

Solomon Islands: A Federation That Never Was

Abstract

The Solomon Islands has struggled with issues of decentralisation and devolution ever since independence, but so far steered clear of embracing a federal constitution. Aspirations for 'state government' were complicated by the arrival of an Australian-led intervention mission over 2003-17, but a federal model also poses acute dilemmas for the country's political elite. The Solomon Islands has become a state that repeatedly disavows its unitary form of government but so far without enacting any of the many iterations of its draft federal constitution.

The Solomon Islands, situated in the south-west Pacific, has struggled with nationhood ever since the end of the British protectorate in 1978. This was one of the remotest outposts of the British empire, where the influence of colonial rule was at its most slender. It became a central battleground in the Pacific War, when American forces battled those of Japan on the island of Guadalcanal and, to the west of the Solomons, in Bougainville (Papua New Guinea [PNG]). Both Solomon Islands and PNG are among the most heterogeneous polities on the planet. Upon independence in the 1970s, both struggled with issues of local autonomy and relationships with central government. Only later, as international discourses concerning 'federalism' loomed larger, did alternative models of devolved statehood become major issues of political contestation. Neighbouring Bougainville, which obtained a devolved autonomous government 15 years ago after a decade of low intensity civil war, is scheduled to hold a referendum on independence in late 2019.

In the mid-1970s Solomon Islands, a western breakaway movement emerged on the island of New Georgia. On the island of Guadalcanal, pressure for 'state government' also arose around the time of independence. Yet the 1978 independence constitution did not meet contemporary demands for 'effective and full devolution'. A provincial government system was introduced in 1981, but without clear revenue sharing provisions. Demands for greater provincial autonomy during a constitutional review in 1987 also fell on deaf ears. At celebrations marking the tenth anniversary of independence in 1988, there was little enthusiasm among those from Guadalcanal or the Western province or from Anuta and Tikopia in the country's extreme east. Famously described by three-time Prime Minister Solomon Mamaloni as a 'nation conceived but never born', the Solomon Islands has become a state that repeatedly disavows its unitary form of government but so far without enacting any of the many iterations of its draft federal constitution.

The Solomon Islands comprises a double chain of high volcanic Islands to the north of Australia and to the east of Papua New Guinea, with numerous small outlying islands, including the Temotu group far to the east and close to Vanuatu. Its population is around 622,700 (2019). The country is highly linguistically diverse, with around 74 distinct languages. Declared a British protectorate in 1893, the group fell under a threadbare administration run by the Western Pacific High Commission based in Fiji. When the British departed, they left in place a 1978 constitution – ratified as an 'independence order' signed at Buckingham Palace – that remains in force to this day. This provided for a parliamentary system in the Westminster tradition, with a Governor-General representing the British Queen. The central state remains a remote and weak presence in most parts of the country. In the rural areas, most people engage in subsistence agriculture with minimal provision of social services. With the exception of the capital, Honiara (Guadalcanal), and the more sizable towns of Auki (Malaita) and Gizo (Western province), the remainder of the nine provincial capitals consist of little more than a small cluster of administrative buildings and a nearby grass-covered domestic airfield.

In late 1998, an uprising on the island of Guadalcanal centrally figured 'state government' among its demands, though at this point the term 'federalism' was rarely used. Militants mostly from the remote 'Weather Coast' (Southern Guadalcanal), calling themselves the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), chased around 25,000 settlers away from the flat and fertile areas of northern and western Guadalcanal. Most of those displaced were from the island of Malaita, and they either relocated to the capital, Honiara, or else travelled back to their home island of Malaita. In January 2000, a rival militia group, the Malaita Eagle Forces (MEF) emerged to combat the Guadalcanal militias and to put pressure on the government to grant compensation to displaced Malaitans. In June 2000, the MEF collaborated with the also predominantly Malaitan paramilitary wing of the police force to overthrow the elected government of Bartholomew Ulufa'alu. Fighting between the IFM and MEF ensued on the outskirts of Honiara, triggering concerted Australian pressure for a peace settlement. In Australia in October 2000, the warring militia groups settled on the Townsville Peace Agreement which committed both sides to disarm, offered an amnesty to the IFM and MEF militants, and promised 'more autonomy by devolution or constitutional amendment to effect self-governing status'.

The Townsville Peace Agreement did not end the conflict on Guadalcanal. Nor did it conclude a linked conflict in the Solomon Islands' Western Province that had brought fighters from both sides of neighbouring Bougainville's civil war into the country. One faction of the Isatabu guerrillas signed up to the peace deal, while the other did not. Those that had made peace then joined bloody police operations against their former compatriots in arms on the Weather Coast. In Honiara, the MEF militias also held onto their weapons, claiming to be defending the city from the threat of IFM attack. Seeing no likely home-grown resolution in sight, Australian and New Zealand troops arrived in July 2003 commencing a 14-year military, policing and civilian reconstruction operation known as the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

RAMSI's arrival complicated efforts to implement the autonomy provisions of the Townsville Peace Agreement. The mission was largely financed by Australia, but Canberra was wary of the cost implications of establishing new federal structures. The 1998-2003 conflict had halted most formal sector economic activity, including the Gold Ridge mine and the palm oil plantation and mill on northern Guadalcanal. GDP *per capita* fell by around a third, leaving Solomon Islands as a yet more aid dependent state. Australian authorities feared that any new provincial-level governments would have insufficient revenue for anything but a poorly resourced administration. On the other hand, as a unitary state the Solomon Islands had major problems of accountability. Around 50% of MPs lost their seats at each election, testifying to their weak authority at the local-level. Many believed, rightly or wrongly, that by drawing government closer to the people, administration would become more effective and corruption lessened. Unlike neighbouring PNG, Solomon Islands has never had the opportunity to draw up its own constitution. Insofar as there was one fundamental norm (*grundnorm*) that reflected Solomon Islanders' preferences about what such a constitution might contain, it was the aspiration for 'state government'.

In the new millennium, as foreign constitutional ideas began to circulate more widely, the call for 'state government' would increasingly be restyled as a demand for a 'federal' constitution. A draft federal constitution was drawn up in 2004, with assistance from the United Nations Development Programme, but this encountered resistance from RAMSI primarily on cost grounds. A further draft appeared in 2009, but consultations continued without resolution. The Constitutional Reform Unit within the Prime Minister's office was to become a permanent fixture, with deliberations that dragged on and on without ever reaching any firm conclusion. Another iteration surfaced in 2011, and yet another in 2014, which was reviewed by eminent constitutional scholar Professor Yash Ghai, who had also been an advisor during the pre-independence constitutional deliberations. Presently, a fifth version of the draft federal constitution is under discussion.

All these various drafts of the federal constitution raise some acute dilemmas for the Solomon Islands. The call for 'state government' has largely been driven by an assumption that richer provinces are subsidizing poorer provinces as well as that national government captures most of the income from foreign-controlled forestry, mining or fishing ventures. There is some truth in this. The 1990 Mining Act gives government ownership of 'all minerals of every description in or under all lands of whatsoever ownership or tenure'. Central government secures the income from fishing license fees, and most log revenues – critical for government finances – are obtained from Honiara-based customs and excise authorities. To an even greater extent than in neighbouring PNG, the provincial governments are cash-starved entities. As in PNG, the advent and growth of sizable constituency funds controlled by MPs in the national parliament (called Rural Constituency Development Funds or RCDFs in Solomon Islands) has further weakened the local-level authority of the provincial governments.

There are risks associated with a federal revenue-sharing model that localizes control over fiscal and regulatory instruments. Devolving central control over logging and mining operations can play into the hands of unscrupulous resource extraction companies and diminish the country's ability to capture appropriate revenues (in any case a major problem even at the central government level). Another risk is that the poorer outlying provinces, such as Temotu or Rennell and Bellona, may be further impoverished under a federal constitution. It is no accident that the relatively resource-rich Guadalcanal and Western provinces have been at the forefront of pressures for 'state government'. Nevertheless, occasional threats of a breakaway –

even by some of the more remote outlying provinces – have never materialized into formal declarations of independence, suggesting that criticism of central government rule is often at least in part a bargaining chip aimed at rebalancing power between Honiara and the country's scattered periphery.

The other major concerns are labour migration and inter-island settlement, and the potential implications of controls on freedom of movement. In the early decades of British rule, foreign controlled plantations brought Solomon Islanders from resource-poor areas (particularly from northern Malaita and the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal) to work richer soils in other parts of the group. Those from Malaita have been the most likely to travel for work, as was the case even in the late 19th century when many voyaged to work on plantations in Queensland (Australia) or Fiji. That propensity for migration, particularly from the densely populated areas of north and central Malaita, continued thereafter. Urban drift from Malaita has been particularly acute. Honiara, the country's capital, is at least 70% inhabited by people of Malaitan descent. In most constitutional models, Honiara has been envisaged as a separate federal district.

Before the 1999-2000 political crisis, the country's relatively small formal sector outside Honiara had a predominantly Malaitan workforce. Most of the workers in the Solomon Islands Plantations Ltd palm oil operations on northern Guadalcanal were Malaitan. So too were the bulk of those employed at the Gold Ridge mine in central Guadalcanal and at the Noro fish cannery in the Western Province. Nearly all of these settlers were chased out during the 1999-2000 crisis. The various companies that have since resumed operations in these areas have tacit agreements with local communities that they will not employ Malaitan labour. For example, despite being less than an hour's drive east of Honiara, the rehabilitated palm oil operation on northern Guadalcanal, now called the Guadalcanal Plains Palm Oil Ltd (GPPOL), cannot send trucks to recruit urban Malaitan workers even to serve as casual daily-rate loose fruit pickers on its plantations for fear of local reprisals. A similar unwritten rule regarding the non-employment of Malaitan labour prevailed at the Gold Ridge mine, after it recommenced production in 2010 until its closure in 2014.

The risk is, then, that with a federal constitution the first act of any new state governments on Guadalcanal and in the West might be to formalize restrictions on migrant labour from Malaita. Parliamentary discussion about the various iterations of the draft federal constitution therefore occasions considerable Malaitan disquiet, though this is often mixed with expressions of hope for greater development on Malaita itself. That potential risk has rarely triggered open conflict between Malaitan and non-Malaitan politicians, despite the fact that the post-colonial history of the Solomon Islands has frequently been shaped by fears of a concentration of power in Malaitan hands. This helps to explain why, despite close to 20 years of deliberations, the federal proposal has never been put to a parliamentary vote. Conflict avoidance in Solomon Islands has so far entailed repeatedly promising further deliberations and more consultation, and putting a final decision on any federal constitution on the back burner.

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