion to boycott the Independence celebration, a situation not resolved until the next year.

After re-election in August of 1980, Hilly became leader of the Independent Group, which held 10 of the 38 seats in parliament, alongside Kenilorea and his United Party's 16 seats. The Independent Group became the junior coalition partner in the Kenilorea

government. Kenilorea had planned to appoint Hilly as Minister of Home Affairs, aiming to utilise him to develop the provincial government concept, and placate the West. However, to hold the support of Guadalcanal MPs, who just as much as the West wanted to safeguard their rights and resources, Kenilorea allocated the portfolio to Phillip Kapini. Hilly was appointed as deputy prime minister and minister for Health and Medical Services, until the Kenilorea government was brought down by opposition leader Solomon Mamaloni.

Questions surrounding how to develop effective district and provincial government systems continued to vex the government. These issues, and the lingering resentment caused by the legacy of the 'Ode', led Deputy Prime Minister Hilly to inform Prime Minister Kenilorea that his Independent Group members had decided to leave the coalition. This forced Kenilorea to submit his resignation, as he no longer had the numbers to govern. On 31 August 1981 there was an election for the prime minister's position which was won by Solomon Mamaloni, with Kenilorea replacing him as leader of the opposition, until the national election in November 1984. One outcome of this period was the *Provincial Government Act 1981*, revised in 1996 and 1997.

### **Prime Minister, 1993–94**

Hilly left parliament from 1984 to 1993 to pursue his own business interests, then in 1993 he was re-elected to the Ranongga/Simbo seat, which he continued to represent until 2010. On his return, between June 1993 and November 1994 Hilly replaced Solomon Mamaloni as prime minister, at the helm of an unstable coalition of seven factions with only a one seat majority.

As opposition leader in 1994, Mamaloni financially lured or offered cabinet positions to defectors from Hilly's fragile coalition government. One Mamaloni-aligned MP said that 'cheque and cash lobbying' by both camps was at its height during this period. With the help of Julian Moti, an Australian lawyer of Indo-Fijian descent, still in his late twenties, Mamaloni engineered plans to remove the minority government. Working in Honiara, and allied to Mamaloni, Moti soon learnt how to make his way around elite circles. As the numbers of his parliamentary supporters dwindled, Hilly refused to recall parliament, which was within his constitutional rights. However, Mamaloni and Moti managed to convince Governor-General Sir Moses Pitakaka to order the parliament to sit and consider a no-confidence motion, which was beyond his powers in the Constitution. The Hilly government declared Moti a prohibited immigrant for two years, the official reason being his non-compliance with the terms of his EEC contract. Moti continued to lead Pitakaka's challenge remotely, using local counsel appearing under his instruction and guidance.

Hilly was asked to resign, and after consulting the attorney-general refused to do so. He was dismissed by the governor-general on 13 October 1994, followed by Mamaloni's installation as caretaker prime minister, until his permanent appointment on 7 November. The Hilly government took the governor-general to the High Court, which found against the governor-general, with the case proceeding to the Court of Appeal. Hilly resigned before there was a final judgement, which was that the governor-general did have the power to order the speaker to convene parliament, a dubious decision. Mamaloni won the subsequent ballot (29 to 18), standing against ex-governor-general (1978–88) and then member of the parliament Sir Baddeley Devesi. Hilly had refused to stand in the ballot. Mamaloni rewarded most of the defectors from the Hilly government with positions in an expanded cabinet. Hilly had a high level of contempt for Moti.

Sir Peter Kenilorea deals effectively with this lamentable situation in his autobiography *Tell It As It Is*, which he called a constitutional coup and tantamount to treason or a conspiracy to commit treason. Moti later returned to prominence when Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare appointed him as Attorney-General in 2006 and again in 2007.

### **The Tensions and the RAMSI Years, 1998–2003**

The next national election was on 6 August 1997, after which Bartholomew Ulufa'alu was elected as prime minister on 27 August. A year later, in September 1998, the nation entered a long period of crisis when an uprising on Guadalcanal, fuelled by what became the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), attacked Malaitan settlers and led to the creation of an equivalent group, the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF), which took control of Honiara. This began what was known as 'The Tensions', a regional dispute that involved mainly Guadalcanal and Malaita, but in a variety of ways destabilised the entire nation. The dispute was eventually settled down by using special envoys, peace negotiations, and the creation of an unarmed Multinational Police Peace Monitoring Group from Fiji and Vanuatu (1999–2000), the International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT) (2000–03), followed by the Pacific Forum-based but Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (2003–17).

Members of the MEF seized Prime Minister Ulufa'alu in June 2000, forcing his resignation. Hilly was one of the two candidates for prime minister in June 2000, losing out to Manasseh Sogavare. However, Sogavare's initial term as prime minister only lasted until December 2001. He was replaced as prime minister by (later Sir) Allan Kemakeza, who served until April 2006.

### **Final Years, 2004–25**

In July 2004, Hilly became leader of the opposition until April 2006, defeating the other candidate, Alfred Sasako. Hilly was Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee 2004–05 and Chairman of the Parliamentary House Committee in 2006–07. He opposed the election of Snyder Rini as prime minister in 2006, alleging that bribes had been paid, and that the election was controlled and influenced by outsiders. There were riots, and Rini resigned after two weeks in the job. In May 2006, Hilly became minister of Commerce, Industries and Employment in the second Sogavare government, but was dismissed from the position in August 2006 after a disagreement concerning the future relationship with the Republic of China (Taiwan). When Sogavare was defeated in a no-confidence motion in December 2007, Hilly joined the government of Prime Minister Dr Derek Sikua (2007–10), once more as minister for Commerce, Industry and Employment. Next, Hilly became minister for Finance and Treasury, then lost his parliamentary seat in the 2010 elections after six terms representing Ranongga/Simbo.

### **Assessing a Career**

Hilly had a reputation for his steady support for village-level activities, and he always cared for his constituents, helping them financially, approachable when they were in Honiara or Gizo for medical care. He lamented the decline of traditional leadership, supporting the formation of chiefs' committees on his home island, particularly the Kulugha Chiefs' Association. During his term as prime minister and more generally in his career, Hilly attempted to strengthen fiscal management and the public service, encouraging coherent policy-making and prudent management of natural resources. Hilly took a strong position against logging controlled by foreign companies, wanting to phase it out, instead encouraging local processing and conservation of forest resources. He is credited with normalising the relationship with Papua New Guinea which had broken down under Mamaloni's 1989–93 prime ministership, because of incursions across the border with Bougainville by the PNG Defence Force in pursuit of members of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army. Hilly, and his Minister for Health (later Governor-General, Sir) Nathaniel Waena dealt efficiently with a 'go slow' dispute by members of the Solomon Islands Medical Association, to ensure full medical services were restored to the nation. Part of the plan to normalise medical services

was the appointment of Dr (later Sir) Nathan Kere as the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. If Hilly had been allowed to succeed, he could have changed the dubious course set for the nation by the unpredictable Mamaloni, and by the ill-advised Governor-General Pitakaka.

After he left parliament, Hilly served as Chairman of the Solomon Islands Political Parties Commission, established under the *Political Parties Act 2014* to monitor the functions of political parties. Hilly resigned from the role in December 2024 due to ill health. One of the few surviving members of the first parliament, Sir Francis Hilly was a humble man, but was also firm in his beliefs on how the nation should be governed.

Although his term as prime minister was short, between 1976 and 2024 he added exceptionally to the development of the Solomon Islands. After his long and distinguished career, Hilly was made a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG) in 2006 and was knighted (KCMG) in 2012.

Sir Francis died in the National Referral Hospital on 10 March 2025. My condolences to Lady Fiona Hilly, and their children Grace, Warwick, Jonathan, and Alexandriá, and to the nine grandchildren for their loss. He was a beloved son of Ranongga, and through his mother, by marriage, language and politics, a son of New Georgia and Simbo, as well as all of the Western Solomons. Sir Francis will be remembered as an important leader of the whole Solomon Islands nation.

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