Chapter 7

RAMSI—the way ahead

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It is no small coincidence that the first to congratulate Solomon Islands’ new prime minister on his election was a member of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Just four hours after Manasseh Sogavare had secured one of the most arduous jobs in the region, RAMSI Special Coordinator, James Batley—who, arguably, was holding down an equally challenging post—dispatched his congratulations to the man with whom he knew he must now attempt to forge an open and trusting partnership if RAMSI in its current form was to survive.

In reality, Batley and the government that put him there had little choice. Australia’s grand vision was of a regional mission led and funded by Australia that could assist Solomon Islanders to rebuild and reshape their nation into a viable, modern state, which could be ruled and run effectively by its own people. If that vision was to be achieved, Australia needed not only the cooperation of the government of Solomon Islands, whoever that might be, it needed a meaningful working partnership with it. This is the case even if that government is headed, as it is today, by a politician who catapulted himself into office initially on the back of a coup in 2000 and who has been more recently on the rebound from the violent social unrest that razed Honiara’s Chinatown in April 2006.

Solomon Islanders have no option. Most already know from the four agonising years of rule by the gun (from 1999 to 2003) just how bad things can get. While the majority of Solomon Islanders did not join in the ethnic tensions, as they are called, between the two largest islands of Guadalcanal and Malaita, they were forced to watch as any semblance of governance crumbled steadily

under the weight of the guns and the criminals wielding them. Most also remain to this day uncomprehending of how their most powerful neighbour, Australia, could sit on its hands for those four long years.

In the first flush of the post-11 September new world order, Australia's John Howard-led government discovered an urgent imperative for neighbourly concern that eventually led to the formation of RAMSI. Arriving in the smoky dawn of 24 July 2003, RAMSI quickly wrought the miracle—the return of law and order and financial stability—that Solomon Islanders had been praying for. In the four years that have passed since, there have been great gains. Despite a lot of hard work, however, Solomon Islands is still far from free of the legacy of those dark days of neglect, nor, therefore, is RAMSI. In many ways, the challenges that RAMSI faces are the same as those that so daunt the future prospects of Solomon Islands, although RAMSI also has a separate set of challenges all its own, which will be discussed in this chapter.

In the 12 months since the Honiara riots, the Solomon Islands defied conventional wisdom and continued to grow. Real gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 6.1 per cent in 2006 and was forecast to grow by 6 per cent in 2007; employment was growing strongly and inflation had fallen to 6.9 per cent through 2006. This is largely due to a combination of smart economic reforms introduced by the government with the assistance of RAMSI's economic governance program and the almost doubling in the past year of revenue collected from logging. Even in the face of such facts, however, the harsh reality is that the Solomon Islands economy suffered so badly in the previous decade that it is estimated that an annual growth rate of 5 per cent will be needed for the next 20 years just to raise the standard of living for the fastest-growing population in the region back to where it was hovering in 1994.

Add to this the growing social problems that accompany a nation's declining capacity to look after itself and the deep-seated and as yet largely unresolved issues that were behind the years of strife and there is still a very, very long way to go before it will be possible to say that Solomon Islanders have wrested back control of their nation's destiny.

A key to turning any of this around is the requirement for rapid change in how Solomon Islands is attempting to fund, run and develop itself. This is a big ask anywhere but more so in a country where a combination of corruption,

ignorance and naivety has combined with a poorly designed electoral system to produce successive governments that are barely representative of, far less accountable to, the people. The institutions bequeathed 30 years ago in the lead up to independence are still not understood clearly by most Solomon Islanders. Nor are these institutions without the need for reform and refinement themselves. RAMSI has already put enormous resources into doing something about Solomon Islanders' fundamental lack of knowledge of how their nation is intended to work, in 2005 funding a multi-million dollar nation-wide civic education project.

RAMSI's innovative programs to enhance rural livelihoods and develop provincial economies and infrastructure face a similar race against time and population growth. With 85 per cent of the Solomon Islands population living in non-urban areas, AusAID has focused some of RAMSI's efforts on improving the rural economic base, and to moving some of the quite active informal economy into the formal sector in time to cushion the nation from the impact of shrinking forestry revenues as Solomon Islands' ancient trees—once a sustainable resource—are finally exhausted in the next four to six years.

At the heart of RAMSI's efforts to assist with the restoration of governance and the institutions of state is a program of ambitious economic, legislative, public sector and electoral reform that is in various stages of design or implementation. It is here we start to see the rub of RAMSI. In stark contrast with the overwhelming support for the mission's quite extensive intervention into Solomon Islands' law and order, there has been resentment, suspicion and active undermining of RAMSI's reforms and, in particular, the policy of putting key RAMSI personnel into ministries such as finance and in positions in other departments, such as that of the accountant-general. The same resistance is evident in response to the mission's efforts to reform government practices, policies and the endemic corruption that so undermines much of the State's core business in Solomon Islands, particularly the delivery of services. RAMSI encounters resentment, suspicion and active undermining from the country's political and bureaucratic élite. The daily, endless and time-consuming struggle to push on with these reforms, with little or no support from all but a few of Solomon Islands' senior bureaucrats, was described by one RAMSI insider in 2005 as 'trench warfare'.

An interesting conundrum has developed since the riots of 2006: the ascendancy of Sogavare and his at times manic and virulent attacks on Australia and RAMSI. While the RAMSI/Solomon Islands government partnership at the political level remains fraught with complicated deceptions, and not-so-hidden agendas to undermine the mission's effectiveness in moving the nation's institutions to a more accountable state, just below this a remarkably effective working relationship has developed between senior Solomon Islands bureaucrats and those programs under RAMSI's three pillars of reform: economic governance, machinery of government and law and justice.

In the year leading up to Sogavare's election, RAMSI had moved to meet the concerns of the Solomon Islands government that it was setting an agenda for these reforms and other RAMSI-funded government programs with little or no consultation or mechanism of accountability other than the agreement of the incumbent Solomon Islands prime minister and regular reporting back to Canberra, Wellington and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. Under the initiative of the then RAMSI Special Coordinator, James Batley, a lot of work was done with the Solomon Islands government to establish jointly agreed targets for all three RAMSI pillars.

A joint consultative forum has been established. Co-chaired by the special coordinator and the secretary to the prime minister, the forum comprises the permanent secretaries of the seven key government departments and the head of the RAMSI programs in these reform areas. An annual performance report is now produced using 51 separate indicators, all developed in discussion with the relevant Solomon Islands authorities or counterparts. These draw on four different sources of data: program-level reporting; analytical surveys; surveys of the population; and capacity-building surveys for each of the reform pillars. The latest of these population surveys, commissioned by RAMSI but conducted by independent researchers, reveals an extraordinarily high level of support for the mission—more than 94 per cent among ordinary Solomon Islanders.

While the Sogavare government's close alliance with elements of the former Malaita Eagle Force's (MEF) criminal and militant leadership has predetermined its antagonism towards RAMSI's core goals, it has also highlighted for Solomon Islanders the critical value of RAMSI's efforts to stabilise and rehabilitate their nation. For instance, the disquiet fuelled in 2005 among informed Solomon Islanders by Canberra's ill-judged decision

to impose an Australian Federal Police (AFP) officer as Solomon Islands' police commissioner has been all but forgotten two years later, amid Solomon Islanders' distaste for the politically compliant incumbent recently rustled up for this post by the Sogavare regime from the dregs of Fiji's now discredited post-coup police force.

A top priority of RAMSI is building the capacity of Solomon Islands' institutions of governance, including the police. Solomon Islanders, however, in sharp contrast with their government's rhetoric, remain wary of too fast a shift back to full localisation, lest they end up with nothing more than a smarter version of what undid the knot of statehood so effectively not so long ago. It is an open secret—discussed frequently by Solomon Islanders—that most politicians would like to get their hands back on the State's coffers with varying degrees of ill intent.

In what has become a large fillip for the mission's morale, the political implications of the continued widespread popular support for RAMSI are probably resisted least by the Solomon Islands government's newly appointed special envoy to RAMSI, former politician Michael Maina. Despite having himself been forced to step down as police minister in 2005 when arrested on, but later cleared of, charges of fraud, the special envoy appears to be working constructively to ensure the mission is able to fulfil its widest mandate.

A more sophisticated and coordinated approach to the induction of all members of RAMSI on their arrival in Solomon Islands, be they civilians, police or military, is still evolving but the importance of this to the mission's goals is now acknowledged. The significance and complexity of effective engagement with local institutions and their personnel—the mission's Solomon Islands counterparts—has been recognised as the touchstone for its efforts in capacity building. This is easier said than done in a cross-cultural environment in which there is often a radically different approach to communicating and imparting '*informations*', as it is called in Solomon Islands Pijin. A lot of gains have, nevertheless, been made in the wake of the post-riot scrutiny applied to the mission from Canberra and from RAMSI practitioners on the ground. A good first step has been the encouragement given to young bureaucrats and other RAMSI personnel, especially members of RAMSI's Participating Police Force (PPF), to equip themselves with the precise skills they need for what is the extremely delicate task of working

with Solomon Islanders to rebuild not only their country but their individual capacity to contribute to this process. Australians don't know how to sit in silence. Solomon Islanders rarely speak without it, that is, without the indication, through the respectful space provided, of the other's willingness to listen. The mission and its members are learning to listen and to learn from Solomon Islanders about how best to communicate with them, to listen to what they think, what they need, what they believe they can contribute and what they think we might be able to bring to the RAMSI table.

Nowhere was this need for a change in approach and preparation more apparent than in the pivotal area of law and order. Having secured most of the guns and prosecuted many of the hard-core violent criminals by the end of 2004, the PPF—led and staffed largely by officers of the AFP's International Deployment Group (IDG)—have grappled with how to relate to, let alone rebuild, a force decimated by the purge of officers involved in the recent lawlessness. The April 2006 protests outside parliament, where the predominantly Australian and New Zealand PPF officers could be seen acting in a seeming vacuum from the mood of the crowd and the senior-ranking local police officers who were present, was a chilling illustration of the dangers of trying to rebuild someone else's country without being steeped in understanding of that culture and the dynamics of that society.

Since the riots, a lot of work has been done to improve the PPF's ability to equip its members with the skills required for effective communication and capacity building. The idea that the most effective way to do this is through a common language is now accepted. While many Solomon Islanders are quite articulate in English, the absence of all but a few Pijin speakers in the civil—but particularly the police—arm of RAMSI was a major weakness before the riots. Now the benefits that fluency in Pijin can bring are recognised, with compulsory Pijin classes required for all new members of the PPF who are not from pidgin-speaking countries. More thorough training of those individual officers being posted to RAMSI is now carried out by a revamped induction process at the IDG in Canberra, which involves regular input from Solomon Islands police officers. There have also been some very good developments within the Solomon Islands Police Force under RAMSI. The resurgence of the Solomon Islands Police Academy and the positive impacts of its training programs throughout the force are examples of this.

At the heart of this are the efforts being made by the IDG to cope with the rapid changes that have been required of the AFP by the new demands of Australia's more proactive role in the region and the changes in the world in which the AFP must now operate. The formation of the IDG is in itself a function of these changes and it is currently deployed in nine missions throughout the world, none of which, bar Cyprus, existed a decade ago. While great achievements were made by RAMSI in the first 12 months after its initial deployment in July 2003—the surrender or seizure of most guns in the community and the arrest of most of the militant and criminal leadership—the organisation of the PPF's rapid deployment to the Solomons led to a lack of long-term planning, personnel management, skills matching and continuity of postings. All of these shortcomings had unintended consequences in other areas of RAMSI's operations. Already there has been an acknowledgement of the need for a wider skill set, particularly in areas such as community policing. Vacancies in the IDG are now advertised throughout Australian states and territories, Pijin classes are offered on a weekly and voluntary basis, the length of deployment has been stretched for many officers into cycles from 40 up to 60, 80 and 100 weeks, and family accommodation is being built in order to attract more stable, long-term officers to the force.

There is much at stake. If, as recent events suggest, the growing number of progressively more impoverished Solomon Islanders are no longer willing to tolerate bad governance as placidly as they have in years past, RAMSI forces could find themselves confronting the very people who should be their natural allies in these reforms.

The April 2006 riots required a rapid hike in the number of troops and police deployed under RAMSI, bringing the mission's military contingent to 430 personnel from the paltry 63 deemed necessary in the period leading up to the riots. Drawn mostly from Australia and New Zealand, they remain on the ground with the additional 120 police shipped in to boost the PPF's numbers above the 450 mark.

The absence of adequate military back-up for the PPF during the April riots raises another set of questions. The deployment of RAMSI's military contingency is intended to provide support to the PPF, not to lead the mission. Risk assessment is therefore one of the prime tasks of the mission's joint intelligence group. The peculiar role of the military in RAMSI limits the quality and depth of the contribution that can be made by the Australian

Defence Force (ADF)—a fact very much to the mission's detriment and evident at the time of the riots, when effectively no troops of the more than 60 in country were available (in any meaningful numbers) to support the increasingly overwhelmed police. Clearly, the deployment of about 60 troops was deemed commensurate with the assessed threat. The fact that the bulk of these troops were deployed to provide additional security at Honiara's main jail since a riot there in 2004 did not dissuade the mission from allowing those remaining, excluding headquarters staff, to make a non-urgent patrol to the country's Western Province.

Head of the PPF at the time, Will Jamieson, stated publicly that there was no intelligence to suggest the kind of orchestrated violence that the police ultimately faced. If not a failure of intelligence, this points, at the very least, to an alarming lack of institutional memory within the mission at the time. Although the precise timing of the assault could not have been anticipated by many Honiara residents, the possibility of the criminal forces aligned against RAMSI biding their time and making such an attempt to undermine public confidence in RAMSI, and to de-motivate and distract the mission, was expected by many Solomon Islanders from RAMSI's very inception.

Such confrontations between white foreign cops and angry black locals—as were witnessed in April 2006—not only left 25 RAMSI personnel injured, they dealt a severe blow to Solomon Islanders' confidence in the ability of the mission to guarantee public safety. Ironically, the vitriolic attacks and clear agenda of the prime minister that came to power through the riots have focused the community's attention on the strengths of the mission and why they don't want RAMSI to go home.

Last, but by no means least, RAMSI has become better, smarter and faster at getting its message out to all stakeholders. Particularly effective has been a new community outreach program, which puts teams of RAMSI personnel from all parts of the mission in regular contact with Honiara's disaffected settlement communities and the provincial population. The mission still has enormous support from the broad mass of Solomon Islanders who genuinely and whole-heartedly appreciate the turn around in their lives that RAMSI's deployment has wrought. There is, however, never an exhaustible supply of good will towards an intervention force. The people of Solomon Islands are now demanding good governance, and that also means they need to know what RAMSI, as their partner, might be

prosecuting on their behalf. They also need reassurance about the nature of that partnership. Like any marriage in which desperate circumstances rather than real attraction dictated a continuing partnership, there were always going to be issues about managing mounting tensions generated by the presence and actions of an intervention force, even a regional one that was invited in so enthusiastically. The degree of honest self-examination, imagination and skill with which such issues continue to be addressed by RAMSI and its hosts—be it the Sogavare government or those that succeed it—will not only be pivotal to a successful RAMSI, they will determine the as yet uncertain future of Solomon Islands and its people.

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