Uniting the fragments
Solomon Islands constitutional reforms

by

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Abstract

Solomon Islands suffered a national identity crisis in the sense that it barely sees itself as one people working together to make things work. This near absence of nationalistic pride at the local level obscured efforts attempted at achieving common. This consequently led to difficulties in identifying appropriate governing structures to govern the diversity. Moreover, modern structures of governance and government were not well received and owned by the country’s citizens. Many times, local understandings of what constitutes good leadership often contradict modern good governance philosophies and political structures. Contradictions brought about by interactions of western philosophies (ways of doing things) and traditional governance modes proved costly for the country after two decades of political independence.

This paper argues that the source of current problems in the country is rooted in the national identity crisis and mismatch between modern political structures and traditional perspectives. The diverse cultural, geographic, social and political features of the country and its population has never been fully acknowledged and accommodated in the country’s political structures and constitution. As, Mamaloni, a former Prime Minister of the country once said “… island communities or nations of this archipelago want to be their own and themselves in terms of organization, having greater freedom to enjoy their lives as much as anyone else in the world”. Unless a system accommodates these “confusions”, and recognizes the distinct diverse groups in the country, and systematically acknowledges them, the desired democratic and good governance standards would not be satisfied and a nation that is united for the common good may never be realized. The current constitutional reforms are therefore a paramount to peaceful co-existence and national unity.

Introduction

On July 7th, 1978, Solomon Islands was declared an independent nation after many years under a British protectorate. A new flag was raised to replace the Union Jack, a national currency circulated, a new constitution promulgated and a national anthem sang. All these symbolized the birth of a nation with high hopes for peace and prosperity. The question that would arise 20 years down the political road was whether these symbols of nationhood meant anything at all?

The country that had hoped for a stable political and progressive economic future came to a real evaluation in 1998 when a social and economic upheaval shocked the foundations of the nation. Instead of Solomon islanders becoming increasingly conscious of a united nation with common goals to achieve, there is an obvious tendency for one to move towards consolidation affiliations with one’s island or language groupings. Moreover, the good of my people is getting more popularity than the good of our people.

Many questions could be raised. For instance, why is there limited of national consciousness after more than two decades of political independence? Why was there a social upheaval when the country enjoys a great deal of democratic freedoms under its constitution? Moreover, how could a government possibly govern in a diverse and fragmented nation? This paper attempts to answer these questions by concentrating on five particular areas.

• Firstly, the paper looks at prevailing political structures within Solomon Islands in pre-contact days. It looks at the how various communities govern themselves and how leadership was chosen or identified.

1 Good governance in this context, means working together to achieve common objectives while respecting the rights of individuals in society and upholding the law.
Secondly but closely related, it discusses the existence of many nations within a nation (Solomon Islands). It discusses the issues of identity and allegiance and how this blurs the notion of a nation. The paper further expanded to explain why modern government apparatus are seen as alien institutions and why they are not particularly regarded as ‘our’ system.

Thirdly, the paper highlighted some notable calls for political autonomy by particular groups within the country since independence. The three notable cases revisited for exemplification are the 1978 Independence Order and the Western Breakaway Movement; the 1987 Constitutional Review report and the Guadalcanal People’s Bonafide demands of 1988; and the 1998 ethnic (social) crisis.

Fourthly, a discussion is focussed on the high turnover rates of governing regimes and the effects on attempts to promote good governance. It focuses on why favoured changes to the governance structure were not implemented as a consequence of political instability since independence.

Finally, there is an outline of the current constitutional reforms that attempt to address the issue of unity in a diverse socio-cultural and political setting. The main areas that are featured in the current constitutional reforms to ensure a favourable marriage between modern structures and local perspectives are highlighted.

It is hoped that by looking at these specific areas, the current constitutional reform targets would be brought into perspective. The urgency and importance of such an undertaking for an even more democratic system and one that upholds good governance is probably timely and would definitely facilitate lasting peace and prosperity.

**Traditional governance structures**

In order to appreciate the obstacles and problems faced by present political arrangements, it is important to have an understanding of the social and political culture of the country and how it influences the behaviour of leaders and administrators in the Solomon Islands. It is important to touch on both traditional organisations (elements of which are still prominent in the Solomon Island societies) existing prior to the establishment of western models of political organisation, and modern organisations in the country.

Prior to foreign influences in the Solomon Islands, there was no system of government administering all the islands, which had their own political organisations. As a late prominent leader of the country puts it, “[t]he ‘Solomon Islands people’ have never been under the authority of any powerful individual leader, nor have they paid homage to a family or clan with royal blood or descent universally acceptable to them (Mamaloni 1992, 14).” Nevertheless, two styles of leadership and governance were evident throughout the islands those days. They are commonly known as the *Mane kaa* (Big Man) System, a largely Melanesian phenomenon and the ‘Chiefly System’, which was widespread in Polynesian outliers. These were also commonly found throughout the South Pacific region. Political boundaries that became sovereign boundaries of existing South Pacific countries were created by imperial powers. The two predominant systems of social and political organisation found in the Solomon Islands prior to the establishment of the present political structures are explained below.

The most common form of leadership in the Solomon Islands prior to contact with the outside world was the rule by the *mane kaa* or *mwane kama*2 (*mane sule*) in the north Guadalcanal languages. In the

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2 This system of leadership was discussed in depth by Ian Hogbin, in his study of the Kaoka Speakers of Guadalcanal (Hogbin 1964). He translated the word *mwane kama* to mean ‘big man’, *mwane* being man, and *kama* being ‘big’. This system of leadership became known as the ‘Big man system’ of government.
case of the ‘Big Man’ system in the Solomon Islands, the person becomes a leader through his own hard work and through the display of certain qualities. Such qualities were identified by Hogbin (1964, 63) as being "... forceful, even-tempered, hard working, a good speaker, and an able organiser. Previously there were also advantages in his enjoying renown as a warrior and magician. But the prime qualification is still wealth in the form of vegetable supplies and pigs". A ‘Big Man’ is a respected person in his own village or groups of hamlets but may have very little or no influence at all over the organisation of nearby islands or even villages.

One also finds the existence of chiefs as political leaders in some of the Solomon Islands societies. Political organisation of the village or part of an island is usually under the leadership of hereditary chiefs. The position is not earned or gained but rather transferred from the father to the son. This is the type of political organisation found in most of the Polynesian Islands of the Solomon Islands like Tikopia, Rennell and Bellona. The influences of chiefs in such Solomon Island societies were not extended to other islands. Like the ‘big man’ system, power of the chief is restricted to distinct island or islands or even just villages.

It should be noted that political organisation, leadership and governance in the islands is not as simple as described here and that considerable variations exist. A ‘big man’ structure that is found in any Melanesian community might be different from that in another, in the same way, as there may be differences in the structure of Polynesian chiefly systems. Nevertheless, suffice to say that two common governance structures found throughout the archipelago prior to contacts with the west were variations of ‘big man’ and ‘chiefly’ arrangements.

Nations within a nation

As inherent in the discussion throughout this paper, “Solomon Islands people” identify themselves more closely with their cultural or island groups than the nation. It is only when individuals go outside the country that the national identity becomes obvious and strong. Even with the introduction of Solomon Islands as a nation and provincial governments as lower imitations of the national government, people still cling strongly to their cultural niches. Despite external influences, people still maintain the strong sense of identity and allegiance with their distinct groupings as in the past. Referring to political arrangements in the islands before we found Europeans on our shores, Kabutaulaka (1993, 72) said, "... small communities not exceeding a few hundred, ruled themselves in their own ways". May be what we have in this archipelago and named Solomon Islands is an ‘imagined community’. Indeed, Anderson’s (1991, 6) definition of a nation as “… an political imagined – and community imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” may have relevance in the case of Solomon Islands. This definition can be borrowed to explain the reality of nationalism in Solomon Islands.

It appears that both national identity and provincial identity are rarely acknowledged. People continue to identify themselves at district or village level. National identity only becomes apparent when a person goes out of the country. When in Honiara, or in other parts of the country, the provincial identity may become obvious (Saemala 1982; Feignberg 1990). Therefore, the national consciousness was supposed to be brought about by nationhood is not always apparent.

Provinces themselves have unity problems, particularly when there are inefficiencies in services or when people feel that they have not been fairly treated. Some Islands in the Solomons have attempted to secede from provinces and some managed to form their own provinces. The motive has always been to look after one’s affairs (through their own province) with the hope that things would be better that way. For example, some islands like Ulawa talked of having a separate province from Makira or Sikaiana from Malaita. Differences in the cultures of these unique groups, amalgamated into one administrative and / or political body explains these problems within provinces.
Groups like the Kwaio of Malaita and the Tikopians and Anutans from Temotu have boycotted elections and refused to pay taxes (Feinberg 1990, 24) because of unfavourable responses from provinces and central government to their grievances. Problems within provinces may continue to haunt the decentralised government in the Solomon Islands just as that between provinces and the national government. This is not an insignificant problem given the fact that two provinces were established due to their dissatisfaction with their former provinces. Rennell and Bellona islands were granted a new province of their own after years of pressurising the government. They claimed that the Central Islands province did not properly serve them and that they are Polynesians with distinct customs and cultures from the Central Islands group. The new Choiseul province made similar claims of neglect in terms of the provision of services from the Western province. Nevertheless, it is important to note that even these new provinces have different groups within them so the move is seen by some as a stepping stone for further demands.

Even with decentralization through provincial government, a notable problem is the tension between national politics and provincial politics. The first and probably the most obvious is the problem of national integration. Once people have identified themselves with a particular province, they start comparing the receipts from and contribution to the national economy against those of other provinces. The welfare of the province becomes more important than the welfare of the whole nation. This may be attributed to the fact that the provincial government system reinstated the traditional characteristics of societies as smaller societies within the big islands. What was important in traditional Solomon Islands’ societies was the welfare of the distinct communities or groups and not the whole island, especially in the larger mountainous islands.

This attitude continues to prevail in Solomon Islands politics today. On his 1989 tour of the Western Province, the Governor General was reminded that the province contributed more than any other province to the national economy but development plans and resource allocation always favoured densely populated areas. In his reply the Governor General stressed unity and political stability and said that equality would result in political instability (Solomon Nius 6 February 1989, 5). By this he meant that giving more does not mean receiving more because the other provinces also need government support. If the needs of other provinces are not satisfactorily met, instability may occur in the country, which may have grave consequences.

This raises a dilemma because the same consequences are possible if provinces are giving more but receiving less from the national economy. Some felt that unity in the country can only be maintained if the central government is dedicated to equal treatment in terms of development and resource allocation. If this is not forthcoming, then the present government arrangements could be a stepping stone to disintegration of the whole country. Nevertheless, there is very little evidence to support claims for possible disintegration of the country once distinct groups are recognized.

Lack of national consciousness has led to suspicions, animosity and fear of domination by other islanders. Because of this resentment of 'strangers' and fear of being dominated, some provinces have been calling for more legislative power to control the movement of persons. A classical case of this was in March 1995, when an interim committee in Munda, in the Western province, called a meeting over squatters from other islands and districts living illegally in the area (Solomon Star, 5 April 1995, 12). The problem stemmed from the past decade when some people were hired to clear the area for a development project. After the job was done, those people continued to stay and built houses illegally on the customary land in the area. Some people in these squatters were working for the fish cannery in the area (Solomon Taiyo Cannery at Noro) but most are unemployed and are suspected to be the source of criminal activity in the area. The customary land owners realised the possible loss of their land so they organised the meeting, aimed at regaining their land and the removal of squatters.

It should be noted that the two provinces that were continuously calling for more autonomy were Guadalcanal and Western. They have industries that attracted people seeking employment, some of whom engaged in criminal activities and illegal settlements. However, such provincial control over movement of people would contradict the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of movement. These
calls for more autonomy are, according to Premdas (1983,51) based on "Charges of alleged discriminatory treatment, ethnic colonialism ... , land alienation, and the over-centralisation of powers and function held by the national government". Lack of national consciousness and the feeling that the central government was not protecting their interests, encouraged provinces to call for more autonomy.

Identity and allegiance

One of the pioneer leaders of the nation state of Solomon Islands after ten years of independence still realized that the amalgamation of these small independent communities into one country may have been a miscalculation. Solomon Mamaloni (first Chief Minister of Solomon Islands) stated that:

> [a]ll these small ‘islands nations‘ were INDEPENDENT entities long before the northern explorers found them. Their cultures differed from each other. However, inter migration between islands close to each other had resulted in some similarities in customs and other characteristics. The merging of these ‘islands nations‘ into one ‘Sovereign Authority‘ (constitutional terms) was by human design, and said to be by necessity. Unfortunately, for all practical purposes it was the greatest error of the British administration in this region (1992, 10).

Some critics say that overemphasis of internal fragmentation may be overly cynical. Nevertheless, achieving national unity is crucial in that it has policy making implications, national wealth distribution and development in general (United Nations 2002, 28). As alluded to earlier, creation of modern political and administrative boundaries could have amalgamated “distinct communities” into seemingly acceptable convenient groupings. Even with these modern political creations, differences in perspectives and ways of doing things do exist. In the recent crisis between Guadalcanal and Malaita people (summarized below) for instance, the movements in the provinces created notions of homogeneous ethnic identity (Kabutaulaka 2000, 4). Such perceived homogeneity existed only for the purpose of social mobilization and it collapsed when the civil unrest stopped.

The geographic features of the country and its cultural and linguistic diversity cannot be down played as something of the past and has no importance in the present contexts. In fact, indications are that it has a lot to say about the present and future directions for politics and governance in the country. As Liloqula (2000, 6) pointed out, “since we became one country, Solomon Islanders have yet to accept each other as one people. The situation has been ongoing but we ignored it in our efforts to remain united, focusing on the good and positive small things that happen and burying the big issue as if it does not exist.” In the governing arena, this diversity inhibits its influences despite the adoption of a democratic system, the Westminster parliamentary system. Solomon Islanders have taken and utilized the system for different purposes at different levels. Devesi (1993, 4) argues that “… in many cases it satisfies individual philosophies on what one feels is good for the nation. This at times tends to be difficult bearing in mind the diverse cultures, island divisions and the different needs at for different islands and communities.”

This reality of “nations within a nation” has a lot to be learned from and to be structured in its right place. A simple example of the lack of national identity and allegiance was demonstrated by the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIP) at the height of the Guadalcanal crisis. Officers who supposed to be the impartial group took sides instead of protecting the citizens of the country. Arms that were supposed to be used for the protection of citizens were used against them. A good number of Guadalcanal and Malaita Police Officers ignored their national duties and affiliated themselves with fighters from their island or cultural background. The reason for this is due to the strength of cultural affiliations over national considerations. Since some island groups were more in numbers in RSIP than others, those who negotiated the Townsville Peace Agreement recommended the need for fair or equal provincial representation in the national police force (see Townsville Peace Agreement 2000). The important point to note is the existence of very strong internal bonds in the many distinct groups within the nation of Solomon islands and this impinges on the concept of national unity.
Government apparatus as alien institutions

Closely related to the identity and allegiance phenomena is the fact that Solomon Islanders see government mechanisms, structures or apparatus as alien to them. The abrupt/sudden change in Solomon Islanders’ views of what constitutes leaders and leadership is resulted in perceptional confusions. The two modes of governance (traditional and western) contradicted each other more than corresponding. As outlined above, in indigenous Solomon Islands societies, leadership is determined either by heredity or amassing of wealth in the form of money, root crops and animals (particularly pigs). In the introduced system, the electoral process determines leadership although elements of heredity and wealth are important considerations.

The greatest contradiction I see is that present political structures and systems are seen to be alien by Solomon Islanders. May be those with Western education sees it differently but a majority of Solomon Islanders regard current political structures as alien institutions. The idea of working together to make things work (ie. governance) for an “imagined community” make little sense little sense to most people. The various processes of how one participates in the course of attaining the common good is complex, confusing and means nothing to ordinary citizens who are basic subsistence farmers. As such, whether or not one takes part government processes and orgnisations is of minor importance.

To give an example, take the recent warnings by the Central Bank of Solomon Islands (CBSI) in light of the country’s economic hardships and near collapse. In March 2001, the Governor of CBSI, Rick Hou appealed to the nation to: (i) stop asking money from the government, (2) restore and establish law and order, (3) restore investor confidence, and (4) reassert ourselves as a nation, one people, one country (Solomon Star 14th March 2001, 1). He appealed following the deteriorating state of Solomon Islands with overseas foreign reserves depleting so rapidly. At that time, CBSI predicted that foreign reserves would dry up in a matter of weeks.

These kinds of genuine warnings were taken lightly by our people may be because of the lack of understanding on how financial institutions operate. Or, it could be purely as a result of understandings that government structures are alien institutions and people do not feel part of them. The lack of national consciousness, the ignorance of national processes, and the “foreign" tagged perceptions on government institutions facilitated the distancing of people from working towards the common good.

It should also be pointed out that duplications in political and governance structures or systems helped people to be alienated from modern structures. For instance, people find it difficult to differentiate between the work of Provincial Assembly members from that of the Member of Parliament. In this case, there are so many politicians at national, provincial and area council levels, duplicating tasks that there are no clear-cut functions of the three levels of government. Such confusions make people uninterested in what governments do. Indeed, they could not care less. In such scenarios, the symbols of nationhood and governance are normally regarded as something external to and do not affect distinct groups within the nation Solomon Islands.

Political instability and difficulties in improving governance

How well people respond to processes established by political and governance structures determine the quality governance and democracy in the Solomons. The issues of fragmentation highlighted meant that the system of governance needs to be modified or even changed. Tensions between national and provincial governments, between modern and traditional political structures and between diverse customs and traditions meant that the present arrangements are unsuitable, thus needs changing,

3 Although this did not actually come about, the warning was from professional analysis of the situation.
A governance issue that had been on the spotlight over the years is the need to review the provincial government system. The petitions and grievances mentioned above all have connections to calls for a change in the provincial government system and the constitution. Indeed, changing or improving the provincial government system has been an issue since the enactment of the 1981 Provincial Government Act. Since then, nothing much has been done to this provincial government system. This is despite recommendations of the Kausimae committee in 1979, which established the Provincial Government Act that a review should be made after five years of its implementation (1979, 95). The only reviews undertaken were the provincial government review of 1986 and in-house reviews in 1991 and 1992.

One reason for the difficulty in reviewing the system has been the constant change in government. In 1988, for instance, a review of decentralisation was undertaken. The review, known as the Government Review White Paper, aimed at institutionalising the role of traditional chiefs into the provincial government system (Solomon Nius 22 August 1988, 3). The review, which involved premiers, came to a halt when the Mamaloni government came to power in 1989 and insisted on the maintenance of the present system. The Mamaloni led Alliance government wanted the system to remain the same except that more powers relating to fisheries resources, forestry, mining, foreign investment and taxation be devolved to the provinces by 1990 (Solomon Nius 6 Feb. 1990, 1). The Alliance government was toppled again in 1990, and replaced by a `Government of National Unity'. The reviews were again disrupted.

The National Coalition Partner (NCP) government that was in power during the mid 1990s was in favour of the involvement of chiefs on the grounds that chiefs have the ultimate power in the villages over land issues, a determinant of development. In an earlier study I did in two provinces (see Nanau 1995), the NCP government’s idea of institutionalizing chiefs was highly criticized. The executives felt that there was no place for this idea in Solomon Islands’ politics because the chiefly system would eventually die out in the country.

This argument is understandable since these two provinces do not have chiefly systems such as those found in the Rennell/Bellona province or the Tikopians and Anutans of Temotu, or the Southern part of Malaita and Ulawa Island. In that particular study, Makira Ulawa and Guadalcanal provinces argue that time and money should only be spent on a structure that will survive in the future. The chiefly system, they believe, is dying out and in most places, it is non-existent. Further, a chiefly system means that the chief would remain in power until his death. Therefore, young people with fresh ideas would be denied the right to use their knowledge, because they would never be in control.

The NCP government was overthrown in 1994 by a constitutional crisis challenged in the High Court by the Prime Minister and the Governor General. In early October, 1994, the Deputy Prime Minister, a government backbencher, and four ministers of the NCP Hilly led government resigned and joined the SINUPP opposition, complaining of a power struggle within the NCP camp and excessive overseas trips made by government ministers (Solomon Star, 5 October 1994, 1). During the same period, the Finance Minister, Andrew Nori also resigned because of a controversial financial deal he made in early September. The deal included the transfer of SI$1.185 million from the central government to an account in Australia. In this transaction, there was a transfer of SI$59,259 from a cheque account into the minister's local bank account with the National Bank of Solomon Islands (Solomon Star, 12 October 1994, 2). He was forced to resign and the NCP government was left ruling with a minority.

On 13 October, the Governor General announced from his residence that he had removed the Prime Minister from office because he had lost majority support of the MPs, a violation of section 33(1) of the constitution (Solomon Star, 14 October 1994, 1). The Prime Minister rebuffed the order and said that he was still the legitimate Prime Minister of the country. The constitutional crisis ended in the High Court for a ruling. The Prime Minister's removal by the Governor General, was supported by the High Court and a new group, the Solomon Islands National Unity, Reconciliation and Progressive Pati (SINURP), under the leadership of Solomon Mamaloni won office in 1994 after an election. The NCPs bid to review the provincial government system was abandoned.
In recent years, governments also changed before the ‘natural deaths’ of the houses. In 1997, a review of the Provincial Government Act was carried out and passed by government as the 1997 Area Assemblies Act. Guadalcanal Province challenged it in the High Court and the Act was nullified. Although the Appeals Court did not uphold the decision of the High Court in 1997, a new government was elected into office and the 1997 Area Assemblies Act was abandoned. The new government re-instated the Provincial Government Act in 1997.

The Solomon Islands Alliance for Change (SIAC) government then appointed a Task Force to look at the Provincial Government system that is cost effective and appropriate. The Task Force led by Milner Tozaka (now SI ambassador in Australia) completed their task and a report and draft legislation were completed. Before SIAC had time to put it into parliament, a coup on June 2000 forced them out of office and the plan was abandoned.

The Sogavare Government that took over from SIAC, after all the turbulence, and in line with the provisions of the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) picked up the 1987 Constitutional Review Committee’s (CRC) report as a starting point for governance reforms. When they were voted out of office in the 2001 general elections, the Kemakeza government continued from where they left. The change is almost certain to take place and as will be seen later, a new constitution is in the making. It is hoped that with the new political structure and constitution in place, democracy and good governance will be upheld.

Since the main focus of this paper is on national fragmentation, it is appropriate that various calls that led to present efforts to constitutional reforms be highlighted. This should shed more light into the understanding of issues that are hoped to be addressed in the proposed constitution.

**Calls for more autonomy and governance reforms**

What ensued since day one of the independent state of Solomon Islands is frustration, confusion and the desire by distinct groups within the country to call for more power and to be autonomous in the hope of meeting their development aspirations. It must be pointed out at this stage that since independence, administrative boundaries created by colonial powers have become mechanisms through which distinct groups exert their presence or promote their grievances. As such, provincial groupings use their status as a province to raise their grievances as a people. Indeed, with a few exceptions, provincial groupings have some commonalities within themselves, despite variations in languages or customs. This is not to say that all provincial groupings are homogeneous.

**The 1978 independence order and the western breakaway movement**

In the years leading up to independence, a good number of people realized that simply uniting the distinct island groups into an entity called the ‘Solomon Islands’ is not right. This is because, the distinct identities that are more important (and appropriate) to the islanders’ world would be destroyed and the influences distinct leaders normally have on their communities may be threatened.

One group that shared these sentiments prior independence was the Western provincial government. In 1975, a submission they sent to the then government the following sentiments were shared:

> Without a form of government which could create a united nation through respecting the regional differences, the effects of the present government structures, powers, functions could only lead to the overrunning of the numerically weaker regions by the numerically stronger regions (cited in Premdas et al 1984, 152)

Inherent in this submission are issues related to the political and administrative arrangements of the proposed independent Solomon Islands, issues of population movements, and revenue sharing.
connotations. The important point to note is the questioning of the political structure that seem to ignore distinct regional differences and distinct needs of each sub-region.

The Western part of the country carried these sentiments through to independence. On 7th July 1978, the Western region of the country threatened to break away from the country and boycotted the festivities to commemorate the Independence Day (Premdas et al 1984, 143). Its leaders were dissatisfied with the failure of the 1978 independence Order to guarantee the devolution of powers to the provinces. Indeed they wanted a more federal political arrangement in which the people can determine their own destiny and the distinct characters of their region maintained or even promoted. The agenda of the Western people at that time could be seen in their fear of being marginalized by migrant populations, the need to control the wealth in their province and the contradictions brought about by the traditional and modern views on land4. The calls by Western province to secede were solved at least for that period through concessions and rational bargaining. Indeed, they shape the development of politics in the country.

**Bona fide demands of Guadalcanal people (1978)**

Another notable post-independent development that proved the existence of nations within a nation (i.e. a fragmented society) was the wave of demands by Guadalcanal province and its people to the national government.

In 1978, the people of Guadalcanal also put forward a petition to the national government regarding some of their grievances. Some people may argue that this is done in the light of what the Western Province and its 1975 submission to the government. Whatever the arguments are, the fact remains that Solomon Islanders see government structures as alien institutions and the leaders in the government represent their own people and not the entire country. The common good is secondary or non-existent. People normally failed to distinguish between a public office and the individual holding that office. This is because government institutions are seen as alien to them. Look at the following words of a petition5 by Guadalcanal protestors in 1978:

> We the bonafide citizens of Guadalcanal, have been kind and helpful to your onetalks for a long time, by allowing our garden lands for them to use, and what do we get in return? Insults is what we get in return for kindness shown to your people and the others. Our traditions and customs have been torn to shreds by your onetalks. Your people have often failed to respect us and our customs.

It can be ascertained from the words of this petition that the government is something external to the distinct communities. It represents the interest of whoever is at the helm. As such, the sense of a nation or feeling part of a nation is absent.

The provincial government Act of 1984 that established provincial governments was no doubt drafted with the intention of uniting the country in mind. It was an attempt to encourage decision making from below and ensure the participation of people in the affairs that affect them. Decentralisation through the provincial government system strengthened the identification of people to a particular area. A former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Provincial Governments and Rural Development at the time of my earlier research (see Nanau 1995), claimed that Solomon Islanders are now identifying themselves as people from a certain province rather than as people from a certain district. On national issues, they identify themselves as Solomon Islanders because the provincial government system provides for that national identity. Decentralisation provides provincial unity, which in turn leads to national unity. This may look contradictory but the reality is that national unity can only be achieved if people in their distinct

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4 See Nanau 2001 for an elaborate discussion on this issues.

5 This petition was prompted by an article published by a local newspaper entitled “local war” which basically insulted Guadalcanal people.
regions are recognized and are given the political and economic mandate to look after their own affairs before the affairs of the nation. This sentiment may not be shared most idealists of nations as homogeneous entities.

**The 1987 constitution review and Guadalcanal Province 1988 demands**

Coincidently, another ten years after their petition to the national government, Guadalcanal people once again pressurized the government to change the government system. They demanded the government to change the political structure in response to continuous brutal killings of their people by migrants. They called for a federal system of government (see Petition of 24th March 1988). Also included in the petition were issues related to revenue sharing, movements and settlements and the distinctiveness of the province and its cultures. The notion of being different from others was again raised.

Indeed other provinces had the same feeling with them. The feeling that they are different. A Constitution Review Committee (CRC) commissioned in 1987 to review the constitutions recorded these sentiments from a cross section of the country. Even the premiers of 6 provinces in a petition to support for the 1987 CRC recommendation for federalism collectively stated the following:

> Geographically our provinces are separated by the sea and natural [sic] we will remain that way. Likewise, we are a multicultural society and we hoped to stay that way, rather than be alienated by more stronger forces, thus causing a disruption to our multicultural indentity [sic] and creating animosity in our society. We do not need to look far to see for ourselves what is happening in other Pacific Territories. What we must now do is to recognize these cultural differences and learn to respect each other for our differences – not by way of alienation, or domination.

What is becoming clearer over the years is the wish by provinces to be given due recognition and autonomy to maintain their distinct ways of doing things. The realization is that the current governance arrangements are threatening the coexistence of the distinct communities within the "imagined country".

**The ethnic crisis and constitutional reforms**

Coincidently, another tens years after their petition to the national government and the shelving of the 1987 CRC report and recommendations, Guadalcanal people once again pressurized the government to change the government structure – this time with force. The social uprising on Guadalcanal came about as a direct consequence of successive governments' inaction on grievances of people. Guadalcanal people in this instance had taken up arms to pressurize the government to look into their long-standing grievances over development issues. High on their agenda were issues related to land occupied by settlers from other islands (particularly Malaitans). A number of people in 1998 directly associated the uprising with the bona fide demands by Guadalcanal indigenous put forward to the government of the day.

Whether or not this is true, the fact remain that in November 1998 a group of armed indigenous Guadalcanal men attacked Malaitan settlements in northwest Guadalcanal destroying properties and chasing settlers. At first the government and many senior state officials downplayed the crisis. For instance, the Minister of State then was quoted saying, “as far as I gather, there are actually two or at the most three very small groups of perhaps a total of 50 people. Some of those arrested on arms charges were disgruntled former police officers. Most trouble makers appear to be young people who do not take it seriously, but who want a bit of fun and adventure” (*Pacific Islands Monthly, June 1999*). As it turned out, it was not a minor act of adventure but a very serious undertaking.

By 2000 a group representing displaced Malaitans had formed and called itself Malaita Eagle Force (MEF). The group’s main concern was rooted in compensation demands of Malaitans over lost properties and those damaged by members of the Isatambu Freedom Movement (IFM), killings of Malaitans and the protection of Malaitan interests in Honiara (*Kabutaulaka 2000, 2*). The MEF made
incursions into Guadalcanal villages and retaliated by killing a number of people. Confrontations between MEF and IFM had escalated around areas surrounding Honiara by March 2000.

On June 5, 2000, MEF joined forces with elements of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) and took over the state armory, staged a coup and the then Prime Minister resigned. It was a period of political uncertainty and confusion in Solomon Islands. This did not deter the determination of IFM, thus fierce fighting between the MEF/Paramilitary and IFM ensued. A new government was formed under duress and it took the conflict very seriously. Their single priority was to bring warring parties to the negotiating table in an attempt to return peace and normalcy to the once happy isles. The government did numerous consultations independently with conflicting parties. Australia and New Zealand allowed their warships for such consultative meetings. A cease-fire agreement was secured between IFM and MEF in early 2000, only to be shattered by the parties a week later. It was not until the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) in Australia that hope for true peace dawned on Solomon Islands.

The Townsville Peace Agreement, Buala Communiqué and constitutional reforms

As soon as hostilities ceased between the MEF and IFM, the then Sogavare government proceeded with the process to review the constitution to accommodate the wish of so many since the birth of Solomon Islands. The TPA stipulates that Malaita and Guadalcanal provinces be given autonomy and subsequently other provinces. Since the government is a signatory to the Agreement, it is obliged “… to introduce a form of government that would give autonomous powers to the people of Solomon Islands to manage their own affairs (Leni 2002, 2).”

A month after the signing of the TPA, the Solomon islands government summoned all provincial premiers to Buala in the Isabel province to a Premiers’ Conference. The Conference acknowledged the two years (1998-2000) were the worst experiences of the country’s short history. They realized that these experiences were the consequences of ignoring the balance of power between the central government and governments of the provinces. They also realized that there is an overriding need to maintain unity in the country. The Conference Communique agreed to the following resolutions:

1. That Solomon Islands Government adopts a homegrown state system of Government for Solomon Islands whereby each respective province should become a state with its own State Constitution

2. The Premiers’ Conference recommends to the National Government of Solomon Islands that it takes to Parliament at the earliest opportunity the desire of the Provincial Governments to amend section 114 and other relevant sections of the National Constitution to give effect to the Premiers Conference’s resolution for the adoption of a home grown State System of Government for Solomon islands

3. That the Premiers’ Conference having heard the desire of Temotu, Makira/Ulawa and Rennell/Bellona Provinces to secede from the rest of Solomon Islands as independent Sovereign States hereby take note of that expressed desire and accordingly advises them to pursue the same individually with the Solomon islands Government.

The third resolution is an interesting development. It shows that the intention of some groups to maintain their own identities and destinies. It is a development that would interest future researchers and worth monitoring.

Soon after the Buala Premiers’ Conference, the Minister responsible then appointed a Task Force to revisit and redefine the 1987 CRC report and recommendations for federalism. The Task Force

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6 This section deals with the establishment of Provincial Governments
completed the task in 2001 and Cabinet approved it in June 2001. As the responsible Minister stated when presenting the report in Parliament, “… this is the appropriate time to reconsider our political history and correct a Government System that was introduced by our past colonial masters, which has proven unsuitable for our interests (Leni 2002)”. As such, the road to a new constitution for improved governance and genuine democracy has just started.

The proposed governance structure and constitution of Solomon Islands

From this point on, there can be no turning back but to review the constitution and make it Solomon Islander friendly. Moreover, the government is very committed to seeing the idea and wish to fruition. The difficulties in the recent years has convinced the government and the people of Solomon Islands the way forward is to give more autonomy to distinct groups or regions of the country to exercise what they believe in and what has been suppressed by the introduction of a foreign government structure. As the UNDP fact finding mission confirmed,

The process of constitutional review in the Solomon islands is on an irreversible track. Politically, the decision has been made to create a federal state and although a thorough analysis of the implications has lacked, the reality does not allow the process to be reversed. For that, too many problems have been encountered in the last 24 years since independence and too much blood has been spilled in more recent years (Muller 2002, 9).

Since the country is going to adopt a ‘homegrown’ federal state system that recognizes the distinctiveness of communities within Solomon Islands, it is appropriate to describe what it will be like. The following section therefore describes the features of the proposed system and highlights aspects of the intended reforms to the constitution.

**Political structure**

In the proposed state government system, the country will no longer have the office of the Governor General (representing monarchy) since the country would now become a republic. Moreover, it will be a three-tier system comprising of the federal government, state governments and local governments with distinctive separation of operational powers prescribed under their respective constitutions (Tuhaika 2001). The states will have their own constitutions. The flow chart (diagram) below indicates the skeleton of the proposed structure.
President
(of the Sovereign Democratic
Federal Republic)

Congress of Governors
This includes the President (Chair); Governor of each state; appointed traditional leaders, elder statesmen/women.

Federal Parliament
(Including the Prime
Minister & Federal Cabinet)

State Governor

State Council of Chiefs
This includes the State Governor (Chair); Chairperson of local/area council government; chiefs appointed by State Governor

State Legislature
(Including State Premier & State Executive)

Area/Local Government
(Chairperson & Council Ministers)
Two bodies, *Federal Parliament* and *Congress of Governors*, would elect the federal President in the proposed reorganization. This of course is yet to be finalized when country wide consultation are done to ascertain what the majority says. Once elected into office, the president becomes chairperson in the proceedings of the *Congress of Governors* while *federal cabinet* and Prime Minister would keep the president informed of government doings.

A new body established by the proposed federal system is the *Congress of Governors*. This entity would embody the Governors of all states, traditional leaders and elder statesmen and women who are appointed by the president on the advice of respective state governors. The president would be chairperson in the Congress of Governors. Members of Congress of Governors are not entitled to receive monthly salaries but allowances, travelling and accommodation costs will be provided. The parliament basically remains as it is except for a change of name from national parliament to ‘federal parliament’.

Below the Congress of Governors are the ceremonial figureheads of each state (state governors). State legislature (current provincial assembly) and another body, the *State Council of Chiefs*, would elect this figurehead. Once elected, the state governor becomes chair in the *State Council of Chiefs*. Membership of *State Council of Chiefs* includes the State Governor (chair), chairpersons of area/local government, leaders, chiefs appointed by the state governor. It is therefore implied that a body similar to the suspended area councils will be in place and the chairperson given a seat in the State Council of Chiefs.

By simply looking at the flow chart, it could be inferred that the proposed new bodies to be established are *Congress of Governors*, office of the *State Governor*, and *State Council of Chiefs*. The only other change is the election of the President (currently, Governor General). Instead of having only parliament elect individuals to this office, the *Congress of Governors* will also be an active participant in the process. It could also be deduced that the office of *state governor* is an imitation of *federal president* while the *state council of chiefs* is a duplicate of *Congress of Governors*.

The only difference is that each body has its own specific functions to perform. I guess, the power sharing (political and economic) arrangement of these various bodies and between individual states and the federal government would be of much interest to the common man.

**Incorporation of traditional values on governance**

In the proposed national constitution, the roles of chiefs are uplifted. Leaders and chiefs of distinct groups within the society are supposed to be involved in the legislating processes of the country. In this way, the conflict of traditional laws with modern laws would be assuaged. Chiefs are featured in the Congress of Governors as well the in the State Council of chiefs. In this way, it is hoped that communities will feel part of the system and the feeling of ownership of the system would be encouraged. In the end, unity in the nation would be facilitated with people seeing government structures and institutions as part of their own systems.

**Freedom of movement**

A major problem in the present system that gave rise to the Guadalcanal uprising is the issue of freedom of movement. Solomon Islanders are normally uncomfortable seeing people moving freely anywhere and settling in to own properties. This free movement is of course a direct consequence of the adoption of western notions of democracy (free movement) and ownership of land as an economic commodity associated with western land tenure.

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7 Chiefs in this context includes church leaders, youth leaders, women’s representatives as well as traditional chiefs.
It is imperative that freedom of movement must be upheld but the freedom of settlement must have some basic controls to be in tune with the way islanders have been coexisting over the years. It may be appropriate for people to own land in perpetuity in their own provinces and islands and not anywhere in the Solomon Islands. Indeed, this is a very sensitive issue that many citizens would not want to engage in a discussion on. Nevertheless, it is an issue that could be properly sorted out to unleash the potential of communities to avail land for sensible economic development undertakings.

The proposed constitution realising this catered for the freedom of movement. That freedom will not be interfered with. However, when it come to the question of any person from another state wishing to settle in another state, the intending settler must comply with the restrictions imposed under the federal and state laws and traditional norms and practices of localities within the sates. Relating this to land, restrictions apply to settlement on both customary and alienated land.

**Local control over resources (land and natural resources)**

Since land ownership differs from region to region, the proposed constitution hopes that respective states will make their own regulations in that regard. The states and the land owners will decide on how land is to be legislated, how disputes over it solved and how wealth obtained from the exploitation of land is to be shared. All alienated lands will be reverted to individual states and the state in turn would return these to original landowners. Ownership of land will remain the right of landowners. This is an important step since currently, land matters in the country are confused due to the application of modern law on alienated lands and its contradictions with traditional land tenures. If this is given back to the people, distinct groups may have their own ways of administering and regulating their land through their distinct ways of dealing with such matters.

The question of ownership of petroleum and minerals on land owned by traditional landowners will be treated as part of the land. Therefore, any explorations for such commodities will be done under the ownership right of traditional landowners. The current legal situation where the Crown owns anything below 6 feet will be erased and all such rights be given to landowners. As such, arrangements to exploit minerals and so forth would be made between the investors, state governments and landowners.

**Sharing of wealth**

Inherent in all disputes mentioned above prior to and after independence is the sharing of national wealth. In the proposed government arrangement, each state will have certain powers to raise revenue while the federal government will continue to provide grants. Revenue raised from exports and imports through the federal system will be shared between states and the federal government.

A sharing formula will be finalized after wider consultations to ensure equitable distribution of wealth. In such a formula, the resource owners, the smaller and remote states and the bigger wealthier provinces should have their fair share. It is hoped that nobody would be left out or really disadvantaged by the new arrangement to cause another uproar.

**Conclusion**

Democratic and good governance practices in Solomon Islands since independence are a very interesting development. The once distinct and independent communities within the archipelago have been amalgamated by colonial powers in the past and forged a country called Solomon Islands. This is well and good for administrative convenience. However, as
this ‘imagined community’ (Solomon Islands) developed its political structures and attempted to govern the different people as one, problems began to emerge.

Since coming into contacts with the wider world, there have been problems related to conflicts over identity and allegiance of what constitutes the common good. Such problems came up every now and then but successive governments skillfully ignored or brushed the symptoms aside. It was not until now that the country is getting back to its senses by looking at the causes of such problems (i.e. fragmentation) rather than merely addressing the symptoms. The communities have been independent and distinct for so long and attempts to recall these independent features into modern governance structures is often an uncomfortable undertaking for leaders. The fear is that by giving more autonomy to distinct groups and administrative entities, the tendency to break away from the country would be high. Whatever the strengths of this arguments are, is yet to proven or otherwise.

The other side of the coin is that the denial of autonomy to distinct groups who have been independent entities until last century could further contribute to the ignorance of a national identity and its associated benefits. People may have more respect for a bigger authority if their immediate identity is not tampered with. If distinct communities can survive over centuries until they discovered foreigners on their shores, why can’t this freedom and democracy be given back to them? After all, it is their indigenous right.

Peaceful coexistence is the word. Recognizing and appreciating each other’s differences could be a brighter way forward for the nation Solomon Islands. So long as differences are acknowledged, it is possible that efforts will be exerted towards the need for good governance in the sense of working together (to be differentiated from community work) to achieve the common good. It may be appropriate for the Solomon Islands to be divided according to their distinct physical and traditional governance and democratic practices in order to stand a united country. For our case the new constitution may just be a few inches from adopting the motto: “Divided We Stand, United We Fall”!

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