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## Longing for peace: Transformation of the Solomon Islands security environment

*An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.*

Mahatma Gandhi

The formal termination of the mandate of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) on 30 June 2017 marked the end of a significant phase in the Solomon Islands peace-building and rehabilitation process, although it did not necessarily mean the ‘end’ of conflict itself and the ‘beginning’ of long-term peace. This is because some of the fundamental issues emanating from an interplay between identity, land dispute, poverty and inequality, intercommunal perception, political governance, corruption and behaviour of political elites, which contributed to nurturing the tension in the first place, are still shimmering. This was perhaps one of the factors that inspired the security treaty of 14 August 2017 between Australia and Solomon Islands, which would enable the rapid deployment of Australian security forces in case of civil unrest (Batley, 2017). This in itself is symbolic of a shared feeling of caution (just in case) and trepidation by the two sides on the potential sustainability of the post-RAMSI security environment. This chapter explores some of the factors that shaped the evolving security climate in Solomon Islands and the effectiveness of RAMSI as a security response mechanism.

The security environment—and indeed the conflict in Solomon Islands—was different from the case studies of Fiji and Tonga (in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively) because of a number of historical and sociopolitical factors. The tension in Fiji revolved around a diaspora group and the indigenous community and the way these groups interplayed with economic, cultural and political factors, whereas in Tonga, the tension was largely between two social classes. In Solomon Islands, the tension was between two indigenous groups whose respective histories were connected to political, socioeconomic and cultural developments that over time led to conflict. These differences make these case studies historically unique in their own ways, a salient aspect that one needs to take into consideration while doing comparative analysis.

The conflict in Solomon Islands from 1999 to 2001 was complex, with multiple dimensions—local, national, regional and international—and had a profound impact on the country, whose population numbers about half a million people. It transformed a largely subsistence society in a significant way and left scars, which have been the subject of peace-building efforts. Attempts to address the conflict in Solomon Islands took various forms, ranging from community-based reconciliation predicated on indigenous notions of balance and harmony to external intervention in the form of RAMSI. There were other formal initiatives, such as the Townsville Peace Agreement and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as peace projects, which consisted of shades of customary and introduced peace-building mechanisms, which some have referred to as ‘hybrid’ (Clements et al., 2007). Although their strategic focus, ideological assumptions and methodological tools were different, they were, by and large, preoccupied with creating a stable and peaceful society.

One of the interesting challenges in the debates around the Solomon Islands conflict is the contending theoretical positions held by different authors, based largely on different interpretations of historical events, trends and changes. This is nothing new in the study of conflicts in which the complex interplay between ethnicity, class, power, resources and culture can be overwhelming for observers and researchers. In the face of such complexity, some are compelled to emphasise certain aspects that they feel intellectually competent and comfortable to deal with. One of the approaches that has been dominant in debates on the conflict in Solomon Islands was the ‘failed state’ and ‘arc of instability’ discourse, discussed in Chapter 2.

Solomon Islands is often depicted as possessing unsophisticated cultures, norms and structures. Frequently accompanied by doses of social Darwinism and racism, such a view does more to obfuscate than enlighten us as to the trends of history, realities of society and dynamics of conflict. On the other hand, the increasingly popular hybrid discourse, which is meant to be a counter to the deficit approach, provides an overly simplistic assumption about the complexity of cultural engagements (Richmond, 2011; Wallis, Jeffery & Kent, 2015). It is assumed by advocates of the hybrid approach that cultures create an instant 'mix' when they come together. Contrary to this simplistic framework, the sociological reality is far more complex; the encounter between two different cultural forces involves a spontaneous process of accommodation, resistance/opposition, synthesis and coexistence, rather than just creating a new hybrid.

This chapter moves away from the deficit and hybrid approaches and instead focuses on the broader dialectics between the colonial economic and political systems and the local cultures and people, and examines some of the resulting contradictions that articulated themselves during the colonial and postcolonial periods in the context of postcolonial theory. The argument made here is that, to understand the Solomon Islands conflict of 1999 to 2001 better, one needs to use postcolonial lenses to capture some of the dynamics of the colonial state: human relationships, including the development policies that led to internal labour migration; the shabby and ineffective governance structure; the paternalistic attitude of the British; the issues of land and lack of autonomy; and participation of local cultural groups. These issues were firmly entrenched in the structural and normative life of the country and spilled over into the postcolonial period and fermented conditions for the conflicts. The grievances and conditions for conflict built up over time, and, although there were accommodating factors such as kinship, religion, intermarriage and the *wantok* ideology,<sup>1</sup> which moderated the rising tension, other external factors, such as the demands of the market economy for the commodification of land and employment, and rising poverty, inequality and economic marginalisation, intensified the tension and eventually sparked the conflict. Solomon Islands is a classic example of the way in which the denial and lack of human security among certain

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1 *Wantok*, a pidgin term that literally means 'one language', refers to common identity, common origin and shared culture.

parts of the population has led to conflict. The approach here will weave together postcolonial, securitisation and human security approaches to understand some of the complex issues relating to conflict.

## Genesis and transformation

Settled about 30,000 years ago, Solomon Islands was, apart from the island of New Guinea and other surrounding archipelagos, the earliest inhabited place in the South Pacific. A culturally diverse society with around 86 languages, the population of the Solomon Islands consisted of independent kinship-based communities operating within defined localities (Bennett, 2002). Beyond the local social boundaries, interisland and intertribal trade enabled the exchange and circulation of goods while maintaining social networks and peaceful relationships. Although there were inter- and intra-tribal skirmishes, these were mostly localised and were due to disputes over territory, resources, women, relationships and other factors. Culture-based conflict mitigation and resolution systems were in place to maintain a sense of balance, continuity and perpetuity of peaceful and stable relations. Community life revolved around kinship and division of labour, based on gender and age, with females involved largely with looking after the domestic duties and gardening while males were engaged in more 'prestigious' political matters such as decision-making, as well as 'masculine' activities such as hunting and acting as protectors of the family and community. Although, in many communities, land was allocated through matrilineal lines, political power still rested largely with older men (Bennett, 1987).

Trading in the form of barter and the use of traditional currency such as shell money took place between islands, and intermarriage consolidated relationships and created alliances between island tribes (Naitoro, 2000). Loyalty and identity revolved around localised kinship groups, and there was a clear distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', although the line of demarcation shifted as a result of intermarriage and greater integration with neighbouring and faraway communities. The identity boundary was maintained and guarded through constant intra- and inter-tribal negotiation, war or sorcery, and the practice of compensation was a way of restoring balance and goodwill between groups and individuals. Social relations and identities were defined at both the social and cosmological levels, in which people and spiritual existence were intricately linked. In his study of the Kwara'ae people, Ben Burt observed that:

This dialectic is quite transparent in the way the Kwara'ae created relationships of authority and power, extended beyond the living to include the dead. Through these relationships, their society participated in a cosmic order of religious power which provided a religious legitimization of the social order by transcending and denying its human construction. (Burt, 2001: 2)

Land, which later became a central issue in the tension in Solomon Islands, was part of the broader kinship and cosmological relationship that connected individuals and defined collective identity and relationships. This played out in different ways in different localities. For instance, in Morovo, rights to fishing, planting and access to land for various purposes depended on their claim to access through recognised consanguineal and affinal ties with tribal groups that controlled the land (Hviding & Baines, 1994).

Christianity later transformed this relationship through imposition of a highly structured and globalised organisation, characterised by a new set of morals and a new eschatological paradigm, which, just as before, put humans at a lower level of the cosmic order below the revered deity. Christianity attempted to undermine the traditional cosmic world and in the process also created conditions for the emergence of new forms of resistance as locals attempted to articulate their identities in a changing environment. However, at the same time, aspects of Christianity were indigenised and incorporated into the local culture and vice versa. As in other parts of the Pacific such as Fiji and Tonga, the distinction between customary ways and the Christian ethos became blurred as the two systems morphed into each other. As we shall see later, the Christian notion of peace was later incorporated into the local peace-building approaches to address future conflicts (Brown, 2004).

Even before the missionaries arrived, some of the early contact with Europeans in the form of whalers, shell and *bêche-de-mer* collectors and beachcombers had made their mark on hitherto autonomous communities. There was a series of contacts with Europeans, some substantive and some minimal. There was a period of 325 years between the first contact with Europeans in the form of the Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendana de Neira in 1568, and the start of British annexation. The British annexed the South Solomons (Guadalcanal, Savo, Malaita, San Cristobal, the New Georgia group) in 1893, the Santa Cruz group in 1898 and 1899, and the Shortlands group (Santa Isabel, Choiseul and Ontong Java) in 1900.

They decided to take over Solomon Islands not for economic gain but for strategic reasons: to keep German influence, now entrenched in nearby New Guinea, at bay.

The forced recruitment of labour, through what came to be known as 'blackbirding', had started in 1870, about two decades before British annexation, and many Solomon Islanders, together with some workers from Vanuatu and New Caledonia, were sent to Fiji, Queensland and Samoa as plantation labourers (Corris, 1970). This was probably the first large-scale and permanent encounter between many local communities and global capitalism and was probably the single most transformative external force for Solomon Islands, aside from Christianity and colonialism.

The Malaitans were the most widely recruited group during the labour trade, with a total of 14,335 involved in contracts to Queensland and Fiji between the 1870s and 1911 and 35,596 contracts internally in Solomon Islands between 1913 and 1940. While this labour system was exacting and exploitative, it also allowed for voluntary labour and some workers willingly embraced it, as they valued the European goods they were given as part of their payment. Guns, especially, were highly valued, since they were effective in subduing competing tribes and chiefs in local disputes and helped to expand the power and influence of some chiefs. Internal labour migration, especially involving Malaitans in Guadalcanal, was encouraged and supervised by the colonial administration, and contributed to tension over land in later years. Malaitans mostly worked as contract labourers on copra plantations, the most important source of revenue for the protectorate.

## Breeding insecurity: Half-hearted British colonial hegemony

Solomon Islands was not a full-fledged British colony but a protectorate under supervision from Fiji, the only British Crown colony in the Pacific Islands. The governor of Fiji also acted as high commissioner for the western Pacific and oversaw other Pacific protectorates such as Solomon Islands, Vanuatu (a condominium with France), Tonga (a British protected state since 1900), Tuvalu and Kiribati (Scarr, 1968). The local Solomon Islands representative, called the resident commissioner, looked

after the day-to-day operation of the protectorate and was in charge of all British personnel. This arrangement lasted for 60 years, ending when the high commissioner's headquarters was moved to Solomon Islands in 1953 after the other British protectorates in the Pacific were removed from its supervision. The title was changed to governor in 1974 as the country moved closer to independence.

The British had a half-hearted presence and a reserved policy stance in Solomon Islands. With their headquarters 2,129 kilometres away in Fiji, the colonial state implanted a shabbily constructed administrative structure by 'remote control', consisting of a hierarchy of positions and government stations that were far removed both from the centre and from the local social structures and people. This was in significant contrast with British policies in Fiji, where the central colonial state assumed a hegemonic presence at different levels of the local social structures through a patronage system that included chieftocrats acting as comprador agents for the British colonial state, as we saw in Chapter 4. In the case of Solomon Islands, the 'state' assumed the form of a resident commissioner who held supreme authority, below whom was a resident magistrate (sometimes referred to as district magistrate), whose title changed to district officer in 1914.

To extend their nationwide reach, the British progressively created a network of government stations over the years, starting with Gizo Island in 1899, Shortland Islands in 1907, Malaita at Rarasu (now called Auki) in 1909, a temporary base at Masi (New Georgia) in 1910, Aola (Guadalcanal) in 1914, Makira (San Cristoval) and Isabel in 1918, and Peu (Vanikolo) in 1923 to administer the new Santa Cruz District on Savo and in the Nggela Islands (separate from Tulagi). A total of eight administrative areas, each with at least one district officer and sometimes additional officers, were set up by 1934 in Mala (Malaita), Guadalcanal, Gizo, Shortlands, Isabel and Russell, Eastern Solomons, Santa Cruz and Tulagi (British High Commission Protectorate, 1911; 1926; 1934).

This state governance 'structure' was in practice a network of positions superimposed on communities without there necessarily being any coherent system of communication, administration and operation to link to each other effectively or to connect with the people. At one level this system had a symbolic role in affirming a sense of British 'presence' and colonial 'legitimacy'. At a more mundane level, it also acted as a system of social control to consolidate colonial hegemony and respond to

situations that were deemed threatening to the colonial establishment. The governance structure was disconnected from ordinary citizens, who in turn saw it as something of minimal or even no relevance to their everyday existence.

The colonial presence was a distant and strange phenomenon and, despite some development projects and social changes, local life hardly changed for years during the colonial and postcolonial periods. In addition to this disconnect was the paternalistic and racist attitudes in the minds of British officials. Young field officials in Solomon Islands and senior administrators in faraway Fiji and London were ignorant of local cultures and perceptions and imposed their will in insensitive and often racially prejudiced ways.

Let us not forget that the first governor of Fiji, Sir Arthur Gordon, as we saw in Chapter 4, was an adherent of social Darwinism. This influenced his policies towards indigenous Fijians, whom he thought could be saved by cocooning them in their traditional social system to ensure their slow evolution and survival in the face of cultural onslaught by the 'superior' European race (Ratuva, 2005). This patronising world view would have also influenced the way in which Solomon Islands was administered. The difference, however, was that, in the case of Fiji, the native administration, run on the basis of separate development (which they referred to as 'indirect rule'), was based on a complex state bureaucracy from the village level to the governor, supported by rigid rules and regulations, unlike Solomon Islands, where the reach of the state was minimal or even non-existent in most localities.

The period from annexation to the 1920s was characterised largely by consolidation of British hegemony through pacification and by ensuring a steady supply of labourers for plantations, which were central to the colonial economy. In response to emerging circumstances, some changes were made in the 1920s, starting with the setting up of an advisory council in 1921 to provide the resident commissioner with advice on issues relating to the administration of the protectorate. The advisory council included Solomon Islanders, and for the first time locals were involved in the decision-making process in the country. In addition to this, in 1925 a structure like that of the Fijian Native Administration was established with the appointment of the first native clerks, subdistrict headmen, village headmen and village constables. There was also some emphasis on medical services as well as, as in Fiji, the introduction of taxation of the

indigenous population in 1921. The introduction of taxation was very unpopular and, as we shall see later, helped to fuel anti-colonial resistance. Education and training were also emphasised in the 1920s in response to the need for more locals to run lower positions in the civil service, as well as professional positions such as teachers and medical officers.

It was not until 1937 that attempts were made to create a more coherent 'native administration', in response both to demands for more local participation and to growing grievances relating to taxation and other issues. The changes included the setting up of native courts in several districts in 1940 to enforce law and order in communities, most of which were in rural areas. World War II put a stop to reforms and, after the war, in 1945, the two main issues faced by the protectorate were reconstruction and development. The capital was shifted from Tulagi to Honiara, and it was also suggested that local government councils be set up, to be responsible for local administration, development, justice, health, education and agriculture. An attempt was made to divide the protectorate into two divisions, but this was deemed too cumbersome and impractical. In late 1948 four districts were created instead, each under the responsibility of a district commissioner. These were the Western district, Central district, Malaita district and the Eastern district. Further changes were made to the membership of these districts in the 1950s. The districts were further divided into subdistricts, run by district commissioners and their district officers, who were assisted by headmen and assistant headmen. This system was purely administrative rather than developmental and participatory, and lacked any direct link with the communities. These administrative measures were, at best, symbols of state authority rather than effective tools of state service. This was an unwieldy undertaking because the idea was to construct a series of administrative entities from a collection of heterogeneous communities with different languages, cultures and world views. This was just one of a series of superficial institutional structures set up by the protectorate that were incompatible with local social realities.

The relocation of the western Pacific high commissioner to Solomon Islands in 1953 was the first time the country had its own central government with more new substantive positions, although advisory links with the Fiji administration were maintained in health, education and agriculture. Following the proclamation of the British Solomon Islands constitution on 10 October 1960, the Legislative Council, with 21 members, was created. Thus, a national representative body was set up for the first time. Eleven members were to be government officials,

and 10 were nominees. Six of the 10 were to be Solomon Islanders. A new constitution was introduced in 1964, with the council having 25 members. Representation by Solomon Islanders was through electoral colleges, formed by local district councils. This nurtured the culture of patronage that was to characterise the Solomon Islands political culture in future years.

As independence drew closer, the policy of localisation in the civil service increased in tempo. This included the district officer and district commissioner positions, which were filled after independence in 1978 by people who later became national leaders, such as Peter Kenilorea, Francis Talasasa, Francis Billy Hilly and Nathaniel Waena. A new pre-independence constitution was approved in 1974, which, among other new initiatives, provided for a governor and an elected Legislative Assembly. As a prelude to independence, the country acquired internal self-governing status on 2 January 1976. It became independent on 7 July 1978 under the leadership of Peter Kenilorea, who served three terms in office. Kenilorea was succeeded by his deputy, Ezekiel Alebua, in 1986. Other prime ministers since independence and before the conflict were Solomon Mamaloni, who had three terms, Francis Billy Hilly and Bartholomew Ulufa'alu.

Although the above description of the colonial system might sound mechanical, there are a number of salient points that I need to raise as part of the security analysis here. The state architecture had a fundamentally hegemonic role in advancing the pacification role of the colonial state. The state's presence in the rural communities was meant to make the statement that colonial authority was supreme and dissent would not be tolerated. This was consistent with British colonial subjugation in other parts of the world. Furthermore, the colonial structures were intended to facilitate the ready appropriation of cheap local labour to produce a surplus for the colonial economy. Money was needed to run the colonial system, and labour recruitment was seen as an economic imperative. Most of the labourers were recruited from Malaita, and many of these were relocated to various parts of Solomon Islands, where they were involved in commercial labour and other market-based activities. This provoked the wrath of the largely subsistence-based local population and planted the seeds of future tension.

To help fund the colonial structure, taxation was introduced as a compulsory imposition. Apart from this economic role, it also had a hegemonic role in controlling people's political choices, or rather lack of choices, because failure to pay tax could lead to imprisonment. What might have looked like an innocent administrative structure, justified as a system to provide law and order and to maintain stability, created contradictions that alerted people to the injustices of colonialism, as we shall see later.

## Increasing insecurity: Resistance against colonial hegemony

Even before colonial rule, resistance to external intervention took many forms, including skirmishes with explorers, missionaries, traders and later with colonial officials as Solomon Islanders found their way of life, identity, well-being and even their territories threatened by foreigners. Some of this resistance ended in deaths on both sides. In 1872 six crew members of the schooner *Lavinia* were killed on Nggela Island while collecting bêche-de-mer. Eight years later, Lieutenant Bower, commander of HMS *Sandfly*, and three crewmen were killed on the same island. On 20 May 1886, six crewmen and six Malaitans on the schooner *Young Dick* were killed while involved in a blackbirding mission.

The accumulation of grievances over the years came to the fore in late 1927 when William Bell, district officer in Malaita, together with some assistants, killed while on a tax-collection trip on Malaita (Keesing & Corris, 1980). The labour recruitment policies of the British, the imposition of tax, and the uneven development and marginalisation of locals had spawned widespread grievances and anti-colonial resentment. The head tax was one of the most notorious and unpopular policies because locals could not understand why they should be paying for something from their meagre resources that did not benefit them at all. Besides, taxation, which was extractive and non-reciprocal, unlike local economic exchanges, was seen as an affront to their culture. Government public services were practically non-existent, and the patronising attitude of colonial officials fuelled the tension further. In response to Bell's death, the British sent a punitive expedition that carried out a brutal retribution, resulting in the death of about 60 Malaitans and the incarceration of almost 200 people (Swinden, 1998). This was part of the broader

‘pacification’ process whereby sacred sites were desecrated and cultural relics were burned and destroyed as a way of forcing people to accept Christianity and to submit to colonial rule.

The incident was historically significant in a number of ways. The attack on Bell and his group, which was well planned and widely supported by locals, manifested the deep-seated revulsion to the British style of rule, which was aloof, condescending and exploitative, with virtually no return to the people in the form of health services, education or development. The legal system could not be relied on for recourse, nor were there local representatives to take up their cause with the authorities, based far away in Suva. The locals realised that taking the law in to their own hands, although seen as a last resort, was a form of self-empowerment to express their will in the most direct and explicit way. The harsh response by the British was characteristic of a power that no longer had any sense of control of the situation and therefore resorted to extreme violence as a form of deterrence to other potential dissent. It was symbolic of the colonial state’s failure to address the fundamental issues of development, governance, security and justice in a humane way. The ability of the British to exert control was due in part to their tactical use of locals to kill and arrest their own people, a technique they used effectively, as part of their pacification program in other colonies, as we saw in the case of Fiji.

The incident made both sides realise that better and more effective means of rule were important to create and maintain trust between the people and the colonial administration. For the British, it revealed how little they knew about the local cultures or the aspirations and feelings of the local people, and showed the need to change their attitudes and approaches. The colonial administration had a strong alliance with the European planters who volunteered to be part of the punitive expedition. The planters’ participation in the incident served their interest in appropriating land and local resources for business. For the locals, there was clamour for a more efficient and humane system to protect their interests, identity, culture and future against what they saw as impending usurpation of their customary way of life.

The trial was used to show the unquestionable dominance of British justice. Of those arrested, 11 were charged with murder and, of these, six were convicted; of the 71 charged with lesser offences, 21 were convicted. The leader of the resistance, Basiana, who also killed Bell, was executed

by hanging on 29 June 1928, while his two sons watched. Repressive regulations were also put in place to legalise arrests as well as detention to maintain order.

The pacification program had its limitations. Instead of nipping rebellion in the bud, it merely inflamed greater passion for autonomy. The issues that led to the killing of Bell and the clamour for protection of local customs and greater political and economic empowerment led to the emergence of the Maasina movement, which started in Malaita and spread to other nearby islands. Its central demand was the creation of an alternative, indigenous-led economic development policy and a politically autonomous system separate from the colonial state. It called for an increase in pay for plantation labourers and demanded the reform of the exploitative labour contract system. In addition, it also called for a more democratic system with indigenous representation in the decision-making process (Keesing, 1978).

There were external factors, too, which helped to catalyse the process. These included the 1930s Depression, which saw the collapse of copra prices. This meant that many Malaitans (who, since the inception of the Queensland and Fiji labour trade, had come to depend on plantation labour) lost their jobs, and those who continued working had their pay reduced. There was widespread disenchantment, expressed in sporadic cases of plantation rebellion and withdrawal of labour. Another important factor was the influence of World War II in raising the consciousness of people about the need for liberation from the British. There was hope that the Americans, who treated the locals better, would help the Solomon Islanders displace the British, but when this did not eventuate the Solomon Islanders proceeded to organise their new liberation strategy (Laracy, 1983).

The Maasina publicly manifested itself during the war in 1943 and 1944 and was symbolic of both political resistance and economic liberation, ideals that the Malaitans have engaged with and nurtured as a result of their grim experiences in labour migration and plantation work over decades. They had learnt how vulnerable they were to global capitalism and colonial rule, the two most powerful foreign forces they had to deal with every day. Their only option was to create their own independent system, which they could control to serve their interests and maximise benefits for themselves (Akin, 2013). They set up their own system of government, which won widespread support and which extended to various other parts of the country.

Needless to say, the Maasina movement was seen as a direct threat to the colonial administration, and in response the British launched Operation De-Louse to arrest the leaders of the movement for violation of the British Unlawful Societies Act of 1799 and the Seditious Meetings Act of 1817. Both these acts were invoked, and the leading chiefs were arrested and sentenced to six years hard labour for secretly conspiring to overthrow the government and holding illegal courts. The people responded by refusing to pay tax, submit to the census or cooperate in any way. This led to the arrest and imprisonment of thousands of people in 1948 and 1949. This softened the islanders' urge for further resistance and, when the first island council was set up in Malaita in 1952, the last bastion of resistance ceased (Frazer, 1990).

In his book *Colonialism, Maasina Rule and the Origins of Malaitan Kastom*, Akin (2013) provides a historical as well as ethnographic analysis of the Maasina rule using the postcolonial lenses to focus on how economic exploitation, political subjugation and ethnic marginalisation created conditions for resistance. The British colonial policy of pacification and coerced imposition under unilateral centralised rule was 'an alien imposition' (Akin, 2013: 87), which came into contradiction with the cultural world of a group of people who lived in relatively egalitarian, subsistence-based and autonomous kinship systems. The early reactions were 'against taxation, unpaid labour, loss of dignity' (Akin, 2013: 87).

Inequality in a structural, ethnic and economic form was an inevitable result of British colonial rule. It permeated the entire society from the level of institutionalised political power to the level of everyday interaction. As an example, reflecting on the issue of unequal justice, Akin says:

There was also anger that when Europeans committed crimes such as murder, severe assault, or rape they were most always deported rather than punished in the Solomons (if at all) in order to avoid embarrassing the white community by a local trial and imprisonment. And when an Islander fought a European, it was always the Islander who went to jail. (Akin, 2013: 86)

The locals found solace in *kastom*, the locally constructed cultural norms to help define their community identity and help them adapt to the changing circumstances. These became the prisms for self-identification, intragroup relationships and engagement with the outside world. *Kastom* became a multipurpose system to provide moral and ethical guidance

and collective protection against outside usurpation, a tool of cultural socialisation as well as a framework for social transformation, adaptation and engagement with the outside world.

The anti-colonial resistance shown by Bell's killing and the Maasina movement set the tone for future conflicts, because some of the same forces that contributed to these events manifested themselves in those conflicts. Among these was the creation of a new proletarian class of Malaitans, who participated in labour migration. In later years, this created tension with the people of Guadalcanal, who felt threatened by their more mobile and commercially experienced island neighbours. Another significant factor was the uneven and socially disruptive development strategies of the British, which created conditions for both the anti-British rebellion and the Malaita/Guadalcanal conflict. The lack of an effective state system to ameliorate tension was also a common feature of colonial and postcolonial conflicts. Both participatory governance and people-centred development were minimal or non-existent in many cases, and this bred animosity.

The colonial hegemony and transformation of the Solomon Islands under the British bred its own contradictions, created in part by an incompetent colonial administration. An ineffective administrative system that boasted neither a central state as a locus of authority nor entrenched local community support was constructed and implanted. The British were more concerned with simply making a physical 'presence' in Solomon Islands as a buffer against German interest in nearby New Guinea than in taking any genuine interest in developing the protectorate.

The colonial administrative structure had neither the capacity nor the intent to unite the culturally diverse country. If anything, it merely exacerbated differences and tensions. For instance, carving up the country into four districts meant that different tribes were forced into administrative units with others and, in the process, separated from cognate tribes in other districts. The role of the districts in acting as electoral colleges for the Legislative Council encouraged patronage at the local level. This allowed district officers and powerful individuals to leverage power to achieve their own political and economic interests. The structure of the state was thin and superficial, and its role was purely administrative rather than policy-making, developmental and legislative.

Although reforms to create a more representative legislative system took place in the 1960s and 1970s, these did very little to enhance people's participation and promote democratic values and culture. The system failed to incorporate Solomon Islands' communities effectively into the administrative structure and vice versa. The reach of the state was limited; there was a huge gap between local identities and loyalties, and national identity and local identities often supplanted national identity. In fact, the idea of a national identity was contested and continues to be so.

Thus it would be nonsensical to talk of Solomon Islands as a 'failed state', fundamentally because the state itself was not sufficiently developed into a fully fledged democracy. Rather than being a failed state, the best description would be a 'syncretic state', where there was a complex ensemble of forces interacting with each other in a situation of contradiction, accommodation or synthesis (Ratuva, 2004). In the case of Solomon Islands, as with many postcolonial societies, there was a constant interaction (action and reaction) between tradition and modernity, subsistence and market economy, communalism and individualism, and Western bureaucracy and indigenous power structures. Sometimes one overrode the other or contradicted one another, and at other times they accommodated each other or integrated to form a new mode of behaviour and a new structure. Hence this complex process of interaction cannot be simplistically explained as being 'failed' or artificially framed as 'hybrid'.

## The Malaita/Guadalcanal conflict

In the earlier part of the chapter, we discussed some of the broader forces that nurtured the conditions for future conflict between the Guadalcanal and Malaitan communities. Strained relations led to the eruption of violence around the latter part of 1998, although some Guadalcanal youths had been collecting arms since 1996 as anti-Malaitan grievances gradually built up over the years. The attack on Malaita settlements by a group of Guadalcanal youths in November 1998 was the catalyst that set in train an almost inevitable process of intercommunal violence. Sentiments were further heightened by the nationalistic utterance by Ezekiel Alebua, premier of Guadalcanal province, who proclaimed that non-Guadalcanal people should respect their hosts, pay rent to Honiara landowners and pay compensation for the Guadalcanal people murdered in Honiara (Kabutaulaka, 2001).

The attack sent shockwaves around the country and sparked further escalation, which saw the shooting of a Guadalcanal youth by the police in December 1998. Guadalcanal youths formed themselves into an organised paramilitary group with different labels, including the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA), the Isatabu Freedom Fighters (IFF) and later the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM). Attacks on settlers continued and, by June 1999, about 50 people had been killed and about 20,000 people from Malaita and other provinces were displaced from areas around Honiara. The police responded violently and, as a result, 13 members of the IFM were killed. This tit-for-tat killing spawned more violence that consumed the communities around the Honiara area.

In response to the IFM's violent tactics, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) was formed by Malaitan youth to protect the displaced Malaitans, seek vengeance for their treatment at the hands of the IFM, and compensation for the damages to properties and for Malaitan deaths. Their raids on Guadalcanal villages led to a number of deaths, including of women and children. The initial skirmishes turned into full-blown confrontations, with both sides inflicting and suffering casualties.

Without an effective security apparatus for law enforcement, the state lacked the authority and power to maintain stability. The security situation deteriorated further after the MEF and other Malaitans in the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) took over the police armoury in Roveand. Prime Minister Ulufa'alu was forced to resign after a coup led by Malaitan lawyer Andrew Nori, and, in the midst of the ensuing confusion, Manasseh Sogavare was elected prime minister under duress (Kabutaulaka, 2001). The violent confrontation between the MEF and IFM worsened and took centre stage, with more than 200 people estimated to have died. The consequences of the conflict were disastrous for a country that had not been able to frame a coherent national identity to unify the different ethnocultural groups since independence.

The situation in Solomon Islands at the time of the conflict was much more complex than the ethnic and tribal factors that have been popularly articulated by the media and other commentators (Kabutaulaka, 2001). The salient factors were multifaceted and in different ways contributed to the grievances, tension and eventual violence. First, as mentioned earlier, the half-hearted colonial policies on governance had consequences that carried over into the postcolonial period. Upon independence, while positions in leadership were localised, the principles of governance and

development remained unchanged, and there was little attempt to redirect development towards what was relevant to the local population. The state became a conduit for cronyism and patronage. Rather than encouraging unity and common identity, the political elites were more focused on their local constituencies and their own political careers. There was, since independence, optimism about creating a new national consciousness and identity, particularly among the urban-based elites and the young educated individuals who had acquired a taste of regionalised and globalised life through contact with the outside world. These progressive and globalised views were at odds with the localised loyalties and identities of rural village folk (Jourdan, 1995).

As with other newly independent postcolonial states, the tension between common national consciousness (through education, common pidgin language, common popular cultural expressions such as music and common national symbolism such as the flag and emblem) on the one hand and communal consciousness on the other, became a dominant challenge for the new state. This was a classic situation of a binary relationship between civic nationalism (national consciousness in relation to the state) and communal nationalism (exertion of communal interests), which Stavenhagen (1996) talked about as a potential cause of friction and instability. Creating the balance between the desire to construct a unified national identity and expressions of distinctive communal identity provides a major cultural and political backdrop to the Malaita/Guadalcanal tension and remains a major issue for Solomon Islands today.

This identity crisis was made more volatile by uneven development and worsening poverty and inequality. The prevalence of inequality and perception of socioeconomic differences between social and cultural groups was a recipe for conflict. The Malaitans were seen to be the 'industrious' ones, acquiring the most lucrative jobs and businesses, thus invoking envy and ethnic stereotypes as 'aggressive' and 'selfish'. The situation was further exacerbated by widespread corruption among politicians, who took bribes from mostly Chinese businessmen and foreign logging companies in return for favours. This also brewed anti-Chinese sentiments, which led to a major riot. The fact that people's expectations in relation to improved livelihood did not match their living standard was a recipe for violence. On top of this was the sensitive issue of land rights, sale and usage. The migration of people into Honiara, especially from Malaita, put considerable pressure on the land and created tension. Many Malaitans married Guadalcanal women and, through matrilineal determination of land rights, were able

to acquire land on which they invited other relatives to settle. Settlements mushroomed around Honiara, and the local landowners might have felt crowded out by the new migrants. Many felt that their identity was being trampled on.

Rising unemployment, poverty and alienation among Guadalcanal youths helped to brew grievances. Knowledge of the outside world through education and the media raised the young people's expectations and, when the goods were not forthcoming and dreams remained unfulfilled, grievances turned to anger and eventually mobilisation for violent action. This was further heightened by the intimidation and killing of some Guadalcanal people by Malaitans. The speech by Alebua regarding indiscretions by Malaitans and the need for compensation was seen by some as the 'order' to open the floodgates of violence.

The inability of the government, run by self-serving politicians, to address the above issues was a major problem. The conflict revealed the inability of the state machinery to deal with law and order and, when the crunch came, those in government had to choose between loyalty to national interest or loyalty to their communities. Many chose the latter.

The analysis by Allen (2012) focuses on a critical assessment of competing identity narratives between 'a Malaitan settler narrative and a Guadalcanal landowner narrative' and how this helped transform the conditions for conflict. Malaitans were initially able to acquire rights to use tribal land on northern Guadalcanal 'but subsequently fell victim to a Guale project of exclusion' (Allen, 2012: 163). The Guadalcanal landowners denied Malaitans the use of land as an expression of discontent against what they saw as cultural and economic intrusion into their traditional domain. This reinforced the Guale claim to ownership and denied Malaitans their source of livelihood. This social disequilibrium—based on the dual processes of exclusion and assertion of rights—contributed significantly to the tension. The denial of access to land and associated socioeconomic and political benefits shaped the power relations and provoked violent reaction. Local grievances based on the desire to share the benefits from resource development on their land escalated to become part of the broader autonomy project for Guadalcanal. Filer, McDonnell and Allen (2017) refer to this process as the 'power of exclusion', referring to a dynamic power relationship where a group denies another access to land and resources and associated socioeconomic and political benefits.

Fraenkel (2004) makes the argument that the conflict was made even more complex by what he referred to as the ‘manipulation of culture’. According to Fraenkel, one of the significant features of the conflict was the way in which both sides used the traditional practice of compensation as a means of acquiring cash either from each other or from the government. The state was criminally leached and looted to the point of bankruptcy. He argues that ‘custom was inevitably remoulded, redefined and selectively styled to meet these new and unfamiliar circumstances. And since there was scope for designing custom, there was also space for manipulation’ (Fraenkel, 2004: 11). Ethnographers might disagree with this instrumentalist view of culture since it ignores the sociocultural role of compensation as a means of maintaining social equilibrium in a changing situation.

A significant aspect of the conflict that is not well understood is the way in which the local issues were part of the globalised discussions among the Solomon Islands diaspora through the Iu-Mi-Nao (‘It’s up to us to do it now’) chat group. Discussions ranged from updates of daily events to critical assessment of the political situation back home and how to address these (Moore, 2004). Cyberspace became the connecting mechanism that linked individuals and groups located overseas but who had a strong primordial attachment to and sense of place with Solomon Islands. The indigenous Solomon Islands narratives were globalised and found expressions in an internationalised discursive space through the more mobile and educated citizens based overseas.

## Assault on human security: ‘Shadow’ political economy, corruption and patronage

The potential for instability, exploitation and retarded development was exacerbated by prevalent patronage and corruption, which ranged from ‘petty and bureaucratic corruption to grand forms of corruption involving high-level officials’ (Chene, 2017). The economy itself has been infested with the scourge of money politics and patronage at different levels from the village to the highest level of politics. Solomon Islands has been described as having a number of ‘shadow’ states, including a complex system of patronage based on money and power, which linked politicians, their constituencies and businessmen outside the ambit of state control (Braithwaite et al., 2010).

Among the notorious shadowy figures are the Asian logging companies who are able to access logging areas directly by bribing landowners and government officials. For landowners, who live a largely subsistence life and have no direct means of generating income, this is an attractive source of cash. Dawea and Canon (2017) document how Malaysian companies were able to use tens of thousands of dollars to pay off landowners and government officials, including the local police, in order to access the local forests on the Santa Cruz Islands. The corrupted local officials acted as 'consultants' and guides and provided legitimacy for the illegal logging operations. The companies had no legal licences to operate and took advantage of the administrative disconnect between the capital Honiara and the rural areas as well as inefficiency in the enforcement system. To justify receiving the money, the locals argued that they 'have effectively been cut loose by the national government, with little choice but to monetise the islands' natural resources to fill the province's coffers and fund development programs' (Dawea & Canon, 2017). Given the government's inability to fund the provinces, logging money plays a vital role in providing resources for local development. Logging has caused irreversible environmental damage and not only on land but also the reefs and coastal areas as a result of silt being washed down rivers. In addition, logging companies have been involved in illegal logging, tax evasion, money-laundering, under-reporting of export value, price transfer and altering the names of tree species. Government officials are often bribed to look the other way. These issues have caused dismay and grievances among many Solomon Islanders and a threat to human security as well as a potential flashpoint for future tensions.

There is a danger that this culture of patronage and corruption will also undermine the environmental, social and economic viability of the mining industry, now envisaged as a substitute for logging, after the forestry resources have been exhausted. Some of these anomalies have manifested themselves in the Gold Ridge mining operations, where there have been issues of licensing, disputes over the disbursement of royalties and benefit-sharing between Guadalcanal province and the national government, and a corrupt payment made to a member of Parliament. The lack of proper regulation and transparency in the administration of the primary industry, coupled with the predatory nature of unscrupulous foreign businesses in collaboration with local entrepreneurial politicians, has a profound impact on social cohesion, communal trust and human

security. The shadowy networks involve state officials and community leaders entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the social and economic security of ordinary citizens, many of whom are not well educated and lack the means for social mobility in a capitalist system.

Another issue that has compromised the integrity of political leaders in a significant way is the discretionary funds allocated to parliamentarians annually. While the official purpose of the fund are for constituency development not covered by the budget, parliamentarians have total discretion as to how the money is used. A significant portion of the money is used for family business, and to build up local patronage and buy off voters. Although a guiding policy for the disbursement and accountability of the discretionary funds exists, this blatant abuse of public money, which is well known, is due to the lack of accountability and regulation because the beneficiaries of the system are the very same people who are supposed to be responsible for enforcement and policing.

In response to concerns about the potential damage that widespread corruption could cause the economy, pressure from the public and international agencies, the National Development Strategy 2016–35 prioritises the battle against corruption in logging and mining. This includes strengthening of anti-bribery laws, creating a special anti-corruption agency and enacting accountability laws (Chene, 2017). The challenges to achieving the aim of reduced corruption are hampered by a number of factors, including weak government capacity, lack of state presence in the outer communities, limited opportunities for public participation as well as the fluidity and instability in state policy due to constant changes in government.

Corruption and patronage pose a direct threat to people's human security due to the arbitrary appropriation of wealth by certain individuals linked to state power, diversion of bribery money from public use, misdistribution of resources, deprivation of a large section of the population and undermining of the developmental potential of the country. Grievances could lead to distrust and tension. The attempts by the government to address corruption can be viable only if the politicians themselves take the lead in adhering to the rules and there is greater cooperation between the state and the people to ensure equal and just distribution of power over resources and decision-making.

## Desecuritisation through peace-building initiatives

The conflict went through several phases: the expression of communal grievances, which built up to sporadic violence; the formation of rival militia groups (1998–2000); internecine conflict (2000–01); and more criminalised disturbances (2000–03). At different stages, there were futile attempts to intervene as the dividing line between warring groups became sharper and the tension more intense.

As the conflict subsided and life slowly returned to ‘normal’, perhaps the biggest challenges for Solomon Islands were how to rebuild destroyed infrastructure, reshape collapsed state institutions, reconstruct shattered social relations and, more importantly, avoid future conflicts of a similar nature. When the state security apparatus failed to stop—or at least manage—the conflict, the responsibility fell on the local and international communities. Wars have the paradoxical effect of expressing both the most inhuman and the most humane form of behavioural dispositions. While there is a desire to destroy, there is also a desire for peace and rebuilding.

In Solomon Islands, there were various levels of peace-building efforts at the regional, national and local levels. Some of these were formally linked, some were informally associated and some operated independently of each other. We cannot dismiss them as being ineffective because, in their own ways, in particular contexts and at particular times, they had their own impact in engaging people and created their own synergy, even if carried out in a limited space and with limited reach and effectiveness. Some were focused on addressing the manifestations of conflict, some were related to addressing relationships and intergroup trust, some were based on managing conflict to ensure that it did not escalate, some were attempts to heal psychological wounds and some were geared towards addressing the root causes of the tension. The last approach is always the most difficult because it means rewinding history and identifying some of the historical issues, as well as casting analytical eyes far and wide to identify deeper economic, political and sociocultural issues at the heart of the tension.

One of the first major attempts (apart from several earlier initiatives) to bring the conflicting parties together was the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA), facilitated by Australia. It was, as the TPA document

itself proclaims, an agreement for the 'cessation of hostilities between Malaita Eagle Force and the Isatabu Freedom Movement and for the restoration of peace and ethnic harmony in Solomon Islands' (Solomon Islands Government, 2000). This involved a six-day discussion between the rival militia groups and the Solomon Islands Government in October 2000 in Townsville, in order to arrive at some common understanding regarding the way forward. Both sides attempted to articulate conditions and demands based on their own political and historical narratives of the conflict. This posed some difficulties in the beginning, but compromises were made in certain areas and attempts were made to balance sectarian and national interests in a win-win formula. The final agreement was hailed as a significant way forward, but not everyone was happy.

The agreement contained a number of ambitious and almost impractical provisions to reduce the tension, initiate peace-building and facilitate rehabilitation. These included the continued employment of police officers who took sides during the confrontation; restructuring of the police force; provision of weapons and general amnesty for combatants; rehabilitation for combatants, which included repatriation to their villages; demilitarisation; more government autonomy for Malaita and Guadalcanal; appointment of a constitutional council; a land enquiry in Guadalcanal; and increased development projects to provide jobs and support for rehabilitation. On the peace-building side, the agreement encouraged reconciliation and proposed the formation of a peace and reconciliation committee as well as international peace monitors. Above all it proclaimed that: 'The parties hereby agree that they renounce violence and intimidation and will henceforth address their differences through negotiations and develop co-operative processes to fulfil the needs of their communities' (Solomon Island Government, 2000: 29).

The TPA took place in the wake of the deaths of perhaps 2,000 people and the failure of six previous peace initiatives brokered by the Commonwealth Secretariat and Solomon Islands Government between June 1999 and 12 May 2000. Despite being hailed by some as a success story, there were shortcomings in the agreement. These included its inability to address some of the fundamental causes of the conflict, which had been built up over generations. For instance, while the idea of rehabilitation of the former militia members through socioeconomic development was a theoretically sound proposal, it was quite ambitious in as far as availability of resources was concerned. The government was literally bankrupt, and there was a lack of funds for any meaningful

development. Furthermore, while the agreement provided proposals for quick solutions to stop the tension, there was no realistic framework for long-term conflict resolution. It has also been argued that the agreement merely ‘institutionalises ethnic division’ because militia from the two sides were encouraged to go back to their home islands, and this minimised interaction and increased the possible recurrence of violence (Byrne, 2000). Indeed violence continued despite the TPA.

The TPA of 15 October 2000 was followed by the mobilisation of an Australian-led International Peace Monitoring Team to supervise the surrender of weapons. Ironically, instead of ending the conflict as anticipated, the TPA caused further differences and tension. Tension was particularly prevalent around Guadalcanal’s Weather Coast, where pro-TPA and anti-TPA factions were engaged in a violent campaign against each other. The pro-TPA faction, led by Harold Keke, was involved in police patrol-boat raids against those opposed to the agreement. There were cases of threats, intimidation and violence, including torture. Keke’s rebellious stance and intimidating activities were used by the Malaitan militants as an excuse for refusing to surrender their weapons. Even today, these incidents still provoke grievances among some local communities.

## Desecuritising the land: The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands

The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) took place under the auspices of the Biketawa Declaration, a regional security agreement by the Pacific Island Forum leaders, as discussed in Chapter 3. The declaration provided for possible intervention by members of the Pacific Island Forum in a member country if invited to do so. Article 2 states:

Forum Leaders recognised the need in time of crisis or in response to members’ request for assistance, for action to be taken on the basis of all members of the Forum being part of the Pacific Islands extended family. (PIF, 2000: 1)

The Solomon Islands Government’s request to Australia for help in 1999 was ignored until after 9/11, when Australia reformulated its security approach, which framed neighbouring Pacific Island states as ‘failed’ and possible bases for terrorists to attack Australia. Thus RAMSI was

originally conceived not as a humanitarian gesture but as part of a bigger strategic policy thrust by Australia to create a security buffer around itself against mythical terrorists lurking around Oceania ready to pounce on Australia. Nevertheless, many Solomon Islanders saw RAMSI as a saviour to rid the country of some security threats in the form of armed militants and lawlessness.

The intervention, which started on 24 July 2003, was led by Australia. One of the first tasks was to establish law and order and provide security for citizens. Among other things, one of the approaches was to give an ultimatum to militant groups to surrender their weapons and to back this threat with legal force. The mission's personnel included military and police officers from the member countries of the Pacific Island Forum, together with civilians who worked in advisory and even operational capacities in government departments.

Apart from security, RAMSI's other focus was on state-building by way of institutional reconstruction along the lines of the Australian neoliberal agenda. Almost every ministry had a RAMSI adviser, whose job involved both day-to-day operational matters and broader strategic issues. One of the underlying assumptions was that locals lacked the capacity to operate a modern state system and that external expertise was needed to build professional capacity and work ethic. In some cases, local personnel were displaced from line ministries and remained as symbolic figures while policies and decisions were formulated and carried out by RAMSI officials. This imposing approach created some tension, especially among locals who felt that their capabilities were not being appreciated—in fact were shunned—by another neocolonial establishment.

With RAMSI taking over security, legal and operational matters, a number of security issues emerged. At the political level, the question of Solomon Islands sovereignty was at stake as a new hegemonic force took over operations of important state apparatus. Differences between the Solomon Islands and Australian governments, predicated on opposing perceptions of each other, intensified over the years. Many Australian officials still perceived Solomon Islands through the condescending 'arc of instability' prism, and Solomon Islanders were conscious of this and viewed the Australians with suspicion and distrust. In this situation of mutual psychological distance and suspicion, it was inevitable that particular types of behaviour were interpreted and stereotyped in disparaging ways. The Australian Government's interference in some sensitive local issues heightened the political temperature significantly.

A case in point was the Australian Government's attempt to thwart the appointment of the Fiji-born Attorney General, Julian Moti, whom Australia saw as a threat to their interests. A charge of sexual assault was used to try to prosecute Moti, but eventually the Australian courts dismissed the case. This was an embarrassing case for Australia, whose credibility in Solomon Islands was badly dented. Another case related to the behind-the-scenes involvement of Patrick Cole, the Australian high commissioner, in local politics. The revelations came in an email leaked by a RAMSI officer, and as a consequence Cole was expelled.

RAMSI's patronising approach attracted negative reaction from the Solomon Islands Government. This included a report by six ministers of the government, which recommended that RAMSI be scaled back and its excesses limited. One of the reasons given was that under the accountant general, the Ministry of Finance was slow in delivering services and goods to the people. It recommended that the role of RAMSI officials should be purely advisory and not substantive. RAMSI was accused of being a stooge of Canberra and was alienated from the Solomon Islands Government (Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi & Okole, 2014). The feeling was widespread among local politicians, civil servants and many Solomon Islands citizens themselves, who saw RAMSI as a semi-imperialist force of sorts, imposing its will on the local population.

People's anger was also violently expressed after Snyder Rini was chosen as prime minister during the April 2006 general elections. A demonstration against Rini's appointment turned violent when Australian Federal Police (AFP) personnel fired tear gas at demonstrators. This led to riots and burnings, including the smashing and torching of RAMSI vehicles around the China Town business district. RAMSI personnel were also targeted. A possible vote of no confidence forced Rini to resign, thus opening the door for the selection of Manasseh Sogavare, who was an uncompromising anti-Australian politician. Australian officials loathed him and tried to undermine him when the chance arose (Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi & Okole, 2014).

The relationship between the Solomon Islands Government and RAMSI oscillated between tension and cordiality, depending very much on the circumstances and who was at the helm. Different prime ministers had different attitudes towards RAMSI but, by and large, there was some agreement that it provided the desired security and institutional rehabilitation for a country struggling to find its footing in constantly

shifting internal and regional political dynamics. There was also a general feeling that RAMSI's role was finite. The ultimate question related to the exit strategy and the timing of it. New Zealand made it clear that it preferred a bilateral program and the rolling back of RAMSI operations. A transitional strategy was put in place after the 2010 Solomon Islands election, resulting in the withdrawal of military personnel in favour of police-assisted programs by 2013. By then, RAMSI had been sufficiently established for Australia to use it as a supporting reference for its bid for a United Nation's Security Council seat (Fullilove, 2009).

Perspectives on RAMSI vary considerably, depending on the respondents and the context of their responses. Advocates of RAMSI often refer to its significance in removing the security threat from the combatants and for creating a more stable and more peaceful environment for the people, many of whom were displaced or suffered in various ways as a result of the conflict. Opponents of RAMSI see it as a Trojan horse for an Australian neo-imperialist agenda, which was manifested in Australian personnel having control of significant line ministries such as finance and justice and in reforming the state bureaucracy to mirror Australian civil service norms and culture. Australians were often accused of being Aussie-centric due to their alleged cultural arrogance and disdain (latent and sometimes manifest) for the local people and culture.

Discussions between the author and civil servants, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), academics and other citizens revealed some deep-seated concern and at times anger about what was perceived as the 'racist' attitude of Australian personnel. The locals had developed a means of 'security mapping' representing the various levels of 'reliability' and 'trustworthiness', to use Enloe's (1980) terminology, to categorise the RAMSI personnel and their attitude towards locals. A local guide took the author around Honiara, observing the way soldiers from the different countries carried out their daily patrols, and to confirm his story about the level of security consciousness of, and trust of the local population by, RAMSI military personnel. We observed the Australian soldiers, fully armed with weapons at the ready position, as if prepared at any moment to pounce on unsuspecting terrorists or to respond to any sudden ambush by hidden 'enemies'. One is reminded of nervous and trigger-happy US marines, in full battle gear, cautiously patrolling the streets of Baghdad and at the same time putting up an aggressively menacing look, as if motivated by the belief that every local was a potential terrorist who must not be trusted. The guide explained that the 'Aussies' (as he referred to

them) not only had little trust in the local population but also treated them as inferiors. This, he felt, helped to fuel the groundswell of anti-Aussie sentiments.

Next we observed the New Zealand soldiers on patrol. They were far more relaxed and, although fully armed with light weapons, casually held their guns, which were pointed, not horizontally as the Australians, but towards the ground. Many New Zealanders were of Pacific Islands and Maori heritage; they fitted in well with the local culture and community and were generally trusted by locals. Many locals the author talked to were highly appreciative of New Zealanders, who they thought were more understanding and down to earth in contrast to their Australian counterparts.

The guide then told me to watch how the Fijian soldiers carried out their patrol. They were quite unique in their patrolling style, and we observed them walking around unarmed, shaking people's hands, smiling and saying 'bula' (hello) in response to a chorus of 'bula' from locals. The Fijians' level of understanding of the local culture and their degree of integration into local life was relatively deep, and locals saw them as the most trustworthy of the RAMSI military forces. Apart from some areas of similarity in their cultural background with the locals, the Fijian soldiers deployed to Solomon Islands had significant experience in peace-keeping operations in the Middle East and other parts of the world. The different approaches of the other military forces testified to the diversity of RAMSI as well as the differing world views that participating nations brought to the mission.

RAMSI was more than just an operation; it turned out to be a system, a complex of multilayered structures and relationships. It was, to put it rather simplistically, a kind of state within a state. Its role spanned a variety of activities including security, finance, development, rehabilitation, justice, policing, public service reform, electoral support and peace-building. Some of these were formally part of the prescribed functions, and some were auxiliary responsibilities. There were differences in opinion as to what RAMSI should be doing. While RAMSI's main responsibilities were to re-establish and ensure security and state rebuilding, some were concerned about its lack of focus on economic development and peace-building. To be fair to RAMSI, it had neither the mandate nor the expertise to carry out either of these two activities. RAMSI's work was more focused on rebuilding institutions rather than mending people's

strained post-conflict relationships. The deep-seated grievances and tensions that helped to spawn the conflict remained relatively untouched. Now that much of RAMSI's security apparatus has been withdrawn, the biggest challenge is how the current 'peace' can hold and for how long. Whether the people of Solomon Islands have reached a stage of conflict fatigue is a critical question. Even if this is the case, there will always be opportunistic individuals and groups who exploit particular situations for their political and economic ends.

What about the role of the Solomon Islands police in future security operations? On the positive side, RAMSI itself has argued that there has been a 'noticeable improvement in the responsiveness and capability of Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF)' (RAMSI Media Unit, 2016). How permanent the 'noticeable improvement' is might be debatable. Pessimists could argue that the 'improvement' could just be a temporary expression of enthusiasm by the RSIPF while optimists see it as a promising sign for the future response capability of the force. It will take time before the restructuring and training carried out by RAMSI gels into the institutional norms and behavioural ethics of the force's personnel. Perhaps the biggest question is whether the training was appropriate for the local cultural context and the unique political terrain of the Solomon Islands, especially when the training template was based on the AFP model of policing. The incongruity between the sociocultural appropriateness of the remodelled police force and the changing local sociopolitical realities could be a security challenge in itself. While the police have been trained to address the visible manifestations of conflict, their inability to address the deep-rooted aspects of conflict, something they might not be trained for, could be overwhelming. The fact that the police personnel might still harbour tribal loyalties that mirror the original political fault lines also poses grave threats to future security.

The current move to arm the police force needs careful consideration, given the situation in 2000 when arms were taken from the armoury by the Malaita-aligned faction of the police force. The need for regulatory and control mechanisms to ensure that this is not repeated is critical for the force and national security at large. Because arms may still be illegally kept by some members of the former combatants, there is some validity in the idea of arming the police. The disadvantages, however, are that an armed police can encourage use of arms by those with guns and, second, there is no guarantee that arms cannot be used by factions within the police against other factions in times of crisis, as we saw in 2000. A more

sensible approach is to develop a highly disciplined and well-trained special response team who are allowed to use arms only when confronted with a gun-related life-and-death situation.

## Lessons of RAMSI

There are a number of critical lessons we can learn from RAMSI. First, in terms of regional security, RAMSI has demonstrated the capacity of regional states to collaborate in an interventionist way, to provide security and help in the post-conflict rebuilding of another neighbouring Pacific state. This was a major regional security project emanating from the Biketawa Declaration, which provided for possible intervention by members of the Pacific Islands Forum if invited by the host country. RAMSI demonstrated that regional security cooperation was possible, given the right circumstances, and if there was a common interest among Forum member countries. However, regional intervention does not always work, as we saw in the case of Fiji after the 2006 coup. The Forum's Eminent Persons Group mission to Fiji turned out to be disastrously comical and purely tokenistic because Fiji did not take it seriously, and it had no impact on post-2006 coup developments in Fiji.

The flip side of the coin is that any similar intervention has implications concerning resources. Intervention has to be funded, and this is where the major challenge begins. Australia, by virtue of being the richest country in the region, was able to bankroll the operation with ease and efficiency. However, the deeper issue relates to the way this money could be used as a powerful political lever and soft power instrument to reinforce Australia's hegemony, not only in Solomon Islands but also in the region generally. RAMSI was an opportunity for Australia, through the estimated A\$2.4 billion poured into the operation, to drive its reform agenda in Solomon Islands and the region, as well as providing opportunities for employment for hundreds of Australian citizens, who worked in various capacities. It was probably Australia's largest single aid project as well as the most high profile and most prestigious in the region.

In a way, in terms of geopolitical psychology, RAMSI would have boosted Australia's ego as a big regional power. To claim a position in the upper echelons of global security stratification, a country needs to 'prove' its capacity to influence and dominate others politically. This has been the basis of big power hegemony such as that of the United States. Australia's

ability to exert its power, to buy off or influence Pacific Island states by virtue of its wealth and political leverage, has often worked well in its favour. Interestingly, Australia is not able to demonstrate a similar hegemonic tendency in Asia, which contains equally powerful or more powerful states that can outmanoeuvre Australia.

Another effect of RAMSI was the creation of an artificial and unequal economy, which exacerbated the class divide between locals, who relied largely on a semi-subsistence livelihood, and highly paid expatriate advisers, consultants and other RAMSI personnel. The large amount of money poured into the country caused unprecedented inflation and hikes in the cost of real estate and funded a lifestyle for foreigners that became the envy of locals, some of whom, admittedly, benefited through employment, the sale of produce and other economic activities in the informal sector. However, the substantial flow of monetary benefits was restricted to locals who had established business interests in hotels, shops, real estate and the food industry. The sharp disparity between the wealth of foreigners and the income of locals also fed into shimmering anti-foreigner grievances and nationalism that erupted during violence against the Australian police and Chinese businesses during the 2006 riots.

Despite its role in restoring stability, one of the major shortcomings of RAMSI was its inability to establish a long-term conflict resolution strategy for Solomon Islands. The focus of the intervention was largely on rebuilding state institutions, not on nation-building. As a result, the issues of social tension, community fractures, conflict and social dislocation remained. RAMSI had neither the intention nor the expertise to carry out these activities, although some of their personnel were involved in some community-based reconciliation.

Post-conflict transformation requires a process of continuity from conflict to stabilisation and restoration of community trust and relationships. This should involve a restorative and transformative approach. RAMSI's approach was based on retributive rather than restorative justice. In other words, the legal process was paramount in determining who was guilty and what type of punishment was needed. The judicial reforms were largely targeted at ensuring the effectiveness of the retributive system. While the retributive approach provided for short-term stability, it might not be sufficient to guarantee long-term sustainable peace.

In this regard, one of the major tests of cultural inclusivity for RAMSI was its recognition of local peace-building initiatives as a legitimate part of the post-conflict rehabilitation process. RAMSI failed this test because local peace-building initiatives were still seen as culturally distinct and in fact of lesser value, and were not accorded a prominent place in the RAMSI official discourse. What needs to be recognised, however, is that community-based peace initiatives helped to energise the peace process and helped to make RAMSI's work easier to achieve. While RAMSI might have provided the macro and national framework for security, its lack of reach and influence within the villages meant that local communities themselves had to be responsible for local peace-building. The future of sustainable peace in Solomon Islands will depend quite significantly on the social cohesion and harmonious relations emanating from local peace-building initiatives. This reflects the bigger problem of disjuncture between RAMSI and the local communities. RAMSI operated at three different levels: state politics, government bureaucracy and local community. Each had its own identity and operational boundary. Although RAMSI was officially linked to the state elites and bureaucracy, it maintained a certain degree of paternalistic distance. Local state officials were hostile to what they saw as the condescending and haughty attitudes of RAMSI personnel.

This 'cultural gap' might have had a hand in shaping the relationship between local cultural perceptions and the Australian-driven world view of RAMSI. The Australian-centric approach to the intervention was dominant and provided the ideological engine for the entire operation from the policy level to the individual behavioural disposition of Australian RAMSI personnel. Rather than taking a politically 'objective' approach, as often assumed, RAMSI's intervention was highly ideological and culturally driven. It was an extension of Australia's foreign policy discourse and a manifestation of Australia's self-mandated missionising influence in the Pacific. RAMSI was a new missionary enterprise that acted as a conduit for Australian values and Australia's political system and social ethos in a Pacific 'failed state'. RAMSI existed in a different cultural and ideological space from that in which the local people lived, and its aspirations were not really implanted meaningfully into the community.

In their analysis of peace-building in Solomon Islands, Braithwaite et al. (2010: 1) argue that there were issues relating to the framing of the problem and the approaches used. Contrary to the dominant perception that Solomon Islands was a 'failed state', a framework used by RAMSI, the

country was not a ‘failed’ state because it was ‘not a “formed state” but a “state in a process of formation”’. They also refer to RAMSI as a ‘shadow state’ because it operated autonomously, separate from the central state.

Braithwaite et al. (2010: 2) argue that, although RAMSI had some notable successes, it did not really address some of the basic issues that led to conflict. It was in fact a ‘crude state-building agenda; it was not about unpicking the specificities of a knot of fragilities’. RAMSI was more interested in state-building than peace-building, and most of its rebuilding activities revolved around urban Honiara, yet more than 80 per cent of the population were hardly affected. Braithwaite et al. (2010) maintain that, although many mistakes were made during the peace-building process, a lot of lessons were also learned, and this is one of the reasons peace-building has not yet failed in Solomon Islands.

## Constitutional engineering and security

The proposal for a new federal constitution has been a central political agenda item in the post-conflict era because of the need for a political structure and constitutional system that addresses some of the issues of governance, resource distribution, civic organisation and people’s loyalties, which were salient to the conflict. Remember that the TPA had proposed a new political system to facilitate different regional interests; the challenge was how to put in place a constitution that was acceptable to all the provinces and people of the country. The broad idea was that constitutional reform would help in addressing some of the country’s issues of security and stability.

In fact, even before independence in 1978, debate as to the best constitutional arrangement to unify a diverse country with about 65 different languages had started. The centralised Westminster system was chosen ahead of the federal one because it was considered to be cheaper and easier to operate and because it was a continuation of the precolonial structure and process. However, postcolonial system did not serve the general interests of the population in terms of political empowerment and participation, as Mae proclaimed:

The level of participation in Solomon Islands under the Westminster system is far from what was envisaged in the 1978 Independence Constitution. There is a huge gap between the

promise of popular participation and the reality of participation ... Furthermore, the current Westminster system of government still resembles the colonial system of government—it's just the personnel serving the system that changed. (Mae, 2010: 5)

The clamour for a federal system was strong even before independence, as was reflected in the boycott of independence celebrations by the Western district. Also, in 1988, the Guadalcanal people staged a demonstration and demanded the formation of state governments in order to protect their traditional rights, which they believed were being undermined by migrants from other islands. The seeds of rebellion against the status quo were already in place. For the people of Guadalcanal, a system that gave them more autonomy to engage with their own development and with land rights, and to deal with economic and political domination by migrants, especially Malaitans, was uppermost in their mind.

The two-tier, post-independence politico-administrative system, consisting of the central government and the provincial governments, did not fully address the issue of autonomy. While the Provincial Government Act of 1981 delegated some power to provincial governments, the central government retained most of the power to make laws and decisions for the country. This structure was problematic because, rather than empowering and encouraging the participation of people in their own governance and development, it merely created a political and bureaucratic 'gap', which disconnected the state from the people. The absence of any effective and trusted mechanism through which people could channel their grievances merely exacerbated discontent. The structure not only replicated the colonial administrative architecture but also simulated its intent, which was based on paternalistic centralised political control rather than democratic participation.

The issue of federalism dominated Solomon Islands political discourse in its postcolonial life. It was the subject of a number of reviews and consultations, including the Provincial Government Review Committee (Kausimae Report, 1979), the Committee to Review the Provincial Government System (Lulei Report, 1986), the Constitutional Review Committee (Mamaloni Report, 1987), the Committee to Review the Provincial Government System (Tozaka Report, 1999), the Buala and Auki Communiqués (2000), the State Government Task Force Report (SGTF, 2000), UNDP Provincial Consultations (2003), MPs Consultations (2005) and the Constitutional Congress Consultations

(2007–10). A draft of a federal constitution was produced in 2011 and, after wide consultations and review, the final draft was produced in 2014. From 2014 to 2016, the government was involved in wide consultation within the country as well as outside the country in places where Solomon Islands citizens lived, such as in Fiji.

There is a general perception that the new constitution will provide a strong platform for addressing some of the issues of empowerment, autonomy, land rights and development, which had helped fuel discontent in the past. Three pertinent provisions in the Preamble of the 2014 constitutional draft attempt to do this:

Affirm the indigenous political units of our original society, whose cultures, traditions, customs, practices and social relationships have always existed, based on tribes, clans, lineages; Respect our diversity, even as we are proud of our common identity and conscious of our shared destiny; Desire that those changes will be directed through constitutional and legal channels and not by violent or unlawful means. (Solomon Islands Joint Constitutional Congress, 2014)

These three key principles—affirmation of indigenous culture and lineages, respect for diversity and avoidance of the deployment of violence—are central to the ideological foundation of the nation-building process for a country scarred by violence, ethnic displacement and cultural dislocation. The proposed draft constitution attempts to address some of these outstanding grievances by proposing a three-tier governance structure consisting of the federal government, state government and community governments, under the rubric of what is fancifully termed ‘cooperative federalism’. A number of critical areas to help bolster nation-building are also proposed. These include equal citizenship, a bill of rights, protection of the natural heritage and environment, provisions concerning civil society, political parties, national security and the election of a unifying president as head of state.

As we have seen in the case of Fiji, the effectiveness of the constitution lies not so much in the enlightening appeal of its principles nor its grand vision for the future, but in how it responds to constantly changing sociopolitical realities and how much legitimacy and respect it is accorded by the people. On the bright side, the federal system has the potential to engage the communities much more closely and meaningfully in relation to issues of socioeconomic development and well-being and to

facilitate and enhance direct democratic participation and community empowerment. These benefits might help to moderate some of the conditions and lessen some of the tensions that spawned the Guadalcanal/Malaita conflict. However, one of the dangers of the federal system is that, while it provides for ‘autonomy’, dispersal of power and localised decision-making, it has the potential to exacerbate the existing divisions. Administrative and political divisions based on ethnocultural factors might generate intranational enclaves. This will further weaken the central state, which, since independence, has had minimal penetration into and influence in the local communities. Because the population is now nationally dispersed, an important issue is how local governments are going to accommodate people from outside the federal ‘states’. For instance, what will happen to the numerous Malaitans who hold high positions in other states, such as Guadalcanal? The issue of distribution of resources and wealth is also a critical one, given the obvious differences in the resource base of the various ‘states’.

The situation seems to be more complicated than originally realised because of the different positions taken by different regions. Nevertheless, the optimism about the newly proposed constitution is in itself a unifying factor. It is asking a great deal for it to deliver the benefits hoped for in terms of national unity and stability, but that outcome is also a bright possibility.

## Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Based on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) model, the Solomon Islands’ localised version was meant to explore and make more explicit some deep-seated issues of communal conflict, individual and collective traumas and grievances as a basis for collective forgiveness and reconciliation. The principle behind TRCs in other countries often revolve around providing a climate conducive to peace-building and national reconciliation, healing some of the wounds inflicted on victims by both sides of the conflict through direct engagement between victims and perpetrators, and re-establishing a long-term environment of nation-building in a politically scarred landscape.

The Solomon Islands Truth and Reconciliation Commission (STRC), consisting of five members, was set up in 2009 under the 2008 Truth and Reconciliation Act, and completed its assignment in 2011, with the aim

to 'discover the causes, details and effects of the country's "ethnic tension" crisis of 1998–2003' (STRC, 2012). The Act itself mandated that there should be wide participation of people nationwide in the reconciliation process. The STRC, the Act suggested, should be engaged in the promotion of national unity and reconciliation through identification of the truth about what happened in the conflicts and why (STRC Act, Section 5c). To this end, the STRC conducted public and closed hearings and collected statements from victims and perpetrators alike. It also facilitated focus group interviews with a diverse range of people directly involved in the conflict and carried out research on issues related to the conflict.

To make the process workable, a number of mechanisms were put in place to protect both victims and perpetrators who were able to share their stories. Among these was the rights of witnesses in relation to the provision of personal security and freedom from incrimination for what was said. Confidentiality was strictly adhered to if requested, and no personal information was to be publicised. Furthermore, a number of principles guided the process to ensure its credibility: informed consent of victims and witnesses before interviews, respect for diversity, non-hierarchical ordering of cases, provision of emotional and social support for victims and witnesses, availability of trauma counselling, special attention to the situation of children, transparency, freedom to use any language, and procedural fairness for all those involved. These were restorative justice principles that ensured that the subjective being of the person, not the process, was the central focus of attention. This was necessary in a situation of deeply fractured relationships, communal hostility and mutual distrust, to ensure that the engagement space was welcoming, non-inhibiting and non-partisan.

STRC's comprehensive nationwide engagement with the communities unearthed diverse experiences, views and sentiments of individuals, organisations and communities relating to the conflict. The STRC divided the consultation process into regions, which in themselves were unique in terms of their circumstances, problems and the way they were linked to the conflict. For instance, in the Weather Coast area (one of the strongholds of Guadalcanal nationalism and where 35 per cent of all deaths took place) a significant amount of focus was on Harold Keke, one of the rebel leaders, and the havoc he created. Most of the 70 people who died did so as a result of incursions by the so-called Joint Operation to subdue Keke and his supporters. Guadalcanal was also the birthplace of the Moro group, an anti-colonial movement for self-determination.

It was apparent that some of these earlier nationalistic sentiments rearticulated themselves during the conflict. In the Western province of Solomon Islands, an interesting development was the involvement of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army in providing security for the locals.

The STRC captured personal stories about compensation, vengeance, displacement, violence, personal and collective trauma, despair, fear, silence and intimidation. The 330-page report was itself an interesting study in power by the gun and the powerlessness of citizens in a world of uncertainty and deep anxiety. All these factors had a devastating impact on basic services like health, education and the rule of law. The dismantling of state institutions and usurpation of state power meant that the police force, the most visible manifestation of state authority in the country, and which was also divided by tribal loyalties, was rendered ineffective. Militia members and local warlords like Keke ruled the streets, the villages and the country in partisan and often violent ways.

Caught between the warring militias, and in the absence of any state protection, the general population had to seek refuge in certain 'safe' places, some under the protection of their respective militia groups and some with their kinsfolks on the 'other' side of the divide. Links through intermarriage became a useful means of security; for instance, some Malaitans who married into Guadalcanal families were protected by their kin. Many Malaitans who had bought land, built houses and ran businesses in Guadalcanal lost everything and left Honiara as internal refugees.

Despite the stories of doom and despair, the STRC also heard stories of hope. There were narratives of people helping and caring for each other in times of crisis and tribulation. This was a great sign of promise for the future. Amid death and destruction, there were pockets of peaceful engagement and coexistence among the members of the community, which sustained stability at the local level.

The responses to the conflict, as we have seen with RAMSI and the numerous court cases, were very legalistic. This was also reflected in the rather bureaucratic recommendations of the STRC, which suggested the introduction of community policing to re-establish trust and confidence between the community and police; developing the capacity of local professionals in the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution and the Office of the Public Solicitor; improvement of juvenile rehabilitation

programs; provision of mental health facilities for accused persons and prisoners; a provincial quota system for the police force and prisons service; a review of tension trials; and consideration of correctional services redundancies, especially for officers who compromised themselves during the conflict (STRC, 2012: 330–2). These recommendations were quite disappointing because they were not based on restorative justice principles but on legally conceptualised and framed retributive approaches. They hardly addressed the deeper issues of healing community wounds and societal fractures, which truth and reconciliation commissions are supposed to address.

Although the recommendations of the STRC do little to address the bigger issue of nation-building and long-term security, from the point of view of the individuals and communities who shared their stories, narrating their experiences was in itself therapeutic and helped to establish a social space for open dialogue. The future of peace-building in Solomon Islands lies not simply in strengthening the legal process, as the STRC suggested, but in empowering people to establish a culture of peace that flows both vertically to the top and horizontally across communities.

## Community-based peace-building

The predominant focus on the role of RAMSI, STRC and high-profile legal cases often overshadowed peace-building initiatives on the ground. Yet, in a society based on kinship and sociocultural bonding, communally based peace initiatives have been part of people's lives for generations. The fact that they usually exist below the radar of state and legal institutions does not render them inferior in any way. Religious, women's and other community organisations were eager to engage with the people and repair the deep-seated impact of the conflict on their community structures, relationships and norms. While some community groups operated independently at the local level, at the national levels, the Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace (MNURP) provided an institutional state umbrella within which some of the national peace initiatives were carried out.

One of the lessons learnt from the conflict was the need for multistakeholder cooperation. That was one of the reasons why MNURP has been working closely with churches, such as the Anglican Church of Melanesia, on projects such as training in peace-building (*Solomon*

*Star*, 2015). As the most influential and powerful institutions outside the state, churches have used their social and spiritual status to involve themselves directly in the social transformation process by promoting communal harmony. Since the conflict, different churches have pursued their own programs using their respective national networks. For instance, from 28 April to 1 May 2008, 90 members of the Church of Melanesia convened for a provincial consultation process in Honiara on the theme 'Healing past hurts: A way forward for the Church of Melanesia'. The participants were from areas badly affected by the conflict, including rural Guadalcanal, Malaita Province and Honiara. The participants included bishops, clergy, the Church's four religious communities, women, youth, chiefs, laymen, ex-militants and ex-police, as well as Provincial Office staff, bishops of other dioceses in Solomon Islands and representatives of the Solomon Islands Government (Solomon Islands Anglican Communion New Service, 2008). The focus of the consultation was to find a common reconciliatory path for those affected by the conflict using the Christian principles of love and forgiveness in a communal setting and to respond to the need to fully understand the deeper impact of the conflict on families. The meeting also endorsed the STRC, which was to be convened later. This was just one of the many conferences, meetings and workshops conducted by civil society organisations on the matter.

International organisations participated in the community rehabilitation and peace process in various ways. For instance, UNICEF was involved in addressing children's needs and UNESCO was directly involved in programs to integrate children's welfare with peace-building and education. This was crucial because of the involvement in the conflict of many young people without formal education and unemployed young people, both as victims and perpetrators (UNESCO, 2014). This went hand in hand with the Ministry of Education's initiative to introduce peace-based modules into its curriculum (Maebuta, 2012). In 2016 the UNDP launched a UN peace-building program designed to support national efforts towards sustainable peace and stability, with emphasis on women's participation, in Solomon Islands (UNDP, 2016). Other international organisations such as the Asian Development Bank, World Bank and European Union were involved in direct or indirect ways through their contribution to development projects as well as social protection.

The role of the international agencies was problematic because of the lack of connection with the local communities. Their links were on a multilateral basis, which, in many instances, were far removed from

reality on the ground. From the vantage point of the international agencies, the value of their contribution to peace-building was the publicity they were able to generate to reinforce their status and legitimacy. The photo sessions and news publicity became ends in themselves. Being seen to be concerned and being pictured on the ground was a great publicity opportunity, although the financial contribution and the actual impact was nominal or, at worst, insignificant. In the bigger scheme of things, peace-building has become an industry that has spawned competition and territoriality among international agencies, academics and consulting firms. For some international agencies, their global status and reputation have been used to help cement their claim to relevance and legitimacy in the peace-building world.

The real workhorses in community peace-building in Solomon Islands were women's organisations, whose role as advocates of non-violence, dialogue, disarmament and peace-building spanned the entire period of the conflict. They provided the support system for children and the old, and kept families together amid the crisis. Unfortunately, women were largely excluded from the formal peace dialogue processes, but this did not deter them from being actively involved in grassroots mobilisation and in creating the necessary conditions for peace-building and dialogue processes such as the TPA and other peace-building initiatives during and after the conflict.

## Conclusion

The colonial experience of Solomon Islands created an economically uneven, institutionally weak, socially fractious and politically demarcated society in which state structures were wobbly, ineffective and largely tokenistic. The British were not really interested in developing infrastructure because it was a secondary colony, ruled from Fiji, the Crown colony. The only visible manifestation of British colonial rule was the flag and a handful of British officials. This neglect created a distorted sociopolitical structure, and the resulting configuration was not fully modelled on the Westminster or customary system, nor was it a utilitarian combination of both, as was the case in other British colonies like Fiji.

Upon independence, Solomon Islands, with minimal or a complete absence of trained expertise, infrastructure and basic state structure, had to start from scratch, and it was not long before seismic shifts began to

be felt. The struggle to keep up with modernity led to overexploitation of resources, corruption, land disputes and maldistribution of wealth, and these put increasing stress on the new country, struggling to create a unified nation amid ethnic and cultural diversity. The syncretic relationship between civic nationalism (the desire to create a unified national identity) and communal nationalism (the desire to maintain communal distinctiveness) formed a fault line, which was exacerbated by socioeconomic disparity and grievances. This intersection between communal mobilisation and socioeconomic disparity became the epicentre of the rippling political quakes.

It was only a matter of time before the inevitable happened. When it happened, the Solomon Island communities were not ready in terms of their conflict resolution responses. They had to adapt to the fast-changing conflict culture and its consequences. The conflict was the single most transformative event in the modern history of Solomon Islands, at least since colonisation, and its long-term effects will be felt for some time yet. Communities were transformed in a fundamental way, and so were the cultural response mechanisms and sense of resilience. Historians will look back and define the conflict as the watershed moment when the country had to come to terms with the complexities of social transformation, a time when indigenous values and colonial cultures intersected and defined each other in a syncretic way.

The conflict in Solomon Islands had a number of significant characteristics that were typical of many postcolonial societies. One major issue was the way in which modernity disrupted and transformed a communal and subsistence culture and created social and political fissures that led to conflict. While local conflicts were taking place as part of normal everyday tension, as in any society, the national conflict in Solomon Islands moved to another level of intensity. The consequences were unprecedented. The growth of the capitalist economy and the subsequent demand for labour and the pressure this put on land and social relations on Guadalcanal provided a recipe for tension. Economic disparity and the corrupt activities of political elites, many of whom were from economically depressed communities and, therefore, wanted quick money for themselves, together with the pressure from their *wantok* for resources, were all juxtaposed in a melting pot of grievances, waiting for a spark to cause an explosion. When it did, it was not easy to stop the genie of aggression, which had been bottled up for some time.

The customary means of reconciliation that had provided for social balance and cultural harmony within kinship groups could not stem the tide of violence and destruction. The extent of violence was national in latitude and impact and was beyond the capacity of local communities to contain using customary means. The setting up of armed groups by warring sides and the mode of engagement and weaponry were modelled on modern militaries or guerrilla armies elsewhere around the world. Clearly these were beyond the cultural knowledge and notion of place of local communities, who found themselves sandwiched between contending forces in a confrontation whose magnitude and intensity were outside the conflict norms of their familiar world. The older generation might have remembered the World War II campaign by the Allies against the Japanese invasion, but these were seen to be instigated from outside and the defeat of the Japanese meant the end of the conflict. This was not the case with the internally generated civil disorder that transformed Honiara and parts of Guadalcanal into 'war zones' of sorts.

The sense of unfamiliarity with the use of firearms and the semi-military organised fighting groups were traumatic for the community collectively as well as for individuals. Relationships were fractured, but this did not dampen the sense of resilience of communities. Often, in times of crisis, collective resilience goes through a phase of resurgence as a protective mechanism to ensure self-preservation. To some extent, mitigating responses might have some links to the subconscious evolutionary intuition for survival. At another level, however, there is an important social rationale for the perpetuation of the human species. For kinship-based societies like that of Solomon Islands, the life of individuals is just as important as the life of the community in general. Life is defined not by the chronological sequence of events from birth to death but by one's consciousness about identity and one's contribution to collective survival. The conflict, and the desire for perpetuity, inspired survival initiatives in the form of community peace-building by community groups such as church and women's organisations. At the more ontological level, in the absence of the capacity for nationwide reach, community peace groups searched more deeply for indigenous modes of reconciliation to address conflicts in neighbourhoods. These pockets of peace-building, scattered around the country, worked well together in diffusing tension at the local level and collectively contributed to national peace, at least for the time being.

For the rest of the Pacific, the Solomon Island conflict was an important lesson in regional intervention, where sovereignty had to be traded for security. For a country desperate to unload the burden of violence, security was the major priority, around which other considerations revolved. RAMSI not only provided the much-needed security but also transformed the security discourse into an Australian-based one. The challenge now is to find ways to build capacity for the local security institutions, principally the police, judiciary, corrections and intelligence, to ensure the sustainability of security and stability. An equally daunting task is to carry out a process of inclusive and consensual nation-building to mend the social fractures and communal rifts that have remained in a state of hibernation since the height of the violence.

Solomon Islands represents a classic postcolonial state where national conflict emanated from the contradiction of its colonial history. The use of postcolonial, securitisation and human security discourses are important in capturing the multilayered factors that have shaped conflict and security during the colonial and postcolonial periods. Although this might be the theoretical approach to explain the past, the narrative for the future is in the hands not of scholars pontificating about what ought to be done but of Solomon Islanders themselves, whose destiny they must take charge of without the paternalistic urgings of neo-imperialist neighbours such as Australia or the patronising whims of international agencies. A future in people's hands is a future in good hands.

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