
Background (drawn in part from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website http://www.dfat.gov.au/)

The population of Solomon Islands, estimated at 450,000 in 2001, is predominantly Melanesian (about 95%) although there are smaller Polynesian, Micronesian, Chinese and European communities. English is the official language of the Solomon Islands but Solomons Tok Pisin is the lingua franca for the majority of people. There are 63 distinct languages in the country, with numerous local dialects.

Solomon Islands’ first contact with Europeans was in 1568, when the Spanish explorer Mendana visited the islands. Whaling boats and traders began to visit the archipelago during the nineteenth century, followed closely by missionaries. In the 1860s “blackbirding” began, with a large number of Solomon Islanders recruited, sometimes by force, to work on sugar plantations in Queensland and Fiji.

In 1893 the British Government established a protectorate over the eastern group of islands with Germany controlling most of the west. Following the Anglo-German agreement of 1899, the British protectorate was extended to all areas now part of the nation of Solomon Islands, while Buka and Bougainville became part of German New Guinea. The Solomon Islands was the scene of some of the bloodiest land, sea and air battles of World War II from 1942 to 1945 and the capital moved from Tulagi (in the Florida Islands, Central Province) to Honiara (adjacent to the strategic Henderson Airfield on Guadalcanal Province) in 1944. Movement of large numbers of Malaitan labourers to Guadalcanal contributed to increasing tensions on Guadalcanal.

There were some indigenous demands for self-rule after World War II. Britain granted Solomon Islands internal self-government in 1976, followed by independence on 7 July 1978. At Independence, Solomon Islands joined the Commonwealth with Queen Elizabeth II as its Head of State, represented by a Governor General. The unicameral National Parliament comprises fifty members, elected for a four-year term under a "first past the post" voting system. The Prime Minister is elected by an absolute majority of Members of Parliament. Party structures in Solomon Islands are fluid. In addition to the National Government, there are nine Provincial Assemblies, each led by a Premier.
Ethnic conflict

Ethnic tension escalated on Guadalcanal in December 1998, although tensions had ebbed and flowed for some years before that. Guadalcanal people resented the influence of settlers from other islands and their occupation of land. The settlers, particularly from Malaita, were drawn to Honiara and its environs by economic opportunities.

The Solomon Islands Government, led by Prime Minister, Bart Ulufa'aalu, and the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP) faced serious challenges in dealing with growing tensions and by mid-1999 the Guadalcanal militants had taken control of the countryside around Honiara. The militants first called themselves the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA) but later adopted the name the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM). Up to 20,000 Malaitan settlers (many second-generation) fled into Honiara and were repatriated to Malaita by the Red Cross. Many have since returned and are concentrated within Honiara.

Violence increased in mid-1999 with the emergence of a Malaitan militant group, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), which undertook armed action on Guadalcanal. A state of emergency was declared on Guadalcanal in June 1999. The Commonwealth Special Envoy, Sitiveni Rabuka, brokered the Honiara Peace Accord, signed by members of the National and Provincial Governments and the Opposition, but the Accord failed to resolve the conflict. Despite several subsequent efforts to negotiate a cease-fire, the conflict continued throughout 1999. A Multinational Police Peace Monitoring group, sponsored by the Commonwealth with assistance from Australia and New Zealand, comprising police from Fiji and Vanuatu, arrived in Honiara in October 1999. Violent incidents and harassment continued to escalate.

On 5 June 2000, MEF militants, together with disaffected police officers ("the Joint Operations Force"), seized control of key installations in Honiara and took Prime Minister Ulufa'aalu hostage, demanding his resignation. On 13 June 2000, Ulufa'aalu submitted his resignation. At a meeting of Parliament on 30 June 2000, following intimidation of MPs and action to prevent attendance by some MPs supporting Ulufa'aalu, Manashe Sogavare (who had been Finance Minister in the Ulufa'aalu government) was elected Prime Minister and formed a new government.

Fragile peace

Following Sogavare’s election, reinvigorated efforts were made, assisted as previously by Australia and New Zealand, to bring the militant groups to the negotiating table. Talks took place on board HMAS Tobruk in July 2000, concluding successfully with agreement to a ceasefire on 3 August 2000. These talks provided the momentum leading to the peace talks at the RAAF base in Townsville, between 9 and 16 October 2000. The Townsville Peace Agreement (http://www.vanuatu.usp.ac.fj/pactreaties/Treaties_etc/Townsville_Peace_Agt.html) (TPA) provided a framework for consolidating peace. It provided for a weapons and general amnesty, disarmament and demilitarization, restructuring of the Royal Solomon Islands Police and the decommissioning of the “Joint Operations Force”. It also provided for the compensation of individuals and proposed development of areas affected by the violence and displacement of people. An indigenous Peace Monitoring Council (PMC) was charged with responsibility for implementing the
peace, with the assistance of an International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT), established at the invitation of TPA signatories.

The TPA brought an end to almost two years of high-level violence by Malaitan and Guadalcanal militants on Guadalcanal. NGOs and civil society called for reconciliation, reconstruction and good governance. Schools re-opened and many small businesses resumed some operations. The PMC and the Australian-led IPMT made some progress in supervising the surrender of arms (receiving some 1,300 weapons, of which about 150 were military-style) and sought to rebuild community confidence.

A number of former militants continue to operate personal “fiefdoms” with armed followers. Some militant groups split and engaged in internecine conflict; some others pursued criminal activities. This has contributed to a general climate of lawlessness and criminal violence, particularly in Honiara, elsewhere on Guadalcanal, and on Malaita, which has exacerbated the serious social and economic decline evident in the Solomon Islands in recent years.

The IPMT is to be drawn down in the first half of 2002. This draw down recognizes the IPMT has now largely done what it can to assist Solomon Islands take the peace process forward. The major problem now is not the high level ethnic conflict that prompted signatories to the TPA to call for assistance of an IPMT. The major problem identified by the Government and people of Solomon Islands is criminal lawlessness.

The PMC mapped out in February 2002 a program for its activities in 2002. Australia and New Zealand are continuing to work with the PMC and indeed to provide increased assistance. Australia and New Zealand are also continuing to work with the Solomon Islands Government and the RSIP to assist them to address the serious law and order problems.

**Fair elections**

The 5 December 2001 elections returned a government with a mandate to redress the country’s severe decline. Donors, including Australia and New Zealand, provided substantial support to promote free and fair elections, particularly through support to the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission, to the RSIP, and through the provision of 90 international electoral observers from Australia, New Zealand, Pacific Islands Forum, Forum islands countries, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the UN, the EU, UK, US, Japan and Taiwan. The elections proceeded peacefully and the large contingent of international observers concluded the elections were fair and reflected the will of the people of the Solomon Islands. About two-thirds of sitting members were defeated, including the majority of ministers of the outgoing Sogavare Government.

While party allegiances are fluid in the Solomon Islands, the final post-poll tally was Sir Allan Kemakeza’s People’s Alliance Party (PAP) 16 seats, "Independents" 18 seats, and Ulufa’alu’s Solomon Islands Alliance for Change Coalition (SIACC) 13 seats. Sogavare’s People’s Progressive Party (PPP) secured two seats and the Solomon Islands Labor Party won a seat.
Sir Allan Kemakeza was elected Prime Minister on 17 December 2001. His People’s Alliance Party formed a 29 member coalition in the 50 seat parliament with the Association of Independent Members led by former Finance Minister Snyder Rini.

**New Government’s early attempts at reform - Federalism**

Prime Minister Kemakeza and his Cabinet have made early efforts to address law and order problems, to develop credible economic policies, and to include the wider community in discussions to address the major problems facing Solomon Islands. In its first Cabinet meeting on 21 December 2001, Cabinet decided to end duty remissions and exemptions. Preparations are well advanced with the framework for a budget which aims at major reductions in public expenditure, realistic projections of domestic and international financial obligations, and revenue flow. Prime Minister Kemakeza recognizes that significant progress in addressing the very serious law and order problems in Solomon Islands is a prerequisite for social and economic recovery.

The new government also considered the work of the previous government to amend the Solomon Islands Constitution to transform the governance of the country from a unitary system to a federal system. In January 2002, the new government adopted the recommendation to devise a federal system of government and delegated the Minister for Provincial Government and Rural Development, the Hon. Nollen Leni to see the matter through assisted by the Chairman of the State Government Task Force 2001 (SGTF), John Tuhaika.

The SGTF sought CDI’s assistance to think through some of the difficult issues concerning the transition to a federal system of government and in response, CDI invited the Minister, his Opposition counterpart, the Chairman of SGTF and the SGTF Legal Adviser to visit Australia for discussions. The delegation comprised;

- **Hon. Nollen C. Leni**  
  Minister of Provincial Govt and Rural Development

- **Hon. Joses Tuhanuku**  
  Leader of Labour Party, representing the Opposition

- **Mr. John M. Tuhaika**  
  Chairman, State Government Task Force 2001

- **Mr. Francis Waleanisia**  
  Legal Counsel, Member of SGTF 2001

The delegation held extensive discussions with Australian experts including the President of the Senate, Senator Margaret Reid; the Commonwealth Grants Commission, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Australian Agency for International Development as well as participating in two round table discussions at the Australian National University with constitutional, economic and Pacific experts.

These discussion were informed by a helpful [background paper](#) prepared by SGTF.

**Constitutions**

The concept of federalism as a way of resolving ethnic and geographic tensions has been discussed in the Solomon Islands for many years. The Mamaloni Committee recommended it in 1987 but no action was taken. The recent troubles have refocused attention on this key change and an action agenda has been adopted with the new government’s endorsement of the SGTF recommendations, which should see a new Federal Constitution emerge by the end of 2002.
The recommendation is for significant but manageable change in the system of government. The Solomon Islands will become a Republic and the Governor-General, currently formally appointed by the Queen on the recommendation of the Prime Minister, will become President, probably elected by the Federal Parliament. The fifty-seat parliament will remain as the seats currently correspond to provincial boundaries. Accordingly this unicameral chamber will be both a constituency based chamber and a states’ house. The current provincial assemblies will become state parliaments once each of the 9 proposed states drafts its own constitution with its own electoral processes. It is not yet clear whether the next layer of government, the area councils, will be retained.

The SGTF report proposes a division of responsibilities between the federal and state governments that will see the latter take primary responsibility for the services closest to the people such as primary and secondary education and health services. It is also proposed that each state will be responsible for its own community policing. The federal government will be responsible for national issues such as foreign affairs and defence (though the defence force will be small). It will also be responsible for tertiary education. The status of the capital, Honiara, is likely to be that of an autonomous territory.

The delegation members recognised that the division of responsibilities would require endowing the new state governments with the resources and capacities to undertake these new tasks. There was likely to be relocation of some public servants to the states. Strengthening capacity would be a considerable challenge.

**Land**

The recent troubles can be explained in part by the post-colonial system of allowing land to be bought and sold outside the traditional land owning structures. The current intention is to revert to more traditional concepts of land ownership. Delegation members realised that this would cause dislocation and could raise significant compensation claims. It was nevertheless necessary to revert to more traditional land ownership to avert future resentment and clashes. To minimise dislocation, there would be no attempt to change urban land ownership.

While Melanesian society does not have hereditary chiefs, the term ‘chief’ has come to be used to denote the big man in a society. The big man is often also the landowner and so some means will need to be found for traditional leadership structures to be built in to the state government structures. This will be critical because the state governments will be responsible for decisions on land use and there needs to be a way of having the land owners ratify these decisions.

There was considerable discussion as to whether delegating land use decisions to the state level will be sound from an environmental standpoint. The federal government will retain responsibility for determining environmental standards in line with international obligations but the state governments will be implementing the decisions. The current unitary system did not sufficiently protect the environment with decisions being taken in far-off Honiara concerning logging in distant parts of the archipelago and dumping of wastes in far away islands. While there was a problem with capacity to take and enforce sound environmental decisions at the state
Government Revenue

Underlying the problems of the Solomon Islands is the crisis of a shrinking economy and the resulting contraction in government revenue. Satish Chand’s paper, *Conflict to Crisis in Recent Solomon Islands*, served as useful background for the round table discussions. Would the new federal structure cost too much? Clearly the states had to avoid lavishing expenditure on new buildings and the like. It was also important that the public service positions established by the states were necessary and the occupants productive. It was thought the federal public service would be cut by fifty percent with the transfer of many functions to the states.

Thought had to be given to the division of responsibility for certain taxes and the division of responsibility in collecting taxes. Given the efficiencies of collecting certain taxes at the federal level, it was likely that income tax would continue to be collected at that level as would export and import taxes. States may be tasked with collecting resource rent taxes and timber royalties. There was a problem with reliance on import and export taxes as the world was moving in the other direction and over taxation would make the Solomon Islands uncompetitive. A similar problem had already occurred with regard to copra.

The meeting with the Commonwealth Grants Commission provided useful ideas on methodology of revenue sharing and service provision in a federal system. There was considerable discussion on the relative merits of tied and untied grants to the states from the federal government. If most of the revenue is collected by the federal government and passed on to the states in grants, the federal government could retain considerable control by tying those grants to specific services, eg earmarked for teachers’ salaries. There was also discussion of the governance of any grant process. Clearly it could not be solely left to the discretion of the federal government. At the same time, it was probably impractical to follow the South African model of a representative from each state and matching representatives from the federal government with a chair to break any deadlock. In the Solomon Islands that would create an unwieldy commission of 19 people. A compromise would need to be found with perhaps various states grouped together and represented by a single member.

Transition

The delegation accepted that there was an enormous amount of work to be done in a short period of time. While there was widespread acceptance of the need to move to a federal system, there needed to be more consultation with the local people on the proposed changes. It was also anticipated that the states would not all be ready at the same time to accept the new responsibilities. There would have to be a transition process with a staggered timetable of the federal government passing responsibilities to the states.

Ultimately, a federal system placed great pressure on the judicial system to resolve the disagreements that would arise between the federal and state governments and among
the states. The federal and state constitutions were the key instruments to be interpreted by the courts. Not much time had been set aside for drafting these instruments and consulting local people about them. The delegation requested assistance from AusAID for technical assistance in constitution drafting, economic modelling and funds for the consultation process.

A CDI researcher, Johanna Stratton, prepared a study of the constitutional structure of the Federated States of Micronesia and passed this to the delegation. FSM was an important model for the Solomon Islands in that it was a fellow Pacific archipelago that had decided on a federal structure as a means of resolving the challenges posed by its geographic and ethnic spread.

For all these political changes to succeed, the law and order situation had to improve. This in turn rested on having the police weapons that were seized during the troubles returned to the authorities. A deadline of the end of May 2002 had been set. At a certain point, it may be necessary to actively disarm the militants. This raised broad and difficult issues beyond the scope of the current study tour.