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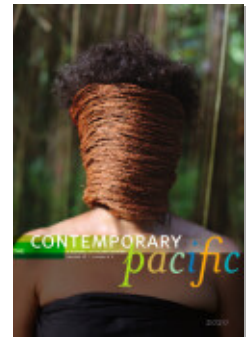
## Solomon Islands

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## SOLOMON ISLANDS

This has been a year of twisting tales in Solomon Islands’ political landscape. The country held its national general elections on 3 April. This was a significant election because it was the first under the new 2018 Electoral Act and the first since the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) concluded in 2017 (Wyeth 2019). But in a total of fifty constituencies, of the 48 incumbents who re-contested their seats, only 13 were unsuccessful. One explanation for this was the amount of constituency development funds that the incumbent MPs had access to prior to polling day (Baker 2019). There were allegations of cross-border registrations and vote buying that influenced the election results (Hawkins 2020; see also Batley and others 2019). Consequently, 28 out of the 50 MPs who won their seats had petitions filed against them in the High Court (RNZ 2019a).

The process of government formation after the April election was an interesting flashpoint. From the 50 elected MPs, 8 represented the Solomon Islands Democratic Party, another 8 represented the Solomon Islands Kadere Party, 21 were independents, and the remaining 13 belonged to other minority parties (Gray 2019).

Manasseh Sogavare, in a shrewd move to set himself up for the position of prime minister (PM), relaunched the Ownership, Unity, and Responsibility Party (OUR Party) a week after the election. Part of this move involved rallying the independent MPs to join OUR Party as lobbying for forming a coalition government intensified between two political camps, the Grand Coalition and the Democratic Coalition Government for Advancement (RNZ 2019b). The Grand Coalition's candidate was Matthew Wale, and the Democratic Coalition's candidate was Sogavare. Sogavare was elected as prime minister with thirty-four votes.

The process of electing Sogavare as prime minister resulted in a court challenge by Wale, who claimed that the postelection formation of OUR Party and Sogavare's nomination as a candidate for the prime minister post were inconsistent with the Political Parties Act 2014. He applied for a High Court injunction to stop the election, which was scheduled for 24 April, until the court gave a judgment on 26 April (Fraenkel 2019). However, the governor general, who received the court order just before he was scheduled to conduct the election, ruled that the election would proceed, basing his decision on the country's constitution. Members of the Grand Coalition boycotted the election by walking out of Parliament, and Wale, on behalf of the Grand Coalition, filed a judicial review application challenging the governor-general's decision (*Solomon Times* 2019b).

Section 83(1) of the Solomon Islands Constitution provides that, "Subject to . . . paragraph 10 of

Schedule 2 (dealing with dispute relating to calling or conduct of PM election) to this Constitution, if a person alleges any provision of the Constitution has been contravened or his/her interest has been affected by such contravention . . . that person may apply to the High Court for a declaration." Paragraph 10 of Schedule 2 stipulates that the governor-general has the power to determine a dispute concerning the election of the prime minister and that his or her determination is final and conclusive. Paragraph 11 of Schedule 2 further states that the governor-general's function conferred by the Schedule "shall be exercised by him in his own deliberate judgment." In its deliberation of Wale's judicial review application, the High Court discussed these constitutional provisions and held that the governor acted lawfully when he decided to "proceed with the election of the PM" (High Court of Solomon Islands 2019).

The disputes over the election of Sogavare as prime minister triggered the eruption of violent protests in parts of Honiara. Outside Parliament, angry protesters condemned the election result and demanded that Sogavare step down (*The Economist* 2019). When their demand was not acknowledged and the police attempted to dismiss them, the protesters marched to Honiara's Chinatown and the suburb of Kukum. In Chinatown, they shouted slogans and smashed up property just like they had done in 2006 (Dziedzic and Wasuka 2019). When the police, equipped with riot gear, "barred access to Chinatown and dispersed the crowds" (Dziedzic and Wasuka 2019), the protesters moved to Kukum and attacked

the Honiara Pacific Casino, destroying windows, computers, and other property. They continued rioting in the eastern part of Honiara on the nights of 24 and 25 April, targeting mainly “shops and businesses in and around the Burns Creek squatter settlement” (*The Economist* 2019).

A number of police officers were reportedly injured in the protests as they tried to disperse the angry protestors and make arrests. Some of those involved in the protests wanted someone new to be prime minister. They wanted change in leadership. Others took advantage of the situation by engaging in looting and damaging property, singling out businesses that appeared to support Sogavare. The ramification of the protests did not deter Sogavare from moving on to establish his Democratic Coalition Government for Advancement (DCGA). A 100 Days Policy Framework representing “the collective priorities of the four coalition Parties that form the DCGA” was drawn up and launched in May (*Solomon Times* 2019a). Some of the DCGA’s key priorities include tax reform, “implementation of the Anti-Corruption Bill, . . . implementation of the 2023 Pacific Games Act, . . . and [to] progress major national projects, including Tina Hydro, Under Sea Cable Project, Honiara and Munda International Airport Project, and Kukum Highway Road Project” (*Solomon Times* 2019a). Mention of the key priorities policy framework made the DCGA look good, at least on paper, but there were ongoing issues around implementation due to limited governance resources.

One interesting aspect of the DCGA policy framework was the review of

the diplomatic relationship with Taiwan and a possible switch to China. No MP talked about the Taiwan-China diplomatic question during his or her campaign, and no political party except the Democratic Alliance Party had as its policy the review of diplomatic ties with Taiwan. However, the DCGA considered this question crucial to its political establishment. In June, it set up a nine-member bipartisan task force to investigate the question and then provide a report. Members included seven MPs (three from government, three opposition, and one independent) and two secretariat staff from the Office of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet (Zhang 2019). The task force visited Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, China, and Taiwan. It recommended that Solomon Islands switch to China “no later than the celebration of the PRC’s [People’s Republic of China’s] 70th anniversary on October 1, 2019” (Zhang 2019).

According to Prime Minister Sogavare, the government would consider four reports before deciding whether to remain with Taiwan or switch to China. However, the Cabinet and caucus received and deliberated on only two, one being the bipartisan task force report. Although the report’s content was questionable, the Cabinet used it as the basis for casting a vote on 16 September to sever “diplomatic ties with Taipei for Beijing” (Zheng and Chung 2019). Taiwan terminated its “36 years of formal relations with the Solomon Islands with immediate effect” as a result (Zheng and Chung 2019). Prime Minister Sogavare and DCGA supporters justified the Cabinet’s move

to sever ties as a collective decision, one that was in the best interest of the country (Zhang 2019).

Six DCGA MPs, including Deputy Prime Minister John Maneniaru, abstained from voting. Five of these ministers were terminated for abstaining, and Minister for Police Lanelle Tanagada decided to resign (Wasuka 2019). Rick Hou and Maneniaru, two of the sacked ministers, came out in the media explaining what had happened in the caucus. Their media statements revealed that there was pressure from the prime minister on government MPs to vote according to a predetermined desire to switch to China (see Hawkins 2019). Prime Minister Sogavare discredited the statements as political rhetoric aimed at provoking political instability and creating division within DCGA (SIBC 2019a).

The decision to switch to China created friction within the DCGA, as some MPs were pro-Taiwan while the rest were pro-China (Manebona 2019). The pro-China MPs and supporters envisaged that Solomon Islands would benefit immensely from diplomatic relations with China. As Prime Minister Sogavare highlighted: “We believe that by establishing diplomatic tie[s] with PRC [we] can assist the country [to] achieve some of its development aspirations” (Zhang 2019). In early October, after the DCGA’s decision, Prime Minister Sogavare and a government delegation visited China, where they “received a warm welcome in Beijing” (Cavanough 2019). When they returned to the Solomons, they spoke highly of China and the benefits that the new diplomatic relationship would create

(RNZ 2019d). This positive pronouncement by the DCGA was made after they had “signed five memoranda of understanding, including an agreement for China’s Belt and Road Initiative and having secured a promise from China to build a multi-million dollar stadium in the country” (Cavanough 2019).

Hou claimed that OUR Party hijacked the Democratic Alliance Party’s foreign policy on reviewing diplomatic ties with Taiwan in order to pursue its political agenda (*Solomon Star* 2019). OUR Party consolidated its power base to remain firm on the decision by luring in MPs from other parties. Such political hopping suggests that party loyalty in Solomon Islands remains a challenge despite the newly enacted Political Parties Integrity Act 2014. Though intended to strengthen the governance of political parties and regulate party hopping, the law was rushed and poorly drafted and, as a result, in effect weakened rather than strengthened political parties (Fraenkel 2019). The DCGA has indicated that one of its policy priorities is to “review and amend the Electoral Act and Political Party Integrity Act” (*Solomon Times* 2019a). This suggests that the DCGA recognizes some of the gaps in the Electoral Act and Political Party Integrity Act and will do something about it. Whether the DCGA will accomplish reforming these laws during its term in office depends on political will and availability of resources.

In September, a few Chinese companies started mobilizing to set up in Solomon Islands. For example, “on 5 September, Gold Ridge Mining Limited, Wanguo International Mining

Group Limited (Guarantor) and China Railway Group Limited of China (contractor) entered into a Construction and Mining Contract in respect of the Gold Ridge Project” (WIMGL 2019). Under the agreement, the contractor would “build and control power and port facilities, roads, rail and bridges [on Guadalcanal], as part of an us\$825 million deal to revive” Gold Ridge mine (ABC News 2019). According to Chinese ambassador Xue Bing, this deal was “an ‘early harvest’ of the new diplomatic tie-up between Beijing and Honiara, and gives Chinese interests an increased foothold in the Pacific, long under the influence of the United States and its allies” (ABC News 2019). Some locals expressed that such a deal would create a debt trap. However, it was revealed during an opening ceremony at the Gold Ridge mine site that Solomon Islands would not pay for the project infrastructure (ABC News 2019).

If there are no effective safeguards and enforcement measures in place, the environmental impacts of the mining project will be devastating. The environmental disaster in relation to the bauxite mine in Mugaba/Rennell and Mungiki/Bellona (Renbel) Province is a case in point. The “bauxite mine is owned by Chinese logger APID Ltd, which had contracted Hong Kong-based company Bintan Mining, to carry out the operation” (Kaukui 2019b). The media published written text messages between the prime minister and a Bintan mining official in November 2016, just before the government granted a 100 percent tax exemption on bauxite exports (Kafo 2017). While the decision was controversial because it raised concerns that

the mining company was colluding with the prime minister and government officials, this was never challenged. The bauxite mining operations “have gouged red gashes in the coastline and left gaping holes in the forest” (Williams 2019). In January 2019, the *MV Solomon Trader* was loading bauxite from the mine in Rennell when it was pushed “aground on a coral reef in the early hours of 5 February, in the lead-up to Cyclone Oma” (Martin 2019). There was spillage of “hundreds of tons of heavy fuel oil from the cargo ship” (Williams 2019).

The oil leakage was “staining the white-sand beaches and imperiling a delicate marine ecosystem” (Williams 2019). According to officials, it “had spread along more than three miles of coastline . . . [and] was approaching the World Heritage site, called East Rennell, which includes the largest lake in the insular Pacific and many endemic land and marine species” (Williams 2019). Due to growing public and international pressure, which raised questions of liability “the parties involved eventually brought in cleanup equipment and teams. The Australian Maritime Safety Authority was asked to lead the effort to sweep up the oil out at sea, and a salvage company, Resolve Marine Group, has led cleanup efforts onshore” (Williams 2019). No one was held responsible for the environmental disaster in Rennell. Apparently, the oversight mechanisms and enforcement of environmental law provisions remained a challenge in 2019.

Another Chinese company that showed interest in setting up in Solomon Islands was the China Sam Enterprise Group. On 22 September,

around the time Solomon Islands decided to switch to China, the company signed an agreement with the premier of Central Province to lease Tulagi Island for seventy-five years (see Barrett 2019). This came as a surprise to the people of Central Province and other Solomon Islanders. The general public was unaware of this deal until the signed documents were exposed in local and international media. The media also reported Attorney General John Muria Jr's statement that his office had not been given the opportunity to examine the agreement before it was signed. Therefore, it was "unlawful, unenforceable and must be terminated with immediate effect" (Barrett 2019). Prime Minister Sogavare denied having any connection with the SAM Group and claimed that he had only met with them briefly during his visit to Beijing in October. However, the China Sam Group revealed on its website that the "business delegation of Sam Group accompanied the prime minister's delegation for the whole trip" (CSEG 2019a). There was also evidence showing that in August DCGA ministers "visited the headquarter of China Sam Enterprise Group and hoped to carry out comprehensive cooperation in energy, chemical industry, investment, trade and other fields in addition to existing cooperation" (CSEG 2019b). This evidence suggests that government officials and Chinese investors were colluding to promote corporate deals. Whether such interaction was for the advancement of national interest or just for self-interest remains debatable.

Malaita, the province with the highest population compared to the rest of country, decided not to support the

DCGA's decision to switch to China. Groups in Malaita expressed a desire for self-determination because of the perception that the government had failed to consult the people (Foukona and Smith 2019). The Malaita province premier invited Malaitan MPs from both the opposition and the national government to meet with the Malaita provincial leaders to discuss issues concerning the change of diplomatic ties (Kaukui and Saeni 2019; Puia 2019). Only five MPs from the opposition, which included Hou and Maneniaru, attended the meeting in Auki. After the meeting, on 17 October, the Malaita provincial government, with the approval of the Malaita Provincial Assembly, issued the Auki Communiqué (Saeni 2019b). The communiqué outlines challenges and processes for addressing development issues in Malaita. It "lists freedom of religion and 'therefore [Malaita] rejects the Chinese Communist Party and its formal systems based on atheist ideology'" (Foukona and Smith 2019).

A delegation consisting of Malaita MPs in the DCGA, which included the deputy prime minister, traveled to Auki in early November to talk about the new China–Solomon Islands diplomatic relationship. The delegation met with the Malaita Provincial Assembly, chiefs, and church leaders, and the audience with these groups was polite. However, when the delegation held a public forum, they were met with hostility (Saeni 2019a). The "crowd was unwilling to listen to the delegation, which irritated MPs and presenters" (RNZ 2019c).

During the meetings in Auki, the



deputy prime minister revealed that “development at Bina Harbor and the construction of a new hospital in Malaita were likely to go ahead. The United States had offered to support the harbor development while Japan has offered to build the hospital” (RNZ 2019c). He also pledged that the Malaitan MPs in the DCGA would work together with Malaita Province for its development (Waikori 2019; see also Eremae 2019). The minister of finance made similar statements when he highlighted that “Bina Harbour project and other key projects in Malaita are also included in the budget as key priority national projects for the country” (Kaukui 2019a).

The deputy prime minister stated that the government respects the Auki Communiqué, which rejects the Chinese Communist Party and “affirms that Malaita Province would not avail itself to any support from the People’s Republic of China” (*Sunday Isles* 2019). As a result, the government decided in early December not to release rural constituency development funds (RCDF) to five MPs who had attended the Auki meeting and were present when the Auki Communiqué was signed. The deputy prime minister explained that this was done in due respect of their support for the communiqué, as the funds in question, formerly provided by Taiwan, were now provided by the People’s Republic of China (*Sunday Isles* 2019). The leader of the independent MPs called on the DCGA to rescind its decision and allow the five MPs to receive the funds, as they are “part and partial [*sic*] of the 2019 Appropriation Act 2018” (SIBC 2019b). Interestingly, the government’s action seems to indicate

a strategy of punishing MPs who did not support the government’s move to switch diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China.

The Solomon Islands National Parliament had its second and final meeting in December. Four significant things happened in this meeting. First, Governor-General His Excellency Sir David Vunagi, who had been elected in May, opened the meeting (NPSI 2019). Second, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales “graced Parliament with his presence and made an address to the house” (NPSI 2019). Third, Parliament passed a budget of SI\$3.8 billion (about US\$458 million) for the 2020 fiscal year. Finally, the debate on the motion of *sine die* provided an opportunity for MPs to discuss and raise questions about Solomon Islands’ diplomatic switch from Taiwan to China. There were both positive and anti-China issues raised during the debate that were driven by perceptions that China would fulfil Solomon Islands’ development needs as well as pro-democracy sentiments. It appears the China narrative will continue to influence Solomon Islands’ political landscape at all levels as 2019 comes to an end and the country moves into 2020.

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## TIMOR-LESTE

On 30 August 2019, Timor-Leste hosted a major celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the 1999 popular consultation that saw it secure its independence from Indonesia. This significant date was also chosen for the exchange of notes between the East Timorese and Australian prime ministers, bringing the 2018 Australia–Timor-Leste maritime boundary treaty into effect. Meanwhile, Timor-Leste’s first experience of semi-presidential “cohabitation” saw the political impasse over the president’s refusal to appoint ministers continue throughout the year.

The year 2018 had ended with a presidential veto of changes to the Law on Petroleum Activities, which was designed to lift the legislated 20 percent limit on state ownership and allow the East Timorese government to become a major joint venture partner. President “Lu Olo” Guterres—a senior figure of the opposition Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN) party—expressed concerns over the financial sustainability of the nation’s now US\$17.7 billion petroleum fund (La’o Hamutuk 2020b). For their part, some local nongovernmental organizations argued that changes to the law were actually aimed at preventing Timor-Leste’s Audit Court from reviewing large contracts—an accusation the government denied (La’o Hamutuk

2018). Parliament successfully reversed the presidential veto on 10 January 2019, as the FRETILIN opposition staged a parliamentary walkout, allowing the government a rare opportunity to assemble the two-thirds supermajority required to reverse the veto.

President Guterres then vetoed the 2019 budget on 23 January, arguing that it was gravely unsustainable and drew too heavily on the principal reserves of Timor-Leste’s sovereign wealth fund. This action placed the Greater Sunrise joint-venture payment in jeopardy, as the FRETILIN opposition has twenty-three seats—enough in normal circumstances to deny the government a parliamentary reversal of the veto. However, this tension was soon resolved on 31 January, when Parliament revised the 2019 budget to US\$1.4 billion by removing the US\$650 million joint-venture payment. The government was confident it could use the petroleum fund itself as the source of the payment, having altered the fund’s investment rules in the Law of Petroleum Activities amendments. Though opposition members of Parliament referred the legislation to the Court of Appeal, the changes were soon found to be constitutional, and the US\$650 million was paid to Conoco Philips and Shell on 16 April (La’o Hamutuk 2018–2020), making the government of Timor-Leste a 56 percent stakeholder in the Greater Sunrise joint venture.

The revised 2019 budget was promulgated by the president on 7 February 2019, to the relief of business groups concerned about the economic impact of a possible return