

RAMSI going nowhere

The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) has achieved much in helping the people of that country recover from the chaos of governmental collapse in the early 2000s. RAMSI has also made great headway in helping the Solomons Public Service restore proper public administration and accountability at the official level.

RAMSI is now struggling to assist the government of Solomon Islands because the dubiously-elected government itself is patently the problem. RAMSI is also clearly struggling in its efforts to continue helping the ordinary citizens of that beleaguered nation because of ministerial-level obstruction. In these circumstances, although it is a regional mission, RAMSI is becoming more and more an expensive – for Australia – window dressing exercise that sustains a corrupt and incompetent government in power. Increasingly, that government is trying to neuter RAMSI and, under the doctrine of national sovereignty, it holds all the cards.

It is useless for the Australian prime-minister and foreign minister to rail against the corrupt actions of senior Solomon Island ministers. As sponsors of RAMSI they have us over a barrel.

Prime-Minister Howard has expressed concern about the potential for China and Taiwan to move in if RAMSI were withdrawn. In fact, the agents of both have been involved for some years and, so long as they maintain their rivalry, neither is likely to dominate. The China-Taiwan excuse sounds too much like a rationalisation for maintaining a failing program whose good intentions are being foiled by corrupt and criminally self-interested Solomon Islands politicians.

There are only two options open to the South Pacific Forum (SPF) – other than more of the same. One is to intervene and forcibly dismiss the whole Solomon Islands government and parliament before organising new elections, perhaps involving a ban on corrupt politicians standing for re-election. Such a move would be unprecedented in the South Pacific although sound precedents exist in other regions, such as the Caribbean and East and West Africa, where Commonwealth countries predominate in the regional grouping. Such a step can be authorised under Chapter 8 of the UN Charter but requires the endorsement of the UN Security Council. This is difficult to achieve before the problem becomes significant enough to affect international peace and security in a serious manner. The difficulty here is waiting for the situation in Solomon Islands to deteriorate to this level, and the suffering this would inevitably cause ordinary Solomon Islanders. Although legally correct such a delay, and the hurt it would cause, would be morally difficult to justify.

In any event, the SPF is most unlikely, certainly at this stage, to entertain even discussing the option of an eventual UN-endorsed regional intervention of this nature. For one thing, the time and effort needed for any consensus to be reached would be substantial. There would be determined resistance by the corrupt and/or incompetent governments of Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu in particular because they have much reason to fear the precedent. Many Fijians on both sides of the political and constitutional divide in that country would also be uncomfortable (although many might also be comforted).

The other option is shock therapy to force urgent political reform in Solomon Islands. This would mean withdrawing RAMSI in toto and cancelling all aid programs forthwith. Australia and New Zealand would have to agree on this as the chief donors and resolutely lead discussions in the Forum accordingly. Assistance programs could be reinstated if the Solomon Islands were to produce a government that will accept genuine reform on terms agreed with RAMSI's sponsors.

Solomon Islands would have to stew in the juice of its own making – or at least the making of its self-serving political class. It would be bitter medicine for the ordinary Solomon Islander but sometimes bitter medicine is the only cure. Hopefully, such a course of treatment would be short when the ordinary citizens witness the departure of the only organisation that has, in recent years, given them hope of a decent future.

There is one other option but it is not one that the SPF could ever formally endorse although many members might acquiesce behind the scenes. It would also be the option of absolute last resort. Australia and New Zealand could unilaterally or bilaterally resort to deniable covert action. The aim would be to encourage uncorrupted leading citizens of Solomons Islands to break the recurring logjam in their political system, in a constitutional manner if at all possible but not necessarily if the situation becomes grave enough. Such a step might entail considerable expense in the short term but is likely to save much money, time, effort and, quite frankly, human life, in the long run. ♦



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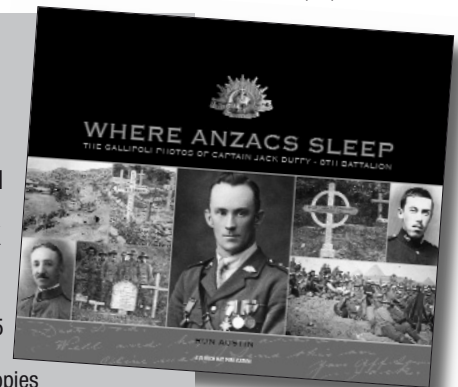
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(Ron & Sue Austin) email. slouchat@surf.net.au (03) 5986 6437

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