



# State building in Solomon Islands

Francis Fukuyama

Addressing long-term strategies for state-building in the Solomons, Professor Fukuyama underlines the need for nation-building efforts to create a sense of a common Solomon Islands identity. Pessimistic about current progress, he makes suggestions for international donors on how to support nation-building efforts, such as the creation of national secondary schools or a university to develop a national elite, as well as investment on Malaita . He also considers a shared sovereignty model in areas where no amount of outside investment will solve underlying social problems. Professor Fukuyama's analysis helps us consider where RAMSI might head.

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## A digression on historical anthropology

Virtually all developed-country visitors to Melanesia have to confront the *wantok* system, which to many seems like a unique and exotic cultural practice, and a huge obstacle to the country's modernisation. It is indeed an obstacle, but it is hardly unique or exotic in human history. The *wantok* is simply the local version of what anthropologists call a segmentary lineage or descent group,<sup>1</sup> which was at one point virtually universal in all human societies. The classic description of a segmentary society was given by the great British

anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard in his study of Nuer pastoralists in southern Sudan.<sup>2</sup> Segmentary societies are a coherent and stable form of social organisation, but in Europe they were superseded at a fairly early point by more modern forms of political organisation not based on kinship. Segmentary societies could not meet the challenges of large-scale social integration in a region characterised by persistent warfare and expanding trade.

Virtually all Indo-European peoples from the Greeks and Romans in the West to the Hindus in the East were organised into patrilineal kinship structures at one time. China and India from prehistoric



times up to the present have also been characterised by patrilineal lineages, at least at a village level. The Latin word *agnatio* refers to the Roman practice of tracing ancestry exclusively through male relatives, from which anthropologists derive the term agnation. Societies will become segmentary—i.e., organised around exclusive, non-overlapping descent groups—only if inheritance is *unilateral*, that is, only if it goes through the father's side or mother's side alone (i.e., is patrilineal or matrilineal). *Bilateral* inheritance tends to blur the borders of descent groups since a child is equally related to both the father and mother and can claim membership in more than one kindred.

Kinship systems are intimately related to property rights systems; indeed, one could argue that kinship systems developed as mechanisms for passing on property to descendants. In virtually all segmentary societies, concepts basic to modern property rights like alienability and individual ownership do not exist. Land is owned by members of the kin group; individuals exist to perpetuate the lineage and not vice versa. In an often quoted statement by an early twentieth century Nigerian chief, 'I conceive that land belongs to a vast family of which many are dead, few are living and countless members are still unborn.'<sup>5</sup> In his classic work *The Ancient City*, the French scholar Fustel de Coulanges points out that for the early Greeks and Romans, land initially became private because it was where ancestors were buried and the focal point of ancestor cults. But for this very reason it was not alienable to people outside the kin group; property rights changed hands oftentimes only through violence.<sup>4</sup>

Segmentary societies tend to be egalitarian and non-hierarchical. They can come together in temporary alliances of lineages, clans, or tribes for purposes of defense or aggression, but then fall apart

when the emergency passes.<sup>5</sup> The fact that there is no sovereign enforcer of rules means that justice has to be compensatory and negotiated on a case-by-case basis by kin groups. Among the Germanic peoples of Northern Europe, this type of justice was known as the *wergeld*; the *Beowulf* saga is essentially an account of a murder and search for justice under *wergeld* rules.<sup>6</sup>

Segmentary societies were, to repeat, virtually universal in human history. As forms of social organisation, however, they have certain critical weaknesses, which is why they were supplemented, in the cases of China and India, and superceded, in the case of Europe, by more impersonal, territorially-based forms of political organisation.

The most important weakness of a segmentary society is its inability to achieve collective action at a large scale for extended periods of time. Since there is no state—a sovereign source of political authority—cooperation is voluntary and consensual. Alliances can fall apart or are subject to renegotiation at any time. What is true at the level of the society as a whole is true at the level of the individual lineage or descent group: the chief or big man is more of a trustee for the kindred rather than an authoritative leader. The kin group delegates authority to the chief only on a temporary basis and can challenge his authority whenever they wish.<sup>7</sup> Segmentary societies are therefore very unstable and incapable of modern forms of legal delegation. The advantages of size and power conferred by state-formation explain why this form of political organisation quickly displaced segmentary societies wherever they arose.<sup>8</sup>

Of all world civilisations, Europe was by far the one in which kinship-based organisation was least important. Patrilineal lineages had largely died out by the time of the late Roman Republic; they were revived again after the Germanic barbarian invasions of Northern Europe, but in the 7th and 8th



centuries the Catholic Church changed the rules of inheritance from unilateral to bilateral, undermining the economic basis of corporate kin groups.<sup>9</sup> Apart from the Church, the driving force behind Europe's transition to ever-larger political structures was the need to organise for war.<sup>10</sup> Despite the early decline of kin groups in Europe, the transition from customary to modern forms of property rights was nonetheless extraordinarily long and painful.<sup>11</sup> In much of Europe, customary constraints on the alienability of land persisted through the nineteenth century. War played an important role in driving this process forward, since Europe's endemic political violence permitted the periodic reallocation of property rights.

### **How the forgoing is relevant to the Solomon Islands**

At the time of their colonisation more than a century ago, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea constituted perhaps the last pristine acephalous segmentary societies anywhere in the world, which is one reason that anthropologists have flocked to this region ever since. The existing social system was coherent and perfectly adequate for a small-scale, subsistence agricultural society, albeit one characterised by a high endemic level of violence.<sup>12</sup> The imposition of a modern state and the opening up of these societies to outside influences presented both opportunities and dangers, similar to those experienced in other parts of the developing world.

The principal danger presented by the development process itself in this kind of society, in my view, is the likelihood that the strong, stable form of social organisation represented by the *wantok* will be replaced not by modern rule-of-law institutions, but rather by new and highly dysfunctional

forms of social organisation like urban gangs and warlord armies that are present throughout Africa and Latin America. Foday Sankoh, Joseph Kony, and Charles Taylor were not traditional African leaders; they and the organisations they spawned arose out of the rubble of traditional forms of social authority in partially modernised societies. It is much easier to undermine traditional social groups than it is to create modern institutions, and the worst failed states in the contemporary world are the ones subject to this form of social collapse.

The European colonial experience in Africa is very instructive in this regard. At the moment of the scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth century, acephalous segmentary societies like those in Melanesia characterised roughly half of Africa.<sup>13</sup> The Europeans wanted to create modern states, bind citizens to those new political units as citizens, and convert customary into modern property in an effort to promote economic development. As Acemoglu and Robinson have pointed out, the colonial authorities succeeded in transferring modern institutions only to those parts of Africa where they were themselves willing to settle.<sup>14</sup> In other regions they established regimes that were either forthrightly exploitative (as in the Belgian Congo), or else they relied on a system of indirect rule to extend their authority on the cheap. They misunderstood the role of the chief in a traditional segmentary society, believing him to be the equivalent of a feudal lord in Europe who could extract capitation taxes and sign contracts alienating customary land. Mahmood Mamdani has argued that the authoritarian 'big man' politics of much of contemporary Africa was actually created by this effort of the Europeans to manipulate the traditional social system.<sup>15</sup>

This past decade has seen the Solomon Islands reach a critical inflection point. Urbanisation and migration to Guadalcanal



has created new social groups—the militias like the Malaita Eagle Force that fought each other during the tensions—that looked more ‘African’ than anything that exists in Papua New Guinea. These groups were not traditional and represent a kind of ‘ethnic’ level of identity, no longer under the close social control of the *wantoks*.<sup>16</sup> The Solomon Islands state was not strong enough to disarm these groups on its own, and the traditional social system has been struggling to re-absorb them ever since RAMSI’s intervention.

Many of the foreigners assisting Solomon Islands have argued that the *wantoks* have to be superseded if there is to be political progress. But we have to be careful what we wish for, since it is not clear that there is at present a form of modern identity to which people can cling as an alternative. The *wantok*-based social system has certain important strengths: ordinary crime, delinquency, drug use, and HIV/AIDS are to date at lower levels than in many developing countries of a comparable income level, and the state does not have to provide a social safety net. It is therefore perfectly legitimate for Solomon Islanders to see the *wantok* positively as a source of social capital.

At the same time, there are certain problems that the *wantok* is completely unable to solve. When a *wantok* goes up against a Malaysian logging company, the logging company wins: it is too easy to bribe a chief into giving away land that is not really his, and the kin group cannot organise to enforce collective decisions on land use. Similarly, commercial agriculture and other types of foreign investment are severely constrained by customary land tenure. The fact that there are multiple classes of claimants to a particular parcel of land, no strong tradition of delegated authority, and no statute of limitations with regard to customary claims, means that it is

extremely difficult both in Solomon Islands and in Papua New Guinea to come up with schemes by which landowners can pool resources to convert customary land into modern, alienable property.

It is sobering to realise that, not just in the history of Africa, but throughout the world more broadly, there are virtually no instances in which customary land was converted into modern property voluntarily, that is, without some degree of coercion or fraud. People in the developed West conveniently forget the degree to which their own institutions were shaped and made possible by violence and conflict in earlier historical periods. The strong, modern property rights systems that exist in the United States and Australia came into being only as the result of a considerable degree of coercion and deceit against indigenous holders of customary land rights.<sup>17</sup> On the Indonesian side of New Guinea, the Sukarno dictatorship followed the pattern of many post-colonial African governments and simply nationalised the land. The founders of modern Indonesia were implementing an ambitious nation-building project that involved creation of a new language and national identity, and had enough state capacity to enforce the shift in property rights. In both Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, no post-colonial government has been strong enough to contemplate something like the nationalisation of the whole of the country. The underlying constraint was the lack of a strong national idea that would legitimate such a project.

As in the case of Papua New Guinea, the existing segmentary social system is a valuable source of social control. But it is also the source of the system’s apparent corruption, and the reason why governments and political parties are unstable and fragmented. It needs to be not replaced but supplemented by modern



institutions in many areas; one of the key tasks is then to set priorities as to what is feasible and what is not.

## Political institutions in Solomon Islands

The fundamental weaknesses of the Solomons' political system are very similar to those of Papua New Guinea. Because of the strength of the *wantok* system and because of the lack of a sense of national identity, the first-past-the-post electoral system produces not a strong two-party system,<sup>18</sup> but a highly unstable mixture of weak parties and independent parliamentarians, who then negotiate the creation of coalition governments that divide the political spoils between them. During the 1990s there appeared to be a coherent distinction between former Prime Minister Mameloni and his followers, and the more reformist Ulua'afu government that was unseated by the 1999 coup. But since that time what boundaries may have existed between these groups have become blurred; any reformist champions would be individuals rather than groups or parties.<sup>19</sup>

Parliament is considering a measure, modeled on a similar law in Papua New Guinea, to strengthen parties by limiting floor-crossing and improving party discipline. Changes in formal institutional rules like this will help increase legislative coherence to some degree, but the fundamental problem lies in the lack of strong political identities above the level of the *wantok* and island.<sup>20</sup> Changing Papua New Guinea's electoral law to a limited preferential vote did little to reduce the number of independents or parties in the 2007 parliamentary election, though it is possible that some consolidation will occur in later elections as politicians game the rules. It is hard to see how national parties

will emerge without cultivation of a stronger sense of national identity. There has to be a sense of public goods shared by the Solomon Islands as a whole, whether that is natural resources, ecological or cultural patrimony, history, or the like, before parties will have an incentive to organise around national issues.<sup>21</sup>

With regard to the central bureaucracy, Solomon Islands appears to have replicated the evolution of Papua New Guinea. The British protectorate bequeathed an adequate administrative system consisting of expatriates and local officers in 1978, but as the civil service became indigenised in the 1980s and 1990s, the bureaucracy's professional standards declined. Many of the most competent administrators are today older officials who were in place at the time of independence; there is a significant capacity gap among younger officials, and a striking lack of quality mentoring that the veterans all said they received from their colonial colleagues. The public sector reform undertaken by the Ulua'afu government in the late 1990s sought to fix some of these problems; whatever one thinks of its design, it was cut short by the coup and never produced its desired effects. It reportedly suffered from many of the same problems as other public sector reforms attempted at that time, i.e., resistance to reduced headcount due to the lack of social safety net for redundant civil servants.<sup>22</sup>

One of the more successful capacity-development efforts under RAMSI appears to be the UNDP-sponsored parliamentary reform, which has provided staff for the Speaker's office as well as for individual parliamentarians. One of the reasons this was successful appears to be that the capacity support was delivered on a group rather than an individual basis. Some of our interlocutors noted that while there is a decent supply of young, educated entrants into the civil service, they confront



a dysfunctional bureaucratic culture that they have to cope with as individuals. That system eventually defeats and absorbs them. A more Mandarin-style training system in which entrants are inducted in classes rather than as individuals might provide some counterweight to this tendency.<sup>23</sup> In addition, it may be worthwhile to consider providing the resources to buy out entire layers of middle management in key ministries, since there seems to be broad agreement that their deadening hand is a source of bureaucratic dysfunction.

The most significant differences between the Solomons and Papua New Guinea lie in the quality, structure, and role of provincial government. The current system was established by the Provincial Government Act of 1981, which was re-enacted in 1997, and provides for a two-level government (in contrast to the four levels of Papua New Guinea). In the provinces, authority is split between an elected premier and provincial assembly, and officials representing the ministries in Honiara. As a 2004 Diagnostic Study indicates, the original legislation left unclear many aspects of the division of labour between the provincial governments and the representatives of the central government in the provinces: a problem compounded by a severe lack of capacity in both cases.<sup>24</sup> Many locally elected officials do not have a clear understanding of their powers and responsibilities. They see themselves as competitors rather than allies of the national members of parliament representing their districts, so there is little cooperation between politicians at the two levels.

The desire to amend the constitution to create a federal system seems to be motivated by the belief in all the provinces except Malaita that this would enable them to restrict immigration into their territories. In addition, people on the other islands seem to believe that services

would be delivered more effectively if they were under local control. It is not clear, however, that such a federal system would actually succeed in limiting movements of population, and what the net economic benefits would be either nationally or for islands/provinces of such limitations on labour mobility. Most developed countries with significantly greater state capacity still find it very difficult to control population movements. It is questionable whether a federal system makes sense for a country as small as the Solomons; the provinces have severe capacity limitations and it is not clear whether any of them are capable of taking over the central government's functions. From an administrative point of view, it makes more sense to strengthen the central government's capacity to deliver services in the provinces. Politically, however, the strong demand for local autonomy has meant that provincial governance strengthening efforts have focused on the elected assemblies.<sup>25</sup>

One of the most controversial issues in the current administrative system concerns the Rural Constituency Development (RCD) funds, by which each member of parliament (MP) is given SI\$1-2 million to distribute directly to constituents. The system is directly comparable to the District Support Grants in Papua New Guinea. Part of the motivation for the RCD funds lies in poor capacity of the formal administrative structure to deliver services on a local level; MPs find they can get resources to constituents more effectively through this channel.<sup>26</sup>

As with the DSGs in Papua New Guinea, however, these discretionary grants suffer from a number of drawbacks. There is at the moment no accountability for the way that these funds are used (although the Auditor General is planning to audit these funds in the coming year), so some proportion is likely siphoned off by MPs in



pure corruption. While many of these funds are used for public purposes, such as the building of clinics or schools, the problem is that their distribution tends to be politicized and directed towards constituents that supported the MP, rather than to the MP's district as a whole. Obviously, the MPs themselves like to have these RCD funds to help get reelected, and without other incentives for prioritizing and using the funds more transparently and across the entire constituency, this electoral motivation reigns unchecked. (On the other hand, the burden of distributing these funds to individual constituents can be quite high for parliamentarians.)

In my earlier papers on Papua New Guinea, I suggested that the Papua New Guinea government was very unlikely to give up funding DSGs, and that a more realistic strategy might be to track and publicize these expenditures more closely. In the Solomon Islands, the donor community has a great deal more leverage, at least in theory, to persuade the government to reduce these funds or at least subject most or all of them to regular audits. The fact that the RCD funds come from Taiwan, a partner who does not currently formally adhere to the international frameworks<sup>27</sup> that promote peer discipline on issues of transparency and alignment, is obviously an obstacle to this. It is at least worth trying to bring the Taiwanese into a larger donor framework that would permit greater transparency in the use of donor money.<sup>28</sup> For example, since so much of the demand for RCD funds appears to be driven by constituents' need for school fees, might it not be possible for the donors collectively to suggest a simultaneous elimination of school fees *and* reduction or elimination of RCD funds, using the latter to pay for the former? Under such a deal, Taiwan could get credit for sending children to school instead of being blamed for funding potentially corrupt

politicians. In any event, elimination of school fees would be a positive step forward in itself, regardless of whether it was linked to reduction of RCD funds.

### **Has progress been made towards resolving the underlying social conflict in the Solomons?**

The social conflict that led to the 1999 coup and civil conflict lies in the out-migration of Malaitans to other islands, and particularly to Guadalcanal. Malaitans are seen as energetic and entrepreneurial, and often willing to take jobs like working on palm oil plantations that are disdained by other island groups. Their growing numbers on Guadalcanal and disputes over property rights was the direct cause of the tensions. As in many similar conflicts in Africa, fights over resources could be exploited by leaders and converted into fights over ethnicity. So the question arises, in the five years of RAMSI's existence, has any progress been made towards resolving this underlying tension?

In a short-term sense, the answer is clearly yes. The militias responsible for the violence earlier in the decade have been disarmed and disbanded, and the formal criminal justice system has been functioning to identify and punish those responsible for serious crimes.<sup>29</sup> The traditional justice system has also been working to reconcile land claims and other compensatory justice issues, and a Truth and Reconciliation process will be undertaken next year.

On the other hand, the social conditions that led to the violence persist in ways that make it impossible to consider ending RAMSI's presence any time in the foreseeable future. Many of the Malaitans repatriated to Malaita have not been reintegrated into society there, and lack of meaningful job opportunities means that there is



continuing pressure for migration or re-migration to other islands. In any event, a very large Malaitan population remains on Guadalcanal and on other islands, and the economy of the country as a whole is dependent on their labour. There is also a significant population of jobless and disaffected young people in the settlements around Honiara.

The most troubling indicator of potential future problems lies in the police force that has been one of RAMSI's chief success stories since 2003. The militias grew in large measure out of the Solomon Islands Police (SIP), many of whom were more loyal to their ethnic group or *wantok* than to the Solomon Islands as a whole. It is not clear that any progress has been made in changing this mindset. Five years after RAMSI's intervention, there are still individual officers in the SIP who were involved in the conflict and have not yet been purged. According to the focus group discussion quoted in the 2007 *People's Survey*:

Most participants believe nepotism, wantokism and corruption remain serious problems in the local police force, and some gave examples of personal experiences of this. Most participants also believe that persisting tensions between Malaitan and Guadalcanal police officers would erupt into violent clashes as soon as RAMSI departed. Cultural pressure to look after relatives if they are arrested can lead to retribution against police officers if they try to remain impartial.<sup>30</sup>

The survey indicated that while most people believed that law and order had improved in recent years, 53 per cent of respondents believed that violence would return to the Solomon Islands if RAMSI left soon.

Many of our interlocutors argued that

the only fundamental solution to the social problem would be to promote economic development on Malaita in ways that would reduce emigration pressures and indeed attract Malaitans back to their own island. And yet, despite the apparently strong political support that exists for this in many parts of the Solomons government, very little progress has been made. There are a number of national development projects such as the creation of Bina Harbour Sea Port in West Kwaio, Malaita; Auluta Basin Palm Oil project in East Malaita; and Suava Bay seaport project in North Malaita that have been under consideration for years now. The reasons for this blockage seem to center, first, on the general inability of Solomon Islands governments to produce strong consensus over national priorities, and second, the usual problems with the acquisition of land for public purposes. Not everyone thinks that the existing development projects are well thought through, and question whether even successful development there will attract enough Malaitans home in a way that would significantly reduce social tensions on Guadalcanal. Development projects that bypass local civil society organisations like the churches that are important deliverers of social services may, in the end, do more harm than good. In any event, the end result is no action. If focusing development projects on Malaita makes sense as a long-term solution to the problem of ethnicity elsewhere, why aren't the donors leading the way on this?<sup>31</sup>

### The missing sense of nation

One of the most striking gaps in the discussions we had with Solomon Islanders was the absence of any sense of national identity on their part, around which a nation-building project could be established.



National identities do not come pre-packaged; they have to be self-consciously constructed by elites around a language, national symbols, a shared history, and the like, even if these seem quite artificial. If *wantok* and ethnic loyalties within a national institution like the police are ever to be overcome, this will only happen if police recruits are bonded to the Solomon Islands state first and their *wantok* second.<sup>32</sup>

Creating such a national identity is a long-term project. In the short run it involves developing a communications strategy to deliberately manipulate cultural symbols; in the long run it requires use of the educational system to create an elite that has a national consciousness. Something like this was once attempted in Papua New Guinea through the creation of national secondary schools that deliberately educated students away from their native areas. The governor of Papua province in Indonesia is attempting something similar through the creation of a series of boarding schools designed to educate students away from their *wantoks*. The Solomons may be too small for this kind of a scheme to work, but it is worth considering whether it would be feasible to invest at least in a high-quality national secondary school or university, located somewhere other than in Honiara.<sup>33</sup>

In the absence of a long-term, nation-building project owned and promoted by the country's political leadership, I am at a loss to understand how the country will ever overcome the divisions that led to the 1999-2003 violence. Ethnic and *wantok* loyalties will never disappear, but they can be held in check by a national elite that is loyal to a larger concept of nation. At the moment, I do not see any dynamic that would lead the country in this direction.

## RAMSI's role, now and in the future

RAMSI has a great deal to be proud of in the five years since the original intervention. As noted in the Annual Performance Report, the acute sense of insecurity coming out of the tensions has been relieved; there is a good start to rebuilding the Solomon Islands Police; macroeconomic policy has improved; and there has been a shift in emphasis from performing short-term governance tasks to building the capacity of Solomon Islanders to eventually take over governance functions.<sup>34</sup> As the report indicates, measurement and evaluation of capacity is inherently difficult to accomplish, so it is not clear at this point the extent to which Solomons Islands' institutions are capable to sustaining themselves in the absence of outside help.

Looking forward to RAMSI's next five years, there is a fundamental ambiguity at the present moment as to its future role. On the one hand, as the Annual Performance Report suggests, RAMSI is continuing to shift from stabilisation of a post-conflict situation to long-term capacity building. The roles of the **PPT** and **CFT** have changed dramatically since 2003, with the **SIP** playing a much more visible role in maintaining order. RAMSI was never designed to be a permanent occupation, but rather a stop-gap intervention that would last only as long as was necessary to restore order and create sustainable local institutions.

On the other hand, apart from politicians like former Prime Minister Sogavare, relatively few people either in RAMSI or among the Solomon Islanders themselves are willing to admit to actively thinking about an exit strategy or are able to contemplate even a rough date for termination of the mission and 'handing back' the currently shared state functions. According to the *People's*

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*Survey*, support for RAMSI's continuing presence remains extremely strong among the general public. Whatever its original designs or intentions, RAMSI is serving a functional role across many dimensions sharing responsibility with government for core functions of the sovereign state.

RAMSI is thus operating under rather fictional premises, namely that at some point the country's capacity will improve across the board to the point that RAMSI can be withdrawn. It might be more useful to think about the foreign presence in Solomon Islands in terms of a very different model than the crisis-responder' approach, which led the government to invite RAMSI to share sovereign functions, including the monopoly on the lethal use of force. In this new model, the international community commits itself to playing key governance functions on a continuing basis, and focuses immediate and sequenced capacity-building on other well-defined areas where there is a reasonable chance that the Solomon Islands government will be able to create self-sustaining institutions in some reasonable time frame. In these areas, there would be a clearly defined timetable for winding down the international presence, which would hopefully focus everyone's minds on the need to have local capacity in place by a certain date.

The reason that one might want to consider un-bundling the treatment of core state functions is not that there are strong political pressures for a wholesale exit, either on the part of the participating country publics, or across the Solomon Islanders themselves. The current sharing of responsibility for sovereign functions is largely accepted. The reason one might want to contemplate shared sovereignty is that there is a certain class of problems that can only be solved by strong, credible commitment to a set of institutional rules, which for the foreseeable future only the

international community is capable of providing. On the other hand, there are other areas where the proportionately very large international aid commitment is potentially creating dependence and moral hazard, and actually impeding the development of indigenous government institutions. The international donor community today provides upwards of 60 per cent of the Solomon Islands' national budget, which permits, among other things, the government to indulge in things like the generous funding of RCD accounts. One of the virtues of shifting explicitly to a shared sovereignty model is that it would necessitate frank discussion of where progress has and has not been made, where it is reasonable to expect progress, and where the idea that the Solomon Islands government will be able to fully 'own' a particular function is, for the moment, entirely unrealistic.

## Credible commitments

What state functions require the credible commitments that for now only international actors can provide, and which functions are better indigenised and handed off to Solomon Islanders on a relatively short timetable?

The discussion with which this paper started about the strengths and weaknesses of segmentary kinship groups might be of some use as a starting point, because it creates a framework for understanding what functions a social system like that in the Solomon Islands is and is not capable of solving. As noted above, segmentary kinship groups provide a high degree of social order at a local level; they are egalitarian, participatory, and flexible.<sup>35</sup> What they are not good at is underpinning collective action at any large scale, whether dealing with a logging company, a foreign



fishery, or even with the sorts of militias that appeared at the end of the 1990s. They can solve customary land disputes, but they are largely incapable of managing a transition to modern property rights. On the other hand, they are relatively better at dealing with issues like dispute resolution, the socialisation of young people, and dealing with social problems like drugs and HIV/AIDS. They can provide a social basis for community policing within villages and local communities, but they are not capable of underpinning a national police force, and indeed seem to guarantee that such a police force will not act in an impartial manner.

This suggests the following division of labour. There are several areas where there is a need for credible commitment to a set of institutional rules. Current efforts at capacity building have not, to my knowledge, unleashed a dynamic that will allow Solomon Islands' society to solve the commitment problem any time in the near future. These include

- the development of a national police force that can be trusted to be loyal to the Solomon Islands as such, which can be depended on to intervene impartially in any future conflict between Malaitans and Guadalcanal natives.
- the creation of a legal trustee for land that will convince customary landowners that they will reliably receive the proceeds from a modern development project, in return for their ceding of their rights on a long-term lease basis to the trustee. Customary landowners will have strong incentives to convert their land, given the right development project; the problem with many trusteeship schemes is that landowners do not believe in the trustee's credibility.
- dealing with foreign extractive industries. It is very easy for a foreign

logging or mining company to play on the internal social divisions that exist in a segmentary society to make a quick killing at the expense of the community as a whole and the collective resource endowment. The manipulation and corruption of leaders by this process extends from the top of the society to the bottom.

- related to the previous two issues, organisation of large-scale development projects that require integration of land rights, enforcement of Solomon Islands law on foreign investors, and a marshalling of financial resources. According to the RAMSI pillar heads, the real governance shortfalls are not in providing routine social services like education, health, and policing, but in the development and productive ministries.

With regard to these issues, both Solomon Islanders and international donors should ask themselves frankly whether even the most intensive and highest quality capacity-building by outsiders is likely to create indigenous governance institutions that will be capable of solving these problems in, say, the next 10-15 years. If the answer is no, then serious consideration should be given to the possibility of a shared sovereignty model in which the international community seeks ways to provide the missing credible commitment on a quasi-permanent basis at the request of the national authorities, without pretending that its fundamental mission is capacity-building.

On the other hand, there are a number of areas in which the local social system may actually work much better than modern institutions in resolving certain classes of problems. The most important is:

Arbitration, dispute resolution, and criminal justice up to a certain level of serious crime. Modern rule-of-law



systems have their own drawbacks: they are cumbersome, slow, excessively formal, and expensive, requiring staffing by highly-trained professionals. Customary justice, by contrast, is low-cost, flexible, and in line with cultural expectations. The greater part of dispute resolution does not require the credible commitment of a modern legal system.

Obviously, there is a large class of legal issues that require modern formal procedure, such as commercial law, and dealing with serious crimes or political corruption. On the other hand, the goal of state-builders here should not be to create an across-the-board modern legal system, but to offload as much as possible onto the customary dispute resolution system. Something like this has been pursued in Papua New Guinea over the past few years, with state funding for family courts that resolve disputes outside of the formal legal system. Many Solomon Islanders commented that the modern justice system is too punitive and heavy-handed compared to their customary approaches. This is a comment that should be taken seriously: in the West, we have a punitive criminal justice system because we do not have strong *wantoks* to enforce social rules on young people.

What would shared sovereignty look like in practice? First of all, the donor community would need to come up with another descriptor of its long-term relationship with the Solomon Islands, since no country relishes the idea of giving up sovereignty and the donors have no interest in retaining sovereign functions unnecessarily. Shared sovereignty could be more positively described as long-term commitments to provide assistance in certain well-defined areas, much like the Status of Forces Agreements that underpin key alliance relationships.

The first step in implementing such an arrangement would be a near-term

discussion between RAMSI, as well as the broader donor community (if there is a good framework for including donors outside RAMSI—see below), and the government over a timetable for the near-term full transfer of governmental functions to the Solomon Islands, perhaps on the model of the Transitional Result Matrix used in Timor Leste. The purpose would be to force a realistic discussion of where real capacity exists or could exist in the public sector, and where talk of ‘capacity-building’ papers over shortfalls that will persist indefinitely.

Once a timetable is in place, it is important to meet commitments in two directions—to genuinely transfer authority in the agreed-on areas without retaining hidden ‘strings’ behind the scenes, but also to commit to staying on indefinitely in the reserved functions. How might this work in practice, say, in the security sector? There are, at the moment, two parallel police forces, the SIP and the RAMSI police. The latter are better funded, trained, equipped, and are, above all, armed. The authority and effectiveness of the SIP is low and can remain that way because everyone knows that the RAMSI police will ultimately back them up if necessary. The current system thus invites plenty of moral hazard.

Under a shared sovereignty model, RAMSI would commit to retaining a serious security force on the islands indefinitely, but one that would, after a certain date, remain in cantonments and only intervene in the event of a general breakdown of order. (For an historical model, consider the shift in the role of US forces in Japan after World War II from an occupation authority to an alliance partner, a role they continue to play more than 60 years after the end of the conflict.) All other policing functions would be turned over to the SIP according to a clear timetable, along with the necessary funding, training, and equipment, *including*



*the right to bear arms.* The latter, of course, is very controversial. But it is hard to see how the SIP can be credible and effective without arms, while the danger of arming the police is considerably mitigated by the existence of a residual RAMSI security force. Knowledge that there will only be one effective police force by a certain date will then force everyone to figure out how to get that force truly prepared for its new responsibilities.

The forgoing is only one possible scenario; the way actual functions are delineated will obviously have to be the product of negotiations between RAMSI and the government. While the outsourcing of core government functions is a very sensitive issue, there are increasing numbers of examples of foreigners providing good governance in functions where countries have not been able to provide it themselves. Indonesia, for example, outsourced the collection of customs revenues to the Swiss, due to problems of endemic corruption. In Papua New Guinea, the Sustainable Development Corporation that runs the Ok Tedi mine in Western Province has a governance board that meets in Singapore and out of reach of the government in Port Moresby.

Given Australia's dominance in the region and the resistance that has provoked, international trusteeship might be an area where other development partners could play a useful role. For example, customary landowners may be more willing to trust a multilateral agency than either RAMSI or Australia acting as a long-term trustee for land in a development project.

## **Is the donor community maximising its potential leverage?**

From the first there have been a number of donors active in the Solomon Islands that are not part of RAMSI, such as the bilateral programs of RAMSI members such as Australia and New Zealand, the European Union, Taiwan, and the World Bank. As in many other developing countries, fragmentation of the international donor community weakens the potential leverage and effectiveness that aid can accomplish. On the other hand, there are certain advantages to having donors outside of RAMSI. Since RAMSI is numerically dominated by Australian expertise and for this reason has become the target of some resentment and backlash, it may be useful to have other international donors who are seen as less tied to Australia that can act as international trustees of Solomon Islands interests. This will be particularly true if there is any interest in moving towards a shared sovereignty model, but it is also important for a more robust and healthy division of labour across international partners.

The international community's role in the Solomon Islands is very different from its role in neighboring Papua New Guinea. As in the case of other post-conflict interventions in weak and failing states, the size of the international contingent and the amount of development assistance flowing into the Solomon Islands relative to the size of the country is enormous in per capita terms. Despite this large commitment, however, I was struck during my visit with the relatively small amount of leverage RAMSI—or indeed donors as a group—is able to exert over the Solomon Islands Government on a number of critical issues.

There are obviously a number of reasons



why RAMSI has wanted to tread lightly. The legitimacy of the whole operation depends on cooperation from both the government and the broader population, and under the previous prime minister RAMSI's role came under attack. Moreover, the development community has internalised the mantra concerning local 'ownership' of the development process, and is much more willing to let locals make their own mistakes rather than to intervene in high-handed ways.<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, the discussion above suggests that there are a number of collective action problems that need a solution, but which the local society is simply incapable of resolving. In these cases, local ownership will simply mean that the problems will go unresolved and development will not happen. RAMSI has not, for example, taken a stand on constitutional issues such as the impending shift to a federal system, which is fraught with all sorts of dangers. It has not pushed strongly to break Telekom's monopoly on telecommunications, or to address issues of political interference in the management of Solomons Airlines, both of which are constraints on development. Projects such as the Provincial Government Strengthening Program take as given the current structure of centre-province relations, without recommending reallocation of powers. Sometimes *only* foreigners can help societies solve internal collective action problems.

The final issue to consider, then, is whether there are ways of maximising the potential leverage that RAMSI and the broader donor community can exert. The donor community itself suffers from a collective action problem: the pressure that RAMSI exerts to counter corruption and increase budgetary discipline is offset by the untied money coming from Taiwan that flows into the RCD funds. Taiwan is pursuing legitimate national interests in

the Solomon Islands, but the net result is a weakening of donor efforts to promote good fiscal governance.

I do not have any specific recommendations as to how to approach this problem. However, particularly with the arrival of a permanent World Bank country manager, some thought might be given to the establishment of a multi-donor fund that would pool the resources of the international community and would impose a greater degree of discipline on donor initiatives.

## Conclusions

The only initiatives that could solve the underlying conflict that led to the 1999–2003 tensions in Solomons Islands, and thereby obviate the need for RAMSI, are long-term nation-building efforts to create a sense of common Solomon Islands identity. I see no one in the political class pushing for this at present. Even if such efforts were underway, the emergence of a new national elite will take many years to come about. RAMSI's ongoing capacity-building efforts address various critical shortfalls in specific technical areas.<sup>37</sup> But while the immediate social conflict from earlier in the decade has been settled fairly and reasonably effectively by RAMSI, there is no dynamic process that that will permit RAMSI to wind down at least a residual security role any time in the foreseeable future.

In thinking about RAMSI's next five years, then, international donors might consider the following:

First, are there some nation-building efforts they could support, such as the creation of national secondary schools or a university, which might foster the growth of a national elite down the road? If development on Malaita is one plausible route to easing social tensions on Guadalcanal, might it make sense to focus efforts there?



Second, in the near term, rather than pretending that RAMSI is building capacity across the board, might it not make sense to work with the Solomon Islands Government to shift to a shared sovereignty model? This would involve identification of areas in which no amount of outside investment in capacity will likely solve the underlying social problem, and a refocusing of capacity-building on areas more likely to yield success. I have suggested one way of thinking about this, but people with much deeper understanding of Melanesian society would need to weigh in.

Third, and particularly if a shared sovereignty model is feasible, then the donor community needs to think about ways of increasing its leverage to help the society make breakthroughs in areas where the Solomon Islands Government is too weak or blocked to act.

Finally, there is great need for follow-on analysis. Compared to the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea seems like a gold mine of analytical capacity, with the National Economic and Fiscal Commission, the Institute of National Affairs, and the University of Papua New Guinea able to provide indigenous expertise. RAMSI should consider commissioning research covering topics such as the design of federal and decentralised systems, the role of leadership training and secondary education in nation-building, and simple descriptive analyses of how the existing governmental system Solomon Islands actually works. It would be much better to put this research in a comparative context; for example, by looking at how discretionary funds like the RCDF are handled in Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, and other parts of the Pacific.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Technically, a lineage is usually distinguished from a descent group by its corporate character, marked by ownership of common property like an ancestral hall or burial ground.
- <sup>2</sup> Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1963). See also his book *Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951).
- <sup>3</sup> Quoted in Victor Turner, (1971:203).
- <sup>4</sup> Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges (1965).

<sup>5</sup> That is why this form of organisation is very common among societies of pastoral nomads, including the armed pastoral nomads that invaded Europe, the Middle East, and China over the centuries.

<sup>6</sup> See Paul Vinogradoff (1920).

<sup>7</sup> The problem of delegation is particularly important in matrilineal societies like those on Guadalcanal, since any one of a woman's brothers can claim to speak on her behalf with regard to land transactions.

<sup>8</sup> At later points in history, technological developments like domestication of the horse and development of the stirrup gave armed nomads advantages over settled peoples organised into states.

<sup>9</sup> The Church forbade cousin marriages, divorce, remarriage, adoption, and other strategies that kin groups used to keep property within the group, for the purpose of gaining that property for itself. See Goody (1983).

<sup>10</sup> This is the familiar argument of Charles Tilly. (1990).

<sup>11</sup> There is an extremely rich English-language literature on this subject. See Frederic W. Maitland and Frederick Pollock (1923); Frederic W. Maitland (1897), and Vinogradoff (1920).

<sup>12</sup> It is estimated that in Papua New Guinea, as many as 30 per cent of all males died from human-induced violence in the period before European colonisation. See Lawrence H. Keeley (1996).

<sup>13</sup> See A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Cyril D. Forde (1975).

<sup>14</sup> Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson (2001: 1369-401).

<sup>15</sup> Mahmood Mamdani (1996).

<sup>16</sup> The use of the term 'ethnic' in the Solomon Islands context generally refers to island-level identities like Malaitans or Guadalcanalese, though the boundary line between ethnic and *wantok* identities can sometimes be blurry. Unlike the highlanders in Papua New Guinea, these island groups were corporately organised into militias during the time of tensions.

<sup>17</sup> See Jennifer Roback, 'Exchange, Sovereignty, and Indian-Anglo Relations' in Terry L. Anderson, ed., *Property Rights and Indian*



- Economies* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991).
- <sup>18</sup> Duverger's Law states that a first-past-the-post electoral system will tend to produce two dominant parties, while a proportional representation system will produce multiple parties.
- <sup>19</sup> On this evolution, see Jon Fraenkel, *The Impact of RAMSI on the 2006 Elections in the Solomon Islands*.
- <sup>20</sup> It is important that members of parliament spend time out of Honiara with their own constituents, but it might be equally important to have them visit other parts of the Solomons besides their home constituency and Honiara to have a greater sense of the country as a whole.
- <sup>21</sup> The development of national identity in regions like Europe was heavily driven by war and political competition, forces that have been largely absent on a national level in Melanesia.
- <sup>22</sup> Overall, the record on civil service reform sponsored by external donors is not very impressive; see the report of the Internal Evaluation Group on Public Sector Reform (World Bank, 2008).
- <sup>23</sup> A 'Mandarin'-style bureaucratic system involves not just objective, exam-based entrance requirements, but training, entry, and promotion with the civil service in cohorts that develop a high degree of class camaraderie. It is in a way the civilian counterpart to a regimental system in the military.
- <sup>24</sup> John Cox and Joanne Morrison, *Solomon Islands Provincial Government Diagnostic Study*, October-November 2004.
- <sup>25</sup> See the Government of the Solomon Islands 'Provincial Governance Strengthening Program,' Honara.
- <sup>26</sup> One of the most common uses for RCD funds are to pay the school fees of constituents. Administratively, this makes no sense: the government is on the one hand collecting school fees from parents and on the other hand rebating them in an unequal and non-transparent manner. It would be much fairer to simply eliminate or reduce the school fees altogether. The reason the current system exists, however, probably lies in the fact that schools cannot rely on timely funding for critical operations and maintenance from the central government in the absence of school fees.
- <sup>26</sup> For example, OECD-DAC's *Paris Declaration on Harmonization and Alignment and Principles of Good International Engagement on Fragile States and Situations*.
- <sup>27</sup> multi-donor framework, and the other donors would have to exert pressure on the Solomon Islands Government not to switch recognition to the People's Republic of China in return. I have no idea whether this is politically possible.
- <sup>28</sup> See Russell W. Glenn (2007).
- <sup>29</sup> *People's Survey 2007*.
- <sup>30</sup> Alternatively, if more Malaitans were allowed to work in Australia or other more developed parts of the Pacific, this might become a source of skills and remittances.
- <sup>31</sup> Observers both in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea seem to think that creating a national identity is so difficult that the most that could be hoped for is the creation of larger regional identities. I do not know enough about either society to comment on this.
- <sup>32</sup> The obvious place to put such an institution would be somewhere on Malaita. In contrast to existing economic development schemes for Malaita, a public higher educational institution there would not be dependent on the vagaries of the market, but fully under the control of the national government, and easily fundable by international donors. On the other hand, there may be resistance from students from the other islands to attend a school there.
- <sup>33</sup> See John Winter and Kaye Schofield, *Annual Performance Report 2006/2007: A Report on the Performance of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands* (July 2007).
- <sup>34</sup> Within, of course, certain limits; these groups do not meet modern Western standards of gender equality, for example.
- <sup>35</sup> For a contrary view, see Edward P. Joseph, (2007).
- <sup>36</sup> Heather Baser (June 2007).