Chapter 6

The impact of RAMSI on the 2006 elections

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The chains came off the doors of parliament and Governor-General Nathaniel Waena strode out at midday on 18 April 2006 to announce the results of the thirteenth prime ministerial elections since independence. To his right was former premier Sir Allan Kemakeza, whose government had proved the first since independence to survive a full term in office.¹ On his left was Snyder Rini, Kemakeza's former deputy, who was declared solemnly to be the newly elected prime minister. Surrounding them were the former cabinet ministers, fresh from their faction having prevailed over the opposition by 27 votes to 23 in a secret ballot held behind closed doors. The message of a triumph for the former government and of continuity in national politics was not lost on the crowds of spectators outside, who had been kept waiting in anticipation for hours in the baking sun. Before Rini had completed his acceptance speech, the protest had turned angry. Minutes later, rocks were raining down on the parliament building and the Australian police protecting it. A protracted siege began, which was eventually subdued with tear-gas. Rioting spread to Point Cruz, Chinatown and to Kukum, with many Asian shops and businesses and the Pacific Casino Hotel complex burnt to the ground. Eight days later, six MPs crossed the floor, triggering the collapse of the Rini-led government and a belated victory for the opposition—an event that transformed unrest into jubilation on the streets of Honiara.²

Black Tuesday—as the events of 18 April became known—generated familiar debates about the ultimate causes of the most serious urban disturbance since the arrival of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in July 2003. Why, after an election process unanimously declared free and fair by foreign observer groups, was there such a violent reaction to the outcome? Were the riots primarily a popular reaction against the perceived illegitimacy of the prime ministerial election result? Did disappointed opposition politicians instigate them? Were disturbances driven by anti-Chinese sentiment, or was the targeting of Asian businesses indicative of popular perceptions that the prime ministerial election had been bought with Asian cash? Was the key flash-point the premature use of tear-gas or, more generally, the poor tactical response to the initial protest by RAMSI police officers? Reports by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that, later that afternoon, RAMSI vehicles were ignited by youths carrying petrol-filled plastic squeeze bottles encouraged wild conspiracy theories in the Australian press: '[t]he protestors can be accused of many things but not spontaneity. Truckloads of rocks and water bottles were delivered outside parliament in the days before the violence began' (Maiden 2006).³ Suggestions of 'prior planning and coordination' and of 'Taiwanese and Chinese influences behind the recent violence in the Solomons' were made by Australian Federal Police Commissioner, Mick Keelty (O'Callaghan 2006; PacNews 2006; ABC 2006b; Callick 2006; McKenna 2006). There was an extraordinary reluctance to look, in any depth, into the domestic political causes of the riots.

This chapter looks at the impact of RAMSI and the broader Australian presence on the outcomes of the April 2006 general election, and the subsequent prime ministerial election. It examines first the voter turn-out data and changes to the voting system before the 2006 poll. Second, it looks at the broader political divisions as they stood on the eve of the poll, and how RAMSI's arrival had shifted the balance between government and opposition. Third, the chapter analyses the variation in the number of candidates contesting compared with previous elections, the performance of women candidates, the turnover of sitting members and the political complexion of the various political parties. Finally, it examines shifting alliances in Honiara in the wake of the 2006 poll, how Rini emerged victorious in the prime ministerial elections on 18 April and the role electoral factors played in triggering the subsequent riots.

The conduct of the polls

The 2006 Solomon Islands general election was the seventh since independence, and the first since RAMSI's arrival in mid 2003. It was potentially a key watershed on the road back to self-government. Parliament was dissolved on 20 December 2005, leaving Kemakeza's government to play a three and a half month long caretaker role.⁴ The Solomon Islands Electoral Commission (SIEC) was in a weak state. Long-standing Chief Electoral Officer, John Babalu, had not had his contract renewed in 2005, and his successor, Martin Karani, had been fired for misappropriation of funds. The new supervisor, Musu Kevu, had been appointed only late in 2005. An AusAID-funded electoral assistance project brought seven advisers from the Australian Electoral Commission to assist the SIEC, which also ran an AusAID and NZAID-supported civic awareness program, which toured every ward and most of the major villages across the country. Unlike 2001, when donors funded the entire election, other costs of the 2006 election were met by the Solomon Islands government.⁵

The most serious problem was with the electoral roll. The final tally of 342,119 registered voters entailed an 85 per cent increase on the 2001 figure. With an estimated population of 470,681, this implied that 73 per cent of citizens were eligible to vote—an unlikely figure, given that about half the population was below the legal minimum voting age of 18. One reason for this was the absence of any 'cleaning' of the electoral register, that is, to remove those deceased or those who had changed constituency (SIEC 2006). Figure 6.1 shows the distribution of registered voters across the 50 constituencies, as well as the variation in turn-out across the country. The largest numbers of registered voters were in the three Honiara constituencies, but here the turn-out was only 28.6 per cent, well below the national average of 56.4 per cent. Many of those living in Honiara were registered twice—once in their place of residence, and again on their island of origin. Mobile town-dwellers regularly vote where they have land rights or strong kinship connections, rather than in the more ethnically inter-mixed urban centres. The Electoral Act contains no provisions for absentee voting. In the days before each general election, outward-bound vessels transport large numbers of islanders across the group—a process that enhances the political leverage of ship-owners, who often double as local logging magnates. The absence of any provision for absentee voting also disenfranchises the large numbers of mobile public

servants, police officers and others engaged in the process of electoral administration, who are therefore unable to return to their homes to vote.

The most substantial change that occurred in electoral administration before the 2006 poll was the shift from a multiple to single ballot box system. In previous elections, polling stations had been organised with separate ballot boxes set aside for each candidate. The voter would collect an endorsed ballot paper from the presiding officer and then enter a private room to deposit this in their favoured candidate's box. The system eased the way for abuse.⁶ The voter could pass through the booth without depositing the ballot paper and sell this outside the polling station to the highest bidder. Candidates or their agents might then cast their own vote towards the end of the polling day, but in the process deposit sizeable numbers of purchased votes into the ballot boxes. At previous elections, counting agents reported discovering large wads of stapled ballots with identical marks in the boxes. With the new single ballot box system, this method of vote buying became impossible, and the reform was applauded widely by returning and presiding officers, polling agents and many candidates, as well as by most ordinary voters. At about only 1.5 per cent, the rate of invalid (or informal) voting was lower than many had anticipated.

Unprecedented numbers of international observers arrived in the Solomon Islands before the 2006 election, including delegations from the Pacific Islands Forum, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Japan, with the United Nations providing logistical coordination. The Commonwealth also had its own team and engaged in training domestic observers. Together, domestic observers and a Winds of Change Clean Election Campaign, inspired initially by Moral Rearmament Group activities in Kenya, ensured a stronger role for civil society activists than at previous elections, and served to focus attention on issues of personal probity, moral character and good governance.⁷ Activists sought to have voters sign undertakings against corruption: 'I pledge that I will not accept bribes, accept any false promises, sell my vote or involve [sic] in any corrupt activity before, during or after the election' (Solomon Star 2006o). The AusAID-funded Clean Election Campaign, together with Winds of Change, generated anxiety among government ministers that this implied support for some cathartic sweeping away of sitting members. This was one of a host of new factors connected with RAMSI's arrival that influenced the habitually opaque and adaptable electoral processes of the Solomon Islands.

Figure 6.1 Solomon Islands election: registered voters and turn-out, 2006

A shape of shapelessness

Sir Allan Kemakeza's chances of survival as prime minister depended on his repeating the coalition-building exercise that had given him the position back in 2001. His skills in this respect owed much to his political experience gained under the later governments of Solomon Mamaloni (1989–93, 1994–97). Kemakeza had entered parliament originally as the Member for Savo/Russells in 1989, and became Minister of Police in Mamaloni's People's Alliance Party (PAP) government. When Mamaloni abandoned the PAP in 1990 after an internal party revolt and stitched together a new coalition with opposition leaders, Kemakeza was one of the loyal ministers who accompanied him. At the 1993 polls, Kemakeza stood successfully as one of the candidates affiliated with Mamaloni's Government of National Unity and Reconciliation (GNUR) grouping. In 1994, he became Minister for Forestry, Environment and Conservation when Mamaloni returned to office, presiding over the most controversial phase of unsustainable round-log exports in the country's history (Bennett 2000: 346–7). The Savo politician returned to cabinet for a third time after the June 2000 coup as deputy prime minister and Minister for National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace. Aboard HMASTobruk off the coast near Honiara, he was responsible for the handing out of SI\$10 million to provincial politicians, most of which ended up in the hands of leaders of the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) (Fraenkel 2004a: 95). In the months after the October 2000 Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA), Kemakeza supervised the distribution of compensation money to militant leaders, including handling pay-outs from a SI\$133.5 million (US\$25 million) loan provided by the Taiwanese EXIM Bank. In the process, he awarded himself SI\$851,000 (US\$164,754), purportedly for damage to his property in Western Guadalcanal, and was sacked for embezzlement. Despite these episodes, in June 2001, Kemakeza received the Knight Bachelor award (KB) from the British Queen for 'services to policing and politics' (BBC 2001).

After the 2001 polls, Kemakeza exploited his newfound status to emerge triumphant in the race to be prime minister. Gathering together at the Honiara Hotel, Kemakeza's seamlessly rejuvenated PAP signed a memorandum of understanding with the Association of Independent Members of Parliament (AIMP). AIMP leader Snyder Rini consequently stepped aside as candidate for the prime ministerial post, ensuring victory

for Kemakeza at the first count with 29 of the 50 votes—an event greeted with dismay by the crowds outside parliament. As prime minister, Kemakeza pursued a crisis-suited variant of the well-established Mamaloni strategy of building up networks of patronage and placating discontent by handing out personal favours.

Despite major failings of policy, including a confession of personal complicity in telling MEF leaders to hold onto their weapons in defiance of his own government's amnesty policy (Fraenkel 2004a: 141–2), Kemakeza's government survived. The continued release of successive portions of the Taiwanese EXIM loan during 2001–02 fuelled a debilitating process of harassment of finance ministry and treasury officials, with militants routinely hanging around outside the prime minister's office with guns, waiting for money to arrive. By December 2002, the economy had hit rock bottom, with gross domestic product (GDP) per capita about one-third lower than 1997 levels. Cabinet itself was under siege from distraught 'special constables'—ex-militants enlisted to serve alongside the regular police at the height of the tension. The prime minister's adviser, ethnic Malaysian businessman Robert Goh, was shot in the stomach during an assassination attempt. The increasing personal risk to the senior political classes encouraged renewed appeals for foreign intervention, and set the stage for what turned out to be an extraordinary political realignment.

The arrival of RAMSI in July 2003 strengthened the beleaguered Kemakeza government. After being flown to Canberra to agree to terms before the mission, Kemakeza steered the required enabling legislation first through cabinet and then through parliament, and reinvented his administration as the loyal ally of the new mission. Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, called Kemakeza a 'straightforward good man to deal with' (People First 2003a). With an armed protection force assigned to him after RAMSI's arrival, the Solomon Islands prime minister met accusations that he was one of the 'big fish' deserving of prosecution for corruption and complicity with the militants during the unrest of 1999–2003 with repeated rejoinders that he would allow the law to take its course (Solomon Star 2006c; New Zealand Herald 2003; SIBC 2003; People First 2003b; Sasako 2003a, 2003b). Three of Kemakeza's original ministers associated with the MEF were eventually convicted and, only after that, belatedly sacked. Several other ministers were prosecuted for corruption. Regular cabinet reshuffles,

judicious distribution of Taiwanese aid and floor crossing by senior opposition leaders assisted the extraordinary survival of Kemakeza's government. Seeking a fifth term in office at the 2006 polls, Kemakeza embarked on a lacklustre campaign hoping to obtain credit for the arrival of RAMSI and the restoration of peace, stability and economic recovery.

On the other hand, the opposition entered the 2006 elections in a much-depleted state, leading some commentators to emphasise the absence of any meaningful distinction between the opposition and the 'old guard' in Solomon Islands politics (Hameiri 2006).⁸ Yet that lack of coherence of the opposition in 2006 needs to be seen in a longer-term context. Solomon Islands politics has never revolved around clear-cut ideological distinctions, for example between left and right. Nor have ethnic, provincial or regional bases provided a workable basis for coalition formation or even for political parties. All governments have been alliances between MPs from different parts of the group, in particular balancing MPs from populous Malaita with those from Guadalcanal and Western Province. The polarisation of Solomon Islands politics in the 1980s around the struggle between the United Party (UP) and PAP ended with Mamaloni's 1990 abandonment of the PAP, and UP leader, Sir Peter Kenilorea's, decision to join the reconfigured Mamaloni GNUR cabinet. Party allegiances subsequently became still weaker, and 'leaders of the independents' turned from being kingmakers to potential victors in the all-important post-election tussle for the prime ministerial post.

The opposition-led governments that emerged at the 1993 and 1997 elections were fractious groupings, held together primarily by their efforts to prevent Mamaloni from returning to office. In 1993, leader of the independents, Francis Billy Hilly, became prime minister with a one-seat majority, and led a short-lived government that took steps to reduce the pace of logging activity, increase local processing and reform the forestry industry. Most of the ministers in the former Mamaloni government were connected closely with logging businesses and opposed the new reformist orientation (Bennett 2000:345). A no-confidence vote in November 1994 brought about the fall of the Hilly government—an event accompanied by what one Mamaloni ally admitted to have been a frenetic process of 'cheque or cash lobbying' (Alasia 1997:13). Deposed minister and former trade unionist Josés Tuhanuku alleged that Goh (later to become Kemakeza's adviser) had been the go-between in soliciting floor crossers for Mamaloni, and claimed

to have been offered a SI\$10,000 bribe to switch sides (Bennett 2000:345). Under the restored Mamaloni government (1994–97), duty was reduced on forestry products and licensing of local logging forms resumed. Despite the consequent acceleration of timber exports, government expenditure rose and debt increased (Bennett 2000:341–2; Fraenkel 2004a:40–1).

After the elections of 1997 Bartholomew Ulufa'alu became prime minister, again at the head of a loose coalition of small parties and independents. The Solomon Islands Action for Change (SIAC) government was committed to reform of government finances, greater regulation of the logging industry and down-sizing of the civil service with backing from the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. For some observers, this implied a government committed to the pro-market ideals of the political right; however, arraying Solomon Islands politicians on a left–right spectrum has never been a particularly useful way of understanding the country's politics. The most characteristic appeal of the Ulufa'alu government was for reform away from the system of cronyism that was identified with Mamaloni's governments, which could hardly be identified as serving a leftist ideology. Those reforms met resistance from entrenched interests, particularly in the public sector (Hughes 2001:12); however, the Ulufa'alu government proved able to withstand several attempted no-confidence bids, in one case because tied votes left the government in office (Kabutaulaka 1999).

When the Isatabu uprising began in late 1998, ministers in the Ulufa'alu government rightly or wrongly interpreted those events as a conspiracy hatched by 'Mamaloni men' aimed at restoring the old guard to office; 'the tensions were being orchestrated to topple the SIAC Government in order to disrupt an ambitious reform programme' (Office of the Prime Minister 2000:7). The Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) evicted some 20,000 Malaitans from their homesteads in rural Guadalcanal. In November 1999, Ulufa'alu met Malaitan protestors demanding compensation for lost properties on the steps of parliament and publicly rejected their claims. Although some pilloried him for this response, the later opening of the compensation floodgates served only to encourage and even institutionalise the new-found role of the militants. In January 2000, the MEF raided the armoury in Auki (on Malaita) and, by April, the government had lost control of the security situation. The Ulufa'alu government was dislodged by the

joint Police Field Force/MEF coup of 5 June 2000. In the wake of the coup, it was the grouping associated with Mamaloni that resumed office, although with Ulufa'alu's sacked finance minister, Manasseh Sogavare, as prime minister. Behind the scenes, the key power-broker was Malaitan politician Charles Dausabea, who was home affairs minister under Mamaloni in 1993 and chief whip in the 1994–97 Mamaloni government.

The 2001 elections found the opposition in a much-weakened state, owing largely to the fraught experience of coup and crisis. Gathering together at the Mendana Hotel, it comprised a loose association of former SIAC ministers, including the Liberal and Labour parties and those who had become known as 'independent of the independents' to distinguish them from those aligned with the only vaguely coherent AIMP (Sasako 2001). Deposed prime minister Ulufa'alu's leadership of the coalition was challenged, ostensibly on the grounds that his return to office might spark a further coup (SIBC 2001). Temotu politician Patteson Oti instead emerged as the favoured SIAC candidate for prime minister, leading Ulufa'alu to withdraw his small Liberal grouping and contest separately. The opposition split weakened its claim to office, and several drifting MPs instead joined the PAP/AIMP in backing Kemakeza. Claims that up to SI\$50,000 had been offered to MPs circulated widely, although there were no prosecutions (Roughan 2001).

After RAMSI's arrival in July 2003, the coherence of the opposition group was weakened still further by defections. Even successive leaders of the opposition, first Oti and then John Garo, crossed the floor to join the Kemakeza government. Two no-confidence votes had failed in 2002, before RAMSI's arrival; the first was withdrawn before being put to a vote and the second was defeated. The likelihood of the Kemakeza government being dislodged after mid 2003 seemed ever more remote. Opposition leaders switching sides explained their action as driven by a desire for positions of responsibility, or pressure from constituents, but self-interest and hunger for power played their part. This consolidation of government was encouraged, particularly by the Australian High Commission but also by the European Union, although a desire to avoid accusations of foreign interference ensured that such advice was rarely formal. Routine informal diplomatic messages of approval or disapproval sufficed, whether or not these were driven by directives from Canberra or Brussels.

No-confidence votes were discouraged as destabilising, echoing the growing emphasis on establishing order along the Melanesian 'arc of instability'. Getting competent MPs into cabinet also appeared pragmatic, owing to the poor track record of the original grouping of PAP/AIMP ministers, demonstrated so vividly by the numerous sackings for corruption or complicity in militant activities during 1998–2003. One leading light on the opposition benches, Fred Fono, told supporters that he was encouraged to cross the floor by Australian and British High Commission requests to enable European Community STABEX funds to be transferred (Solomon Star 2005c, 2005g; Brown 2006). Yet another former minister in the SIAC government, Alfred Sasako, switched sides to assume sacked MEF minister Alex Bartlett's agriculture portfolio in September 2004 (Radio New Zealand International 2004). The short-term advantages of encouraging a 'national unity' cabinet under Kemakeza were readily apparent, but its longer-term political repercussions were to prove much more dangerous.

Anti-RAMSI ministers or politicians almost inevitably ended up, or remained, on the opposition benches, threatening a political realignment around the issue of support for or opposition to foreign intervention. Sogavare had, early on, established himself as a vocal critic of RAMSI, warning at the outset of the mission that ministers had become 'puppets of foreign governments' (ABC 2003; The Australian 2003). He remained on the opposition benches. In January 2005, Francis Zama was sacked as finance minister and Oti was sacked as communications minister for 'adverse reactions' after they criticised RAMSI during a debate on the mission's annual report (Solomon Star 2005a, 2005b).

Outside parliament, former leaders of the MEF sought to undermine the mission, and played on disquiet about aspects of the operation as a vehicle for their re-entry into parliament at the forthcoming elections. Charles Dausabea, who had lost his East Honiara seat in 2001, vigorously contested RAMSI's usurpation of Solomon Islands sovereignty, while former MEF supreme commander, Andrew Nori (also a candidate at the 2006 poll) sought to challenge the legality of RAMSI's immunity from prosecution under Solomon Islands law, unsuccessfully mimicking the constitutional challenge that had recently ended the first incarnation of Australia's Enhanced Cooperation Program in neighbouring Papua New Guinea. He

came fourth in the race for West Are' Are, due partly to unpopularity arising from landowner resistance to his logging schemes in Waisisi. Demands by rebel militants hiding out in the interior of Malaita that Kemakeza resign (Solomon Star 2005e) were taken up by opposition spokesman for good governance and justice, Joses Sanga (Solomon Star 2005f). Even Ulufa'alu (once a vociferous enthusiast for Australian intervention) insisted on a time line for RAMSI's presence (Solomon Star 2005h). Labour Party leader, Joses Tuhanuku—whose strong support had been noted in the debates accompanying the start of the mission in Australia's parliament—accused Kemakeza of having become a 'puppet of Australia' (Solomon Star 2006f).⁹ Elsinia Wainwright, the Canberra-based author of the June 2003 *Our Failing Neighbour* pamphlet—which set out a justification for Australian intervention—now speculated that 'a realignment of political forces in Honiara could see political support for RAMSI evaporate' (Wainwright 2005:5).

The oddity was that the SIAC grouping had been the natural ally of the RAMSI operation; it was the victim of the June 2000 coup. Yet the absence of Australian intervention at that time left a legacy of bitterness. The apparent reluctance of RAMSI to pursue prosecutions against Kemakeza—and the practicalities of trying to dislodge a well-entrenched incumbent—potentially handed the opposition an otherwise lacking focal point for the 2006 campaign. The opposition was not, however, consistently or unanimously anti-RAMSI. Knowledge that political alignments were fluid, and that the ties that bound ministers to the Kemakeza government might evaporate in the wake of the poll, made a waiting game seem the more tactically astute option. The operation still had overwhelming public support, despite disquiet about Australian heavy-handedness, failure to respond to local anxieties and the absence of sufficient emphasis on the regional aspect of the intervention (Pacific Islands Forum Eminent Persons' Group 2005; Solomon Islands Government 2004, 2005a). Despite these good reasons, it stands to the credit of some leading opposition politicians that they did not seek to realign collectively around hostility to RAMSI. The better option was to use the hiatus occasioned by RAMSI to rebuild the potential for local leadership, and to seek to undermine the social weight of those still potentially powerful former militant leaders operating behind the scenes of Solomon Islands politics.

Forces of fractionalisation

As the curtains rose on the 2006 poll, outcomes were highly uncertain, particularly given the widely expected high attrition rate for sitting members. Local-level contests turned out to be highly competitive—453 candidates stood for election, an average of 9.1 per constituency (up from 6.6 per cent in 2001). One result was that the average share of the vote secured by victors fell to 30.8 per cent—the lowest figure since independence. Half of all MPs obtained less than 30 per cent of the vote (Table 6.1). Only two MPs secured majorities of the constituency vote, although the unopposed Job Dudley Tausinga standing in North New Georgia clearly had unanimous backing from his constituents, who were renowned for solidly supporting the pre-selected Christian Fellowship Church candidate. He obtained 74 per cent of the vote in 2001, and in 2006 was embarking on his sixth consecutive term in office. More generally, the west of the country had lower than average numbers of candidates and higher than average victor vote shares, while Isabel, Guadalacanal, Malaita and Makira had larger numbers of candidates and lower victor vote shares—so too did Honiara, where the miniscule turn-out lent a particularly arbitrary character to electoral outcomes. The most contested constituency in the country was East Honiara, with 20 candidates, where Charles Dausabea emerged victorious with 23.4 per cent of the vote (or the support of 6.3 per cent of registered voters), retaking the seat he held in 1993 and 1997.¹⁰

One reason for the historically high level of candidates was the absence of distinctive political issues at the local level separating the candidates. Where elections pit acknowledged conservatives against reformist candidates or where other popularly accepted issues divide political parties, pressure is often exerted on weaker candidates to step aside to avoid splitting the vote for like-minded candidates (or parties). If there is no common consensus about what the electoral issues are, contests become a free-for-all, without much constraint on the number of contestants entering the race. Efforts to create a unified opposition to an incumbent MP did occur in some constituencies, such as West Kwara'ae, and in others sitting members bribed potential rivals not to contest. In most cases, however, there was little restraint on candidate proliferation.

Those national-level campaign issues that did emerge exerted a marginal influence on constituency outcomes. Rural development was championed

Table 6.1 **Selected features of Solomon Islands elections since independence, 1980–2006**

Year of election	1980	1984 ¹	1989	1993	1997	2001	2006
Average no. candidates	6.3	6.8	6.8	5.9	6.7	6.6	9.1
Share new members (%) ²	68.4	56.8	52.6	42.6	52.0	64.0	50.0
Incumbent turnover (%) ²	52.6	40.5	42.1	14.9	38.0	52.0	46.0
Number of constituency victors by percentage of vote share							
>50% and unopposed	6	9	8	17	12	10	3
40–9	5	6	6	5	7	7	5
30–9	14	12	13	14	15	15	17
20–9	11	7	10	5	10	16	25
10–20	2	3	1	6	6	2	0
0–9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total seats in parliament	38	371	38	47	50	50	50

Notes: ¹ No election held in East Kwaio in 1984. ² Incumbent turnover and sitting member figures relate to general elections only, and are insensitive to by-election results.

Source: Compiled from data released by the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission.

particularly in Honiara and the west, but this was a program most aspiring politicians agreed on in principle—in the process, undermining its potential as a focal point for political crystallisation. Guale politician Francis Orodani launched a Solomon First Party, committed to pressing the government to make good on TPA commitments and enact the draft federal constitution (Solomon Star 2006p; The Pacific Magazine 2006). ‘State government’—like rural development—was an issue of ostensible consensus, however much those who stood to lose from this sought to undermine the passage of the draft constitution through procedural complications, absenteeism and stonewalling.¹¹ Promises of devolution, greater provincial autonomy and reconciliation between Guadalcanal and Malaita were standard soap-box patter for politicians across the country. Solomon Islands recognition of Taiwan proved another potential focal point, owing to some opposition politicians engaging in negotiations with representatives from mainland

China and controversies about the influence of Taiwanese aid funding in the election. Rennell and Bellona MP Joses Tuhanuku (2006) claimed that, aside from picking up the tab for the Rural Constituency Development Funds (RCDF), the Taiwanese were funding clandestine 'special projects' through the prime minister's office, which were granted only to politically sympathetic allies.¹² Foreign entanglements were, however, scarcely a priority for hard-pressed villagers, despite an understandable readiness to accept assistance from any source.

Some local-level issues played a significant role in the campaign. The long-running strike by workers at Russell Islands Plantations Estates Ltd contributed to the fall of Kemakeza's vote share from 60 per cent in 2001 to 30 per cent in 2006 in his Savo/Russells constituency. Irate Russell Islanders refused to release the ballot boxes for passage to the Central Division counting centre at Tulagi off the nearby island of Gela, fearing official ballot rigging. East Malaita's Joses Sanga argued in favour of restricting naturalised citizens' rights to contest the election (Solomon Star 2006e). Similarly, one of the resolutions of the Guadalcanal Leaders' Summit at Balasuna on 14–18 February 2005 stated that 'non-indigenes and naturalised citizens should not be allowed to stand as candidates in any Guadalcanal constituency' (Guadalcanal Leaders' Summit 2005). This did not stop naturalised Chinese citizen Laurie Chan being returned as MP for West Guadalcanal. Most politicians promised constituency rewards if they were elected to office, and contests were decided by local verdicts about the personal integrity (or otherwise) of candidates. That type of focus was, to a greater degree than at previous elections, echoed at the national level, owing to the civic awareness program, the Winds of Change campaign, the impact of decisions by the Leadership Code Commission and the good governance agenda propagated by increasingly vociferous civil society organisations, with encouragement from RAMSI and the Honiara-based diplomatic fraternity.

Under first-past-the-post systems, as in Solomon Islands, candidate proliferation can prove self-reinforcing: the more candidates that enter the fray, the smaller is the share of the vote required for victory and the easier it appears to be for an aspiring candidate to win. Nevertheless, candidate proliferation does not mimic Papua New Guinea's long-term increase, election after election.¹³ In Solomon Islands, the average number of candidates per constituency was always high—averaging 6.5 during 1980–2001—but

it spiked in 2006 to reach 9.1 per constituency (Table 6.1). There were, therefore, specific reasons for the 2006 upswing in candidate numbers.

Most importantly, the arrival of RAMSI and the consequently transformed political situation generated enormous uncertainties about political leadership. Although there had been by-elections in the constituencies of the three convicted MEF ministers in the post-2001 cabinet and in the South Guadalcanal constituency of murdered MP Father Augustine Geve, most other MPs had held their seats since 2001. In the intervening period, many new influences affected the fortunes of local leaders. First, RAMSI's arrival, the arrest of militants and confiscation of weapons meant links with the militias or those carrying guns were no longer viable methods of controlling political power. Second, economic collapse during 2001–02—and the subsequent recovery of rural logging activity—had assisted some political aspirants, but damaged the fortunes of others. Third, regular cabinet reshuffles at Kemakeza's instigation left many casualties, for whom loss of prestigious portfolios potentially also entailed subsequent electoral defeat. Only half of those in the cabinet formed after the 2001 poll still held ministerial positions immediately before the 2006 election.

The gender dimension

The Solomon Islands 2001–06 government had not a single woman member (Table 6.2). Since independence, only one woman has been elected to parliament in the country: Hilda Kari, 1993–2001. For the 2006 poll, 26 women contested, half of whom had the backing of the National Council of Women. This was the largest number of women candidates ever to contest a Solomon Islands election. Women had played an important role in the Solomon Islands peace process, and many hoped this would translate into representation in parliament; yet not a single female candidate gained a seat.

Some women contestants came close. Sarah Dyer—standing in West Honiara—came second ahead of well-known politicians such as the incumbent, Yukio Sato, and David Tuhanuku, but she lost to Isaac Inoke, who was able to draw on strong support from the sizeable Fataleka community in the critically important White River area. In central Honiara, three women candidates split the vote, and Nelson Ne'e emerged victorious through a crowded field. On Malaita, Afu Billy had in 2001 come within only two

votes of victory. Back then, she had lost to Joses Sanga, who subsequently emerged as one of the more prominent new opposition MPs and who easily retook the East Malaita seat in 2006 with 46 per cent of the vote. Other new women candidates on Malaita—such as Rachel Fera in Aoke-Langalanga—notched up a significant share of the vote, but neither she nor civil society activist Mathew Wale could dislodge the well-known incumbent, former prime minister Bart Ulufa'alu. Where women candidates were not resident permanently in their constituencies, as with Alice Pollard in West Are'are and Doreen Kuper on Makira, they inevitably faced an uphill battle. In the aftermath of the election, the National Council of Women called for quotas for women in parliament—a proposal that, given the absence of strong political parties in Solomon Islands, would require the introduction of some seats reserved for women (Solomon Star 2006t).¹⁴

Incumbent turnover

Historically, Solomon Islands has witnessed a high turnover of sitting members. In 1997, 52 per cent of those elected were new members, and, in 2001, an extraordinary 62 per cent of those elected had not previously been in parliament (Table 6.1). Since the 1990s, sweeping changes in parliament's

Table 6.2 Representation by gender group in Solomon Islands, 1980–2006

	Candidates		MPs	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
1980	0	242	0	38
1984	1	245	0	37
1989	3	254	0	38
1993	11	269	1	46
1997	12	321	1	49
2001	13	315	0	50
2006	26	425	0	50

Note: No election was held in East Kwaio in 1984.

Source: Compiled from data released by the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission.

make-up have often, perhaps a little naively, been seen as indicative of popular backing for reform. Part of the reason for this view was because of the way government funds were deployed under the 1990–93 Mamaloni government to assist MPs to retain their seats, resulting, in 1993, in the lowest level of defeat of sitting members witnessed at any post-independence election (Table 6.1). Before the April 2006 elections, many had expected a high level of incumbent turnover similar to that in 2001. There were good reasons for this view. In July 2005, provincial elections in Choiseul and Western Province saw, respectively, 75 per cent and 85 per cent of members lose their seats (ABC 2005). In the 2006 general elections, however, the share of new members across the entire country was 50 per cent, closer to the historical average. Local economic conditions help to explain the variation in turnover rates in different parts of the group, owing to their impact on local leadership. On Choiseul and in Western Province, all MPs bar one were returned to office, and the one casualty lost by only two votes after a recount. On Isabel and in Honiara, all the incumbents lost their seats. On Malaita, Guadalcanal and Makira, the picture was much more varied.

Holding a ministerial portfolio exerted some influence over re-election prospects, but the potential downside was longer absence from the constituency on official business. At 55 per cent, the ministerial survival rate was only a little higher than the average rate of incumbent re-election (46 per cent). Of the nine ministers who lost, many faced popular hostility owing to incompetence or mismanagement, or because they supplemented their marriages with mistresses (popularly called ‘O2s’ and ‘O3s’ after the names of the Australian-donated patrol boats usually docked at the Point Cruz harbour in Honiara). High-profile casualties from the former cabinet included former mines minister Walton Naezon (Central Guadalcanal) and Michael Maena (Temotu Pele), who had been sacked as a minister by Kemakeza after being charged with embezzlement of US\$150,000 (Radio New Zealand International 2005). Three government MPs who were found guilty of misconduct by the Leadership Code Commission—Alfred Sasako, Stephen Paeni and chairman of the government caucus, Jeffrey Teava—also lost their seats. The issue of good (or bad) governance had a discernible impact on outcomes. Minister of National Planning and Aid Coordination, Fred Fono, secured 55 per cent of the vote in West Kwara’ae (Malaita). His pre-election release of documents covering the expenditure of Rural

Constituency Development Funds was applauded widely in a campaign in which revelations of abuse of such funds regularly sealed the fate of sitting members (Solomon Star 2006i). Even Fono, however, was subsequently accused of offering cash for support before the 4 May 2006 contest for the prime ministership (Solomon Star 2006b). There were no public denials, confirming the view that this type of practice was extraordinarily widespread.

Political survival is perpetually precarious even for ministers, but judicious construction of patronage networks can stave off defeat. Long-term survivors such as Kemakeza carefully lavished expenditure on targeted voters (SIBC 2005). In March 2005, he handed over SI\$20,000 cash to his main potential rival for the Savo/Russell constituency, former MP John Ngina (Solomon Star 2005d).

Former Minister of Finance Peter Boyers (New Zealand born but married locally and well versed in Melanesian ways) distributed water tanks across his West New Georgia constituency. Other well-endowed businessmen or recipients of plentiful logging revenues, such as Laurie Chan in West Guadalcanal and Snyder Rini in Morovo, were able to retain their seats in an election that, despite the new ballot box system, witnessed numerous allegations in the letters pages of the *Solomon Star* that MPs were buying votes.

On the opposition side of the house, veteran politicians who were household names—such as Ulufa’alu, Hilly and Leslie Boseto—kept their seats. There was one high-profile opposition casualty: Josés Tuhānuku came fourth in the race for the Rennell and Bellona constituency. Even before the election, he had claimed to be the victim of a concerted Taiwanese-funded effort to dislodge him (Solomon Star 2006k). More usually, defeated incumbents were the least well known at the national level, or were those long absent from their constituencies. As on the government side of the house, well-endowed opposition MPs with access to local logging revenue or other sources of income fared better than the more cash-strapped candidates. Even veteran MPs associated with reformist objectives found the procurement of political support difficult to avoid, and circulated small sums of cash to voters often on the night before the poll (the ‘devil’s night’, see Alasia this volume), or flirted on the borders of legality by promising constituents monetary hand-outs at a fixed date after

the election. Overall, the 2006 elections exhibited a familiar Melanesian pattern: extraordinarily high incumbent turnover at the rank-and-file level coupled with exceptionally low incumbent turnover for a small cluster of established political leaders.

Parties and outcomes

Kemakeza's PAP launched its manifesto under the slogan 'Vote PAP to rebuild this nation', urging a platform of 'restoration of national unity and peace' and calling RAMSI a 'God-given gift to the people of this country'. The party promised to field 50 official candidates covering all of the nation's constituencies, as well as an additional collection of 'shadow candidates' (Solomon Star 2006a, 2006b). It charged SI\$70 for a copy of the manifesto, suggesting some restriction of access to state coffers under the new tighter controls exercised by hard-nosed Australian officials. If, as some suggested, there was a substantial pot of Taiwanese cash funding Kemakeza sympathisers, there was little sign of this having any substantial impact on political allegiances. Most of those MPs and other officials affiliated with the PAP back in 2001 had drifted away in the intervening years, or saw the writing on the wall for Kemakeza. Robert Goh—the prime minister's prosperous so-called 'dollar-a-year' adviser since the 2001 polls—played little public role in the campaign, although his private residence was later burnt to the ground by angry rioters. The Solomon Star ran headlines such as 'PM urged to come clean' and 'Erase Sir Allan now', reinforcing the already strong popular perception of Kemakeza's government as corrupt (Solomon Star 2006m, 2006q). The prime minister made no major statements of policy or vision during the campaign. On many weekends, Kemakeza went to his home island of Savo or to Yandina in the Russell Islands, clearly focusing first and foremost on the anticipated tough battle to retain his own seat.

Other parties were just as diffuse. The Lafari Party—a new organisation appealing to public servants—secured two MPs and had, during the campaign, pledged to assist the PAP in stabilising the country. Its leaders, however (floor crossers John Garo and Alfred Sasako) both lost their seats, and the two successful Lafari MPs joined the PAP immediately after the election (Solomon Star 2006n). In February 2006, national president of the AIMP, Tommy Chan, launched a 'statement of policy 2006', pledging

to assist with stabilisation, along with the usual platitudes about support for reconciliation and healing. The party never released a list of candidates, preferring to pursue the amorphous strategy of claiming to articulate the aspirations of those who failed to lodge any party affiliation. Party affiliations are always difficult to establish in Solomon Islands politics. Candidates often double list themselves, or shift allegiances, particularly in the days just before the prime ministerial vote. Table 6.3 provides affiliations given by the MPs themselves at the time of the prime ministerial election on 18 April.

On the opposition side, party affiliations were only slightly more meaningful. Ulufa'alu published conflicting listings of sponsored candidates for his Liberal Party in the *Solomon Star* (2006g, 2006h), several of whom responded by writing letters to the newspaper denying such allegiances. His party secured only two MPs, reducing Ulufa'alu's chances in the leadership contest. Francis Billy Hilly's Nasnol Pati (National Party) gained six members, including Hilly himself, Leslie Boseto, Patteson Oti and Joses Sanga. Sanga argued for legislation to strengthen the party system, including Papua New Guinea-style laws against floor crossing and provisions for public funding for political parties (*Solomon Star* 2006l). Ironically, Sanga, Oti and Boseto were all to resign from the Nasnol Pati shortly after the elections in the wake of Hilly's sacking (in a manner that might have been illegal had

Table 6.3 **Party affiliations of elected MPs as of 18 April 2006**

Solomon Islands Social Credit Party	2
People's Alliance Party	5
Nasnol Pati	6
Solomon Islands Party for Rural Advancement	6
Solomon Islands Liberal Party	3
Democratic Party	5
Association of Independent Members	12
Independents	11
Total	50

Source: Compiled by the author and David Kusilifu.

the legislation they proposed been enacted) (SIBC 2006b). Responding to national debates about the pivotal role villagers had played in leading the 2002–06 economic recovery, western politicians launched a Solomon Islands Party for Rural Advancement (SIPRA), led by former Permanent Secretary for Finance, Gordon Darcy Lilo. SIPRA was new, while the Liberal and Nasnol parties had been in hibernation since the 2001 poll. With 12 MPs altogether, these three parties formed the core of the opposition.

On the maverick fringe of Solomon Islands politics, Manasseh Sogavare launched a Solomon Islands Social Credit Party (Socred) in July 2005, backed by Filipino businessman Ramon Quitales. It campaigned on a platform of hostility to foreign banks as well as the Central Bank of the Solomon Islands, urging peculiar monetary reforms aimed at relieving national indebtedness (PacNews 2005a, 2005b). Only one Socred candidate other than Sogavare was successful: Temotu MP Clay Forau, a debutant MP who played the side-switching game with sufficient versatility to earn himself portfolios in Rini's and Sogavare's cabinets. By 18 April, five successful MPs had affiliated themselves with the Democratic Party, the brainchild of private lawyer Gabriel Suri. This barely figured as a cohesive entity, however, and party affiliations exerted little influence over candidates' subsequent alliances. Francis Orodani's Solomon First Party vanished without trace, as did several other 'virtual' parties that had made fleeting public appearances before the polls. Efforts to encourage a rebirth for the United Party of the 1970s and 1980s triggered denunciations after the chairman of the electoral commission and Speaker of the House, Sir Peter Kenilorea, assumed the presidency of the party. Kenilorea (2006a) responded that his actions had in no way violated the constitution, prompting Pacific Island Forum observers to respond that the issue was one of propriety rather than legality, and that the assumption of such a position 'damages the appearance of impartiality of the [electoral] Commission' (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2006). In the event, none of the United Party candidates captured a seat. In total, only 26 of those elected as MPs had party affiliations or had acquired these by 18 April, implying that the remaining 24 were independents. Ten of these were associated with the quasi-formal AIMP grouping led by Rini and Chan, but 14 were genuinely unaffiliated or were watching closely which way the political winds blew.

The 44-strong international observer team found that 'the polling process was transparent and well conducted, and voters were able to

exercise a free and secret vote' (International Electoral Observers 2006). Elsewhere in the world, election observation missions are, more usually, watch-dogs against gross fraud or ballot rigging, but are less well equipped to deal with the sort of subtle irregularities that occur behind the back of the formal election process in Solomon Islands. Despite substantial voter intimidation by armed militants, particularly on North Malaita and South Guadalcanal, the 2001 election was declared free and fair. In 2006, guns were not a factor influencing voting patterns, but efforts to purchase votes were nevertheless widespread—whether or not this breached the Electoral Act's un-enforced SI\$50,000 limit on campaign expenditures. Despite the limited purview of the international election observers, their conclusions provided a confidence-building influence and a counterweight to some of the more outrageous 'tok stori' claims that circulated. Before the 5 April poll, former governor-general Sir Baddley Devesi had advised foreign observers to stay on to scrutinise the subsequent prime ministerial election. UN Observer Mission Coordinator, Steve Wagenseil, responded that the prime ministerial election process (conducted behind closed doors) lacked sufficient transparency to be susceptible to overseas observation (Solomon Star 2006j). Most international observers had left the country before the Easter weekend.

The second election

As the election results flowed in to Honiara, so too did the newly elected and returned MPs. The alternative groupings settled in at the Honiara Hotel, owned by Chinese businessman Tommy Chan, and at the Iron Bottom Sound Hotel, owned by Alex Wong, another local Chinese businessman and naturalised citizen. Chan (national president of the AIMP) welcomed members with an advertisement in the Solomon Star (2006r) congratulating them and announcing that 'the people of Solomon Islands have again entrusted you with the responsibility of ensuring that this country they love to call home and its multiracial population is well governed and properly cared for. Your electors have given you the support you needed and now it is your turn to honour that support.' This was an attempt to generate consolidation in an otherwise fluid setting, a familiar Melanesian bandwagon strategy aimed at encouraging wavering MPs to gather behind a plausible victor. Of the 21 MPs listed in the

advertisement, at least 11 had no previous association with the AIMP.¹⁵ On the top of the list was Snyder Rini, and the next day the AIMP leader and Chan walked together into the Flamingo Nightclub (next to the Honiara Hotel) claiming 24 backers for an AIMP government, and announcing publicly the end of the coalition with Kemakeza. All 11 of the ministers who had secured re-election associated themselves with the Rini camp.

This was an unwelcome development for Australian diplomats. As an embarrassing leaked email from a subsequently hurriedly removed RAMSI official later acknowledged, Australian High Commissioner, Patrick Cole, had apparently been working hard behind the scenes to avoid Rini capturing the top job. 'Cole said he had talked to Tommy and [his son] Laurie Chan as to why Rini had been selected given that they had given him assurances that he wouldn't be,' wrote Mick Shannon (Solomon Star 2006y), '[l]ooks like Tommy Chan's main business interest is in getting a second casino licence and he can no doubt depend on Rini for that.' In itself, the revelation of Australian manoeuvring behind the scenes in Solomon Islands politics was hardly surprising. Perhaps more disturbing was the view expressed that, as a result of the anticipated loss of Peter Boyers as finance minister, 'we will end up with no effective voice in cabinet to guide economic and fiscal policy'. Cole refused to comment about 'what an individual may or may not have said about what may or may not have been going on' and faced down the calls for his resignation (Solomon Star 2006x). Cole viewed Kemakeza as 'the best of a bad bunch' and as an accomplished master at the parliamentary numbers game. He had long pursued a bilateral agenda that occasionally departed from the studied neutrality sought by RAMSI. Cole supported the adoption of Papua New Guinea-style integrity legislation in the Solomon Islands, including grace periods during which no-confidence votes could not dislodge governments and rules against MPs crossing the floor.¹⁶

The initial bid to assemble a rival coalition came from East Honiara MP, Charles Dausabea, who claimed the support of eight members and demanded an alternative to Kemakeza. This was still less welcome for Australian diplomats than having Rini as prime minister. The Prime Minister had 'crossed the line in terms of sovereignty', declared Dausabea, criticising Australian interference in cabinet decision making and associated breaches of national security (SIBC 2006a). Dausabea rejected having as prime minister someone from either Malaita or Guadalcanal—suggesting that this

was 'too early after the ethnic tension' (Solomon Star 2006s) for such an outcome. That comment, as well as Dausabea's tarnished reputation during the 1998–99 unrest and as a behind-the-scenes power-broker after the 2000 coup, generated a flurry of hostile criticism (see, for example, Aqorau 2006). It played, however, to a familiar gallery in Solomon Islands politics. Even before the 1998–2003 tensions, candidates for prime minister who were not from Malaita or Guadalcanal—such as Makira's Mamaloni—had faced an easier ride than Kenilorea or Ulufa'alu (from Malaita) or Alebua (from Guadalcanal). In the wake of the Isatabu uprising, Sogavare (from Choiseul) and Kemakeza (from Savo) had traded off their origins. Disturbingly, the anti-Malaita directive ruled out as potential prime ministers the two politicians associated popularly with the younger generation and often perceived—rightly or wrongly—as promising a more competent, honest and reform-oriented style of leadership: Joses Sanga and Fred Fono.

On Thursday 12 April, a new coalition was announced, bringing together three former prime ministers: Ulufa'alu, Hilly and Sogavare. It claimed 30 members, including those from the SIPRA, the Nasnol Pati and the Liberals. Dausabea had also joined the group. In Solomon Islands realpolitik, having such a brutal presence as Dausabea belonging to the loosely knit, tactically ill-astute and soft-hearted opposition potentially made the difference in the fluid but hard-fought struggle for the prime ministerial post. Two opposition MPs arriving from the east were whisked away unexpectedly to the Honiara Hotel by Chan's henchmen. Oti fetched them away to the opposition headquarters at the Iron Bottom Sound Hotel. Police were stopped from collecting their personal possessions by hotel owner, Chan. It was Dausabea who then successfully physically obtained the luggage, and brought it to the opposition headquarters (Solomon Star 2006t).

The inauspicious 2001 splintering of the opposition due to conflicts about the leadership reappeared, although this time the group remained at least partially intact. Before the voting began, Sogavare broke away, leaving a number of disoriented supporters behind at the Iron Bottom Sound Hotel. The opposition continued its internal selection process and, after several rounds of elimination, settled on Job Dudley Tausinga as its candidate for prime minister. Other aspirants such as Ulufa'alu, Hilly and Oti held together behind the newly favoured leader, desperate as they were to avoid another term in the wilderness of opposition. The Sogavare breakaway,

however, proved potentially devastating for opposition ambitions. This new group's headquarters was at the Pacific Casino Hotel, an enterprise owned by yet another Chinese businessman and naturalised citizen, Patrick Leong. It provided a convenient transit station for wavering opportunists, eager to take advantage of prevailing uncertainties to enhance their position in the struggle for prestigious portfolios and/or other rewards.

As realignments in the now tripartite contest began, the atmosphere became extraordinarily tense at the Iron Bottom Sound Hotel. The new MP for South Guadalcanal, David Day Pacha, was whisked away in a vehicle belonging to local businessman of Guale and Asian descent, Bobo Dettke, to join Sogavare's group. Dausabea's security guards manning the gates at the Iron Bottom Sound Hotel became greatly agitated and harried visitors, suspecting them of intending to snatch further opposition MPs. Three more of the Guale MPs had also shifted across to the Pacific Casino Hotel, as did several other debutant or previously non-aligned MPs. The rebel Guale bloc emphasised the presence of Dausabea—due to his notorious links with the MEF—as the reason for their flight from the opposition camp. It was widely rumoured that the bills for their rooms and expenses at the Pacific Casino Hotel were being paid by Dettke (reportedly at a cost of SI\$2 million), and more secretive financiers could plausibly have been operating behind the scenes. A *Winds of Change* advertisement appeared in the *Solomon Star* (2006t) headlined 'Who will decide our PM?', and explained that 'there is a select group of business, logging and foreign interests that are currently attempting to corrupt our political process and manipulate the election of the new PM so that they can continue to control our nation'.

In the midst of this fraught coalition-building process, two Taiwanese naval vessels docked in port and sent sailors from the Wu-Yi's training squadron to perform kung-fu exercises for onlookers at the National Stadium. The event was accompanied by new announcements by Ambassador Antonio Chen of Taiwanese aid awaiting the incoming government (ABC 2006a). New and returned MPs were invited to come aboard the Wu-Yi that evening for a cocktail party. Only a few AIMP members attended, including Peter Boyers and Laurie Chan, as well as the outgoing prime minister. Kemakeza told the gathering that his government would be re-elected (*Solomon Star* 2006u), yet the celebrated 'numbers man' of 2001–06 no longer had sufficient party

backing for a bid to remain prime minister. His PAP had been reduced to a rump of seven members. One of these, Fred Fono, immediately deserted and joined the AIMP.

According to the timetable set by Governor-General Sir Nathaniel Waena, nominations for the prime ministership were to close at 4pm on 11 April 2006, and the elections were scheduled for 9.30am on Tuesday 18 April. By the close of nominations, all three candidates were from the western part of the country: Rini, Tausinga and Sogavare. During the Easter long weekend, coalition fortunes waxed and waned. Numbers appeared increasingly to favour the opposition, and a greater sense of calm prevailed at the gates of the Iron Bottom Sound Hotel. On its own, the Honiara Hotel-based coalition did not have the numbers to win the prime ministerial election outright. When MPs finally gathered on Vavaya Ridge to select their new prime minister, Tausinga was easily ahead at the first count, but four votes short of a clear majority. It was the 11 MPs who sided with Sogavare at the first count who provided the crucial swing votes. In the second round of voting, 10 of these backed Rini—handing him victory by 27 votes to 23. It was to prove a short-lived triumph. Eight days later, responding to the political shock waves engendered by the riots, six MPs crossed the floor to join an opposition that regrouped around Sogavare as its new candidate for prime minister. Facing an impending no-confidence vote, Rini chose to resign. The Honiara Hotel camp chose Fred Fono as its candidate for the second prime ministerial elections held on 4 May, but he lost by 22 votes to Sogavare's 28. Sogavare consequently became prime minister, with Tausinga as deputy and Ulufa'alu as finance minister.

Table 6.4 The 18 April and 4 May 2006 prime ministerial elections

18 April	First round	Second round	4 May	First round
Synder Rini	17	27	Fred Fono	22
Job Dudley Tausinga	22	23	Manasseh Sogavare	28
Mannaseh Sogavare	11			

Source: Compiled by author.

Conclusion: riots revisited

The riots that broke out on 18 April outside parliament were triggered by a deeply flawed prime ministerial selection process, which not for the first time generated an outcome that bore no relationship to any discernible popular mandate.¹⁷ The previous government had earned itself a poor reputation among Solomon Islanders. As we have seen, many ministers had been sacked for embezzlement of funds or complicity in militant activities. Kemakeza's PAP performed poorly at the polls. Its coalition ally—the Rini-led AIMP—had also suffered high-profile casualties. In total, nine of the 20 ministers had lost their seats, as well as the bulk of pro-government backbenchers. Nevertheless, here was the former deputy prime minister leading the core of the old cabinet back into office. Whatever the role of disgruntled politicians in inciting the crowds, the causes of the Honiara riots ran much deeper. The intense level of popular antipathy to the outcome of the prime ministerial election—at least among the hundreds gathered outside parliament on 18 April—was captured in three hours of pilot footage for an intended new Solomon Islands TV station.¹⁸ There exists no reason to believe that some reservoir of popular support for the former government existed anywhere else in the country.

This was not the first time a gathering outside parliament had reacted in a hostile way to the outcome of a prime ministerial election, even if the response this time was far more violent. Back in 2001, at the previous prime ministerial election, Kemakeza's victory had been greeted with such a stunned and disapproving silence that Sir Allan felt obliged in the midst of his post-election news conference to publicly dismiss his critics as articulating a narrowly urban response.¹⁹ Previous government changes, for example in 1990 and 1994, were also outcomes of behind-the-scenes manoeuvring by top politicians, and bore no necessary relationship to popular enthusiasm or disdain with the performance of the government of the day. Cautious preparation for disturbances accompanying prime ministerial elections, including deployment of officers to Chinatown, had previously been standard Royal Solomon Islands Police procedure (Short 2006).²⁰

Did disappointed politicians plan and spark the disturbances? Two opposition MPs—Dausabea and Nelson Ne'e—were subsequently arrested for inciting the crowds to violence. Some speculated about Dausabea's role in stirring youths to action the night before the riots (Wickham 2006).

Exiting parliament after Rini's election, Dausabea allegedly said '*mi fala lose nao, iu fala doim what nao iufala likem* [we've lost, you go ahead and do what you want]', which sounds more provocative in Pijin than in English (Solomon Star 2006v). The less-seasoned Central Honiara MP, Ne'e, was blunter: '*dynamitem parliment* [blow up parliament],' he is said to have told the crowds (Solomon Star 2006w). Was this mere trouble making amid an already occurring popular outrage-driven riot, or had frustrated political leaders transformed an otherwise peaceful protest into a violent one? This is a familiar issue, and one that also accompanied Solomon Islands urban unrest in 1989 and 1996, the Isatabu uprising of 1998–99 and various Malaitan demonstrations in Honiara during 1999–2000 (Fraenkel 2004a:64–5, 117–19). It is also—in all these cases—impossible to answer definitively, for the Melanesian leader blends into the crowd and the instigator is rarely separated easily from the instigated. At the time of writing, the courts are entrusted with the responsibility of judging whether politicians incited the riots and a commission of inquiry is supposed to establish the causes. Since courts are responsible for establishing guilt or innocence, however, and not ultimate causes, and since the commission cannot comment on matters before the courts, it seems likely that neither will resolve the broader issue of what was behind the Honiara riots.

The claims that trucks had delivered rocks, water bottles and fire-bombs to parliament before the riots were all false (Maiden 2006; Morgan and McLeod 2006:421–2).²¹ Stones hurled at Parliament House were available readily on the access road. The torching of the first RAMSI vehicle, supposedly with the petrol-filled water bottles described in *The Australian*, happened at least an hour and a half after the initial outbreak of the disturbances outside parliament. Once the crowds veered towards the town, numerous opportunist elements joined the *melée*. In the 1990s, before their crisis-related exodus from Honiara in 2000–01, underemployed youths hanging around aimlessly in Honiara (the notorious '*masta liu*') regularly joined urban disturbances. The renewed expansion of squatter settlements on Honiara's fringes and the buildup of numbers of young and aimless street-kids during 2002–06 were always likely to swell the ferocity of even minor urban disturbances.

The claims that RAMSI police tactics sparked the disturbances were overplayed and often inconsistent. Despite a heavy presence, Australian

police quickly lost control, and resorted to using tear-gas only about three hours after the disturbances outside parliament began. Providing a megaphone for respected senior statesman Sir Peter Kenilorea might have helped to calm the crowds, but it requires a big counterfactual stretch to suggest that this would have quelled the unrest. The Deputy Commissioner of Police, Johnson Siapu, claimed that ‘the violence and attacks on property at Chinatown and other areas throughout Point Cruz had commenced prior to the deployment of tear gas’ (Solomon Star 2006z). According to Police Commissioner Shane Castles, the timing was close: ‘[b]y 3.15pm... a crowd in excess of 200 began ransacking both the Sunrise and Wings Supermarkets’, and ‘at 3.22pm non-lethal [CS] tear gas was deployed at parliament house’ (Solomon Star 2006aa). If so, the tear-gas was deployed seven minutes after the ransacking began. It takes about five minutes to run, without stumbling, down the steep hill from parliament to Point Cruz. Hence, if this timing was correct, those fleeing from the tear-gas outside parliament could have joined the rioting in the town centre only about 3.27pm, 12 minutes after it began.

Most extraordinary were the claims that Taiwanese funding somehow fuelled the riots. Taiwan had, at times, exercised an ill-advised influence on Solomon Islands politics: with regard to the misconceived EXIM loan in 2001, RCDF spending before the 2006 poll and selective payments routed through Kemakeza’s office during the run up the 2006 poll. The diplomatic fiasco surrounding the ill-timed arrival of the Wu-Yi—and the cocktail party in the middle of government formation—encouraged increasingly shrill antipodean allegations of Taiwanese political interference in the electoral process. Many also claimed that Taiwanese money influenced the wheeling and dealing in the run up to the 18 April prime ministerial election. Money does change hands in such elections. Since such transactions are inevitably secretive in one sense—but well known in another—amounts often tend to become exaggerated. Solomon Islanders’ evidence of receipts of bribes arises owing to ostentatious displays by recipients. In close-knit communities, politicians who are seen to suddenly mysteriously acquire a new four-wheel-drive vehicle, for example, or a fancy house are known to be in receipt of unusual sources of income. Such payments usually come from local businesses, would-be casino operators or logging companies seeking to influence the composition and policy direction of the incoming government.

The more important influence on the shaping and reshaping of Solomon Islands politics during 2003–06 was the Australian presence. Even that was limited, however, as the election first of Rini and then of Sogavare—neither of whom were candidates favoured in Canberra—clearly showed. Australian influence had served to strengthen the Kemakeza government, but it did not extend to determining the outcome of the post-election leadership contest. Nevertheless, the shaping and reshaping of government and opposition alliances during 2003–06 had showed itself to be extraordinarily susceptible to influence, whether deliberate or inadvertent. Neutrality was impossible, even if it appeared politically indispensable. No serious top-level consideration was given in Canberra to the political ramifications of the RAMSI operation, despite the parliamentary reconfiguration that ensued.²² For the Australian High Commission, this was a positive consolidation around Kemakeza, even requiring additional legislation to further strengthen the position of the government. For RAMSI's special coordinator, it was perhaps more problematic, but unfortunately unavoidable owing to the role of the prime minister in legitimising the entire operation. Had the legislation recommended so strongly by some Canberra think-tanks—giving incoming governments a grace period during which they would be immune from no-confidence votes—been enacted and had it been accompanied by laws against floor crossing, the Rini government might have survived any parliamentary challenge, leaving RAMSI in the impossible situation of having to prop up a deeply unpopular government. Fortunately, such legislation had not been enacted. Nevertheless, the eventual triumph of a now heavily compromised opposition on 4 May 2006 bore all the scars of the reconfiguration of the political order during 2003–06. The way ahead will not be easy.

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Notes

- 1 Solomon Mamaloni survived a full term as prime minister from 1989 to 1993, but his government did not. In 1990, Mamaloni abandoned his own People's Alliance Party and forged a new coalition with former opposition members. The 1984 United Party government also survived a full term, but its initial prime minister, Sir Peter Kenilorea, was forced to resign in 1986.
- 2 Rini in fact resigned, but only minutes before the vote on a no-confidence motion.
- 3 'The fact that elements of the pro-opposition crowd were already armed with petrol spray and fire bombs, and quickly set to incinerating RAMSI vehicles after the initial skirmishes, supports the contention that key members of the opposition group instrumentalised violence for political gain' (Morgan and McLeod 2006:421–2).
- 4 'There shall be a general election at such time within four months of every dissolution of Parliament' (Solomon Islands Government 1978:S.74).
- 5 I am indebted to Alistair Legge, of the Australian Electoral Commission, who managed the Civic Education Project, for details about these arrangements.
- 6 See the comments of SIEC adviser David Clarke in Solomon Star 2006d.
- 7 The Moral Rearmament Group grew out of the 1930s Oxford group and is known as Initiatives of Change in Australia. See <http://www.au.iofc.org>
- 8 Similarly, Morgan and McLeod (2006:420–1) reject the view that the prime ministerial election contest was 'a contest between the new guard who support political reform and the old guard characterised by money politics' on the grounds that many of the opposition politicians were also 'old' and because 'charges of money politics and maladministration may evenly be directed against members of Tausinga's camp' (my emphasis). For an alternative view, see Kabutaulaka 2006.
- 9 For the debates in Australia, see Australian Government 2003.
- 10 In the week before the election, Dausabea converted his house into a kind of hospitality centre for confirmed supporters and, on election day, he took them in groups of 20 to the polling station, bringing them back for refreshment thereafter (Bishop Terry Brown, personal communication, 31 August 2006).
- 11 The Constitutional (Amendment) Bill 2005 was defeated in November 2005—not due to direct opposition, but owing to the absence of so many sitting members that it proved impossible to reach the required majority (three-quarters of the house or 38 MPs) (Solomon Islands Government 2005b).
- 12 See also the rather inconsistent responses from Taiwanese Ambassador, Antonio Chen (2006), and Kemakeza (2006), and the subsequent contributions from Joses Sanga (2006), Alfred Sasako (2006) and Speaker of the House, Sir Peter Kenilorea (2006b).
- 13 In the wake of its 2002 elections, Papua New Guinea switched from first-past-the-post to a limited preferential voting system. For data on the number of candidates per constituency in Papua New Guinea, see Fraenkel 2004b. What is said here is also true of Vanuatu, although that country uses a single non-transferable vote system (see van Trease 2005).

- 14 For an analysis of the likely impact of quotas aimed at influencing party candidate selection, see Fraenkel 2006.
- 15 In some cases, only the constituencies were announced, presumably because when the advertisement was written the victors were still unknown.
- 16 Personal communications (Anonymous).
- 17 The issue of what reforms might prove effective in such circumstances, including the scope for strengthening political parties and reform of the process of electing prime ministers, is discussed in a separate forthcoming paper.
- 18 Raw DVD recording of Solomon Islands TV footage taken before, during and after the prime ministerial election result, including the subsequent disturbances outside parliament.
- 19 For some sense of the anticipation of the potential for hostility from the outcome of Solomon Islands' two-stage prime ministerial elections, and an account of the 2001 sequence of events, see Fraenkel 2004a:136–38.
- 20 Solomon Islands-born Mike Wheatley, the Assistant Police Commissioner, National Reconnaissance and Surveillance, during 1992–2000, explained: 'It is a standard procedure for the disciplinary forces of Solomon Islands to be on alert during any national election, stepping up as parliament is convened for the election of the Prime Minister. Forces were usually deployed at Parliament House, on the approaches to Chinatown and for other key locations on a direct route from Parliament House. Such a strategy allows one to block or deflect riotous assembly as opposed to the riskier strategy of following it into Chinatown' (Wheatley 2006).
- 21 See Note 4.
- 22 Personal communication (Anonymous).

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