

# Solomon Islands' long summer of discontent: Security challenges

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## Rising temperatures: Conflict factors

It is the last quarter of 2023 and the Solomon Islands is unbearably hot. The road into East Guadalcanal is blocked by locals hurtling rocks at cars, particularly government-plated and Asian-driven vehicles, in protest of a regional land dispute. Key services are now unmanned due to a planned protest by public servants in Honiara objecting to delayed pay and entitlements. A volunteer midwife service pops up to deal with women who are now unable to give birth in a hospital or clinic, while teachers' attendance in schools is low and affecting the number of students able to graduate. Meanwhile, the government blames the global economic downturn for increases in opportunistic theft and the numbers of people begging for money around the main shops and markets in town. Parliament has only been in session twice in 2023, both times to approve increased entitlements for Members of Parliament (MPs) and discretionary funding. The business sector bemoans a backlog of needed reforms, unpaid government contracts, and rising taxes and duties.

A male youth is accidentally killed by a logging truck, and he is from a family that was evicted from the land that the logging company now owns. The company also runs a hotel where it is widely known prostitution and sales of illegal drugs occur, but those responsible so far have evaded arrest and prosecutions. The Prime Minister, who is closely allied with the logging company and whose son in law is on the Board, states that the 2023 election will be delayed due to the hosting of the South Pacific Games and the economic effects of COVID-19. Locals attack the logging company premises, and people who have previously hurtled rocks at cars now advance on the first foreign owned premises they can find in East Guadalcanal and loot and destroy goods. Local security guards abscond from their posts at the Asian-owned casino hotel hosting a meeting of current MPs, and soon security guards around other Asian-owned businesses follow suit, with a few forming their own groups and offering 'security' services for the highest paying businesses. The civil conflict some people call the 'second tensions' begins.

The above 2023 scenario is of course hypothetical, but each element of this scenario is based in causes of conflict in 2020. The civil conflict in Solomon Islands from 1998–2003, known as 'the tensions', was one which while small in fatalities (around 200) was great in its impacts on development. Solomon Islands is ranked 153 out of 189 countries (UNDPa 2018), according to the 2019 UNDP human development index (HDI). The conflict also had a toll for neighbouring Australia, ultimately leading the Australian Government to fund a regional security intervention for disarmament and 'restoration' of law and order at a cost of \$2.6 billion AUD (Hayward-Jones 2014).

## 2020

It is 2020 and Solomon Islands is sweating, because of the effects of the global economic downturn following COVID-19. Government responses to the pandemic, including lockdowns prior to the arrival of any case of COVID-19 in the country, budget cuts, and redirections, have contributed to the turmoil. Increased discretionary spending by Members of Parliament of government funds allocated for agriculture, health and natural disasters, are paid for by cuts across the board to ministry budgets. Working people buy less food and grow or harvest more food themselves, worrying that restricted imports and government controls on informal markets will mean that they will not be able to feed their families. Those in rural areas find themselves often hosting more people in their homes and on their land as people return due to school closures and job losses. Land tenure reforms mean that many squatters are evicted, which adds to population pressures on already overcrowded areas of the city and peri-urban areas.

While to date COVID-19 cases have been confined to quarantine, the country has operated under a State of Emergency since 25 March with severe economic repercussions. The informal marketing sector, which provides the only source of household income for more than 80 per cent of vendors (Keen & Ride 2018), suffered erratic closures at the start of the year and at the end of the year the government announces its intent to suspend Facebook, despite its prominent use by small and large businesses for sales and promotions.

With many losing formal jobs in industry and pay from civil service positions, the importance of informal incomes gained through markets or online marketing becomes even greater. A survey of 100 businesses by the Solomon Islands Chamber of Commerce and Industry in May finds 55 of them have laid off staff or are planning to lay off workers, and 34 per cent of these have to lay off more than 40 per cent of their workforce. By July, 34 per cent of survey respondents say their business situation had worsened (SICCI2020).

Essential services have also faced disruptions with schools closing for eight weeks, followed by suspensions at early childhood education centers. Nurses state they have overdue pay and unpaid entitlements (the nurses' union that raised this issue was then suspended by the government, with an official release claiming that their sit-in was illegal according to the Procession and Public Assemblies Act and provisions of the State of Emergency).

Transparency of budget spending is lower than in 2019, in part due to the unusual situation of COVID-19, increased funding to some areas under the State of Emergency (SOE), as well as the centralisation of power, and lack of government oversight. Local residents are inquiring whether the government coffers are in fact empty and the treasury is

drawing on reserves, and who actually received ‘economic stimulus package’ funding of SBD\$300 million. How much have Members of Parliament received in discretionary funding and how it has been spent? The Prime Minister’s Office meanwhile, staffed largely by political appointees (who are not subject to hiring and performance standards of public servants), manages a budget of SBD\$71 million in development expenditure for 2020, as well as stimulus package funding.

Communications are regular, with the Prime Minister making weekly or even more regular announcements, and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services providing daily social media updates on cases of COVID-19 and quarantine issues. However, confusion has also been rife at certain points. In the first lockdown on 10 April 2020, 63 people were arrested for breaching curfews imposed during the lockdown, but their cases were later thrown out because of incorrect procedures. Confusing statements were made about what time the lockdown started and stopped. Communication about the economic stimulus package also suffers from lack of clarity, with some potential applicants being told they needed to have a registered business and several documents, and others being told this was not necessary. Criticism of the government and swearing about officials on social media leads government to bring forward plans for legislation on internet use, and Cabinet to announce in November its intent to suspend Facebook.

Meanwhile, several disputes simmer between provincial governments and the national political coalition. The most populous of the provinces, Malaita, has been in disagreement with the federal government over the decision to switch diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China in September 2019, and over the Malaita Provincial Government’s call for greater autonomy in its affairs. In response, various operators affiliated with the Prime Minister’s Office and Malaitan MPs supporting the national governing coalition, have threatened to recall the Provincial Permanent Secretary; held up a donation of personal protective equipment (PPE) from Taiwanese groups; questioned the legitimacy of USAID given to Malaita for its agriculture sector; and allegedly offered bribes of SBD\$10,000 to members of the Provincial Assembly to overturn the Malaitan Premier (which was voted down 24 votes against and 9 in support).

However, it is not just Malaita Provincial Government that has called for increased autonomy. Most of the large provinces have had substantive disagreements with the national government in 2020. In September, the Western Province Premier called for government reform to recognise greater power for the provinces and threatened to take court action if the government passed a bill that takes discretion from the provinces and formally centralises power. Even Guadalcanal Province has complained about the unfair burden of national government decisions about COVID-19 including extending the emergency zone beyond the city to the province without proper consultation, and proposing the province run quarantine and COVID-19 testing centers when they have neither funding nor capacity to do so.

The rising influence of the provinces and public airing of their grievances is a trend that has taken sections of the development sector by surprise. Provincial government

staff used to complain about the lack of visits or consultations from international NGOs to their offices, whereas in 2020, it seems a photo opportunity between the Premier of Malaita or Premier of Makira and an international NGO has become a far more regular occurrence. Previous aid projects that only worked at the national level now also work directly at the provincial level.

While this might be new for some development actors, local conflict researchers have long pointed to the need for a system of sharing power between the national government and the provinces in order to prevent conflict. The Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has referred to many reports advocating a form of decentralised power and state governance and concludes that:

none of these reports has made their way to a political agenda that would satisfy the demands of the Guadalcanal leaders for state government; this is the case until now... The Guadalcanal ex-combatants highlighted this potential for future conflict time and time again during the public hearing on 11 and 12 May 2011’ (TRC 2013:57).

Guadalcanal being driven by and largely benefitting national politicians and structures was one of the motivations for violence by militants and their political supporters in the previous armed conflict.

While there are no such organised militant groups in 2020, there is an increase in the popularity of provincial governments ‘opting out’ of national government in anticipation of being more economically self-sufficient (with support from donor funded projects). Bougainville’s move towards independence and the election of its government is watched closely in Solomon Islands, with a degree of both admiration and anxiety about whether an independent Bougainville can ensure security and peace. During the Solomon Islands conflict, and in Bougainville’s own civil war, violent incidents involving Bougainvilleans in Solomon Islands occurred and the border between both countries remains quite porous, open to trade of both legal goods, such as canned fish and fresh produce, and illegal goods, including weapons during times of conflict.

The Royal Solomon Islands Police Force is stretched thin responding to crime not to mention complicated issues such as weapons smuggling or the burning down of the Civil Aviation Authority in July and the Aola police post in October. Meanwhile, violence against women and girls – the most commonly experienced form of violence in the Solomon Islands – is more likely to be ignored than prosecuted. A review of 107 women who went to the police last year found that in 60 per cent of cases, women were given no information and there was no action. Only 43 per cent of visits eventually resulted in a Police Safety Notice or court case (Ride & Soaki 2019).

The economic pressures of COVID-19 have doubled efforts by loggers and miners to extract and export natural resources. Tubi tree logs, a rare species banned from export, were again found this year and impounded; however, the company involved was merely fined and is still allowed to log and propose new mining activities. Logging companies seldom pay the applicable fees due to exemptions awarded by allies in government, others simply do not pay due to a

lack of respect for the provincial authorities, which in turn do not punish noncompliance. For instance, in Malaita in 2016, outstanding logging fees totaled SBD\$4 million with only 30 per cent of active logging companies paying their license fees (Minter et al 2016). This situation has been corrected under the current Malaita provincial government, which has reduced logging and required all operators to pay fees; however, in other provinces, practices such as not paying fees, or paying with bags of rice or other commodities rather than cash continues in 2020. Sexual abuse of young girls and women by loggers and miners is a frequent if underreported occurrence.

Meanwhile, in 2020 landowners resisting proposals to mine in Choiseul, Isabel, Western Province and Temotu have the odds stacked against them. For local landowners to take an issue to court they would have to hire a lawyer for several appearances – a process and cost beyond the capacity and financial resources of rural people, the majority of whom are subsistence farmers and fishers. The few cases where logging or mining has been resisted by landowners tend to be those with access to legal aid or overseas support. There is currently no accessible legal aid system in Solomon Islands (the current Public Solicitors Office civil division has a staff of only four). The continued presence of extractive natural resource companies with poor records on environmental and social responsibility or abiding by the law will lead to future conflicts.

In 2020, Solomon Islands is in a long summer of discontent. This summer heat will lead to spot fires of violence in 2023. In three years an election will be due, and elections and political transitions are a time for symbolic violence (Ride, 2019). The temperatures have risen in this long summer because of discontent about foreign extraction of and benefit from natural resources, housing insecurity, lack of economic opportunity for indigenous people and businesses, youth unemployment and exclusion, failure of government services to meet basic needs of education and health, corruption, growing food insecurity, land disputes, mistrust of and dissatisfaction with police, and a system of governance that centralises power within a mere 100 people or so (the governing coalition MPs and their political appointees) rather than sharing it with those representing a predominantly rural population in the provinces.

## Prospects for peace

Local actors on the ground are indeed planting and maintaining greenery that can lower the temperature in certain areas. These actors include chiefs and women leaders, who are responsible for local conflict resolution in Solomon Islands, but have varying levels of legitimacy and agency (with some local leaders respected and active, and others who serve as ‘chief’ in name only but have no capacity to solve conflict). The Royal Solomon Islands Police Force Crime Prevention Strategy builds on these local actors to form crime prevention committees that are reducing local crime in urban and rural areas. Social media and groups like Yumi Toktok Forum and Transparency International have provided forums to uncover information and discuss issues, which helps people let off steam and provides an outlet to expose cover-ups and other illicit behaviour. The provincial

government’s role as frontline actors in solving conflicts (see Phillips 2020) has become more pronounced with COVID-19, and their moves towards financial autonomy will strengthen their role in peacebuilding.

However, rain from the sky, in the form of aid from the national government and its key source of funding – donors – is also needed to cool down the conflict factors. Police reform, particularly establishing an easy-to-use complaints mechanism staffed by active and independent researchers and prosecutors that would make the force able to cleanse itself of corrupt officers, inactive officers and those with gender biases that prevent them acting on every crime, will restore public trust in police. Free legal aid and support for local communities, as a first step to introducing more social and environmental responsibility into the mining and logging sectors, is also desperately required. Increased donor funding for a range of actors – civil society, provincial government, indigenous-run businesses, youth groups, women’s groups – can help provide alternative sources of power that can both increase calls for accountability and provide new potential political candidates and coalitions to influence the next governing coalition beyond 2023. Although fatigued by many conflict issues, these ‘cooling agents’ are all around us, supporting peace in Solomon Islands while watching for signs of rain that may help them survive.

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