

## CHAPTER 1

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# Political Background

## Political System

Solomon Islands gained constitutional independence from the United Kingdom on 7 July 1978 and adopted the Westminster system of government. It recognises HM Queen Elizabeth II as its Head of State and is represented by a Governor-General, currently the Reverend Sir John Ini Lapli. Following independence, Solomon Islands joined the Commonwealth.

The unicameral National Parliament comprises 50 Members, elected under a 'first-past-the-post' voting system. The Prime Minister is elected for a four-year term by a simple majority of Members of Parliament. In addition to the National Government, there are 10 Provincial Assemblies, including Honiara City Council.

## Recent Political Developments

Following the forced resignation of Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu in June 2000, after the armed takeover of the capital by elements supporting the opposition, Manasseh Sogavare, who had been opposition leader, was elected Prime Minister at a sitting of Parliament on 30 June 2000. Six Members of Parliament had been prevented from attending the session of Parliament at which the Prime Minister was elected. This was allegedly due to intimidation by the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF).

As ethnic tensions between warring factions of the two militant groups – the MEF and the Guadalcanal Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) – continued, many attempts by the Commonwealth and other nations were made to broker a series of peace talks aimed at stabilising the deteriorating economic and security situation in the country.

This has, however, failed to stem continuing violence which the police have been unable to curb. The establishment of a Peace Monitoring Council (PMC) and International Peace Monitoring Team has thus far ensured an uneasy peace and Solomon Islanders are hoping that the election of a stable government will bring peace and development to the country.

The Prime Minister's attempt earlier this year to extend the life of Parliament from four years to five met with vigorous protests from civil society and the international community, as this would have led to the postponement of the national elections. He was therefore forced to withdraw the Bill to extend the life of Parliament and agreed to hold elections as required within the time-frame stipulated under the Constitution.

## Economic Development

Economic development in Solomon Islands has been seriously affected as a result of continuing 'ethnic tension'. Most export industries have ceased to

operate, export earnings have dropped and government revenue has collapsed. The granting of illegal *ad hoc* duty remissions has further reduced customs revenue and Government has been unable to meet its debt repayments as well as being unable to pay salaries to the civil service and police. This has been exacerbated by continuous demands for financial compensation from different sections of the community allegedly affected by the crisis. Money to pay compensation was supplied by the Government of Taiwan and partially distributed, further exacerbating the unrest.

## **Security**

The security situation in Honiara, the rest of Guadalcanal and Malaita remains volatile, as a large number of high-powered weapons are still unaccounted for. Members of the IPMT reported that a recent inventory of the police armoury undertaken by the members of the IPMT confirmed that more than 400 police weapons have still not been accounted for. Many are allegedly being used for criminal activities and there is fear that failing recovery of such weapons, peace and stability will continue to elude Solomon Islands. The recent recruitment of more than 1,100 former ethnic militia members as special constables has also added to these fears.

## **Political Parties**

There are two main coalitions – Coalition for National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace (CNURP), and Alliance for Change which subsequently formed the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change Coalition (SIACC) for the purpose of contesting the 2001 elections. The CNURP which elected Manasseh Sogavare as Prime Minister when it took power on 30 June 2000 comprised members of the Liberal Party, People's Alliance Party (PAP), the United Party as well as a number of independents. The Alliance for Change represents the former government led by Bartholomew Ulufa'alu. The PAP parliamentary leader is Sir Allan Kemakeza, the leader of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) is Manasseh Sogavare, the Solomon Islands Labour Party (SLP) leader is Joses Tuhanuku, the United Democratic Party is led by Jon Maitia and the New Solomons Party is led by Sam Alesia.

The nature of the party system in Solomon Islands is characterised by fluid coalitions, which made it difficult to predict any political outcome of the elections for which 328 candidates had registered.

Additionally, the Solomon Islands Constitution makes provision for an 'Independent Group' whose members are independent both of the Government and of any opposition group and whose number includes a leader who can command their support.

This situation is a consequence of the Constitution, which lays down that the Prime Minister will be chosen from among the elected Members of Parliament, and the nature of Solomon Islands as a collection of many islands each seeking its own best advantage.

Members of Parliament can switch political allegiance at will without any constitutional or legal penalties while others profess membership of more

than one party. A further factor is the 'wantok' system used to differentiate people based on their own dialect or the provinces to which they belong, and which usually influences the democratic process in Solomon Islands. It is also often used as a basis for the election of candidates. The result is that a strong party political system has failed to develop.