Preface

This collection originates in a one-day conference organised jointly by the State Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) Program and the Pacific Centre at the Australian National University on 5 May 2006. The conference—Solomon Islands, Where to Now?—was held shortly after serious disturbances in the Solomon Islands capital, Honiara, in April 2006. This was a timely opportunity to reflect on these events and what they meant for Solomon Islands, as well as for the substantial Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). As well as Australian-based scholars, several colleagues from Solomon Islands and other parts of the region accepted our invitation to contribute their observations and analysis of developments in Honiara.

The crisis that gripped Solomon Islands in April 2006 started when newly elected parliamentarians chose Snyder Rini as prime minister-elect. People expressed outrage, peacefully at first but then in a riot that destroyed Chinese-owned stores in the capital. Australia, New Zealand and Fiji sent troops and police to join those already there under the regional mission. RAMSI was deployed initially in mid-2003 at the request of the Solomon Islands government. Law and order was restored quickly and peacefully after four debilitating years of ‘ethnic tensions’, endemic lawlessness, economic decline, and a progressive paralysis of the central government. The disturbances in April caused extensive damage to Honiara’s Chinatown district—though fortunately no fatalities occurred—and caught most observers completely off-guard. While these events did not derail the regional mission, they inevitably raised questions about some of the earlier assessments. Before they occurred, many experts were hailing RAMSI as an unqualified success. Some saw it as a model for ‘cooperative intervention’ in ‘failing states’ worldwide. In light of April’s developments, RAMSI’s success appeared less certain and its model more problematic.

Shortly after the disturbances, a new government was established in Solomon Islands under the leadership of Manasseh Sogavare. In the following fifteen months relations between the governments of Solomon Islands and Australia deteriorated dramatically as they struggled over the control and
direction of the regional mission. While some of the contributions, notably the introductory chapter, allude to these subsequent developments, most are focused on the events surrounding the April disturbances. While by no means a definitive account, this book explores a significant crisis moment in recent Solomon Islands history. Contributors examine what happened when unrest engulfed the capital of the small Melanesian country in 2006, the role of members of the local Asian community in business and politics, and why the crisis is best understood in the context of the country’s unique blend of traditional and modern politics.

Chapter One situates RAMSI in the setting of international state building and the particular social and historical context of state building in Solomon Islands. Chapters Two and Three look at the politics underlying the disturbances and the Asian involvement in Solomon Islands politics and economics. Chapters Four, Five and Six examine the workings of the formal political and electoral process and, in particular, the 2006 election and process of government formation. Some of the challenges facing the regional assistance mission are examined in Chapter Seven. While most contributors focus on developments in the national capital, Chapters Eight and Nine offer some different perspectives from the provinces. Chapter Ten provides some broader reflections on the challenges facing Solomon Islands in the years ahead. Appendix 1 is an Australian government perspective on the events in Honiara in April 2006, while the terms of reference for the Solomon Islands government Commission of Inquiry into these events are reproduced in Appendix 2. Appendix 3 contains the terms of reference for the subsequent Pacific Islands Forum Review of RAMSI. Chapters Five and Nine are reproduced with permission from the 2007 Special Issue on Solomon Islands of the Journal of Pacific History.

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