

The Mouse that Roared: Manasseh Sogavare, China, and Australia

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Figure 1: Point Cruz, Honiara.
(Courtesy of the Solomon Islands Ports Authority)

Introduction

Manasseh Sogavare, four times Prime Minister of Solomon Islands—the most experienced since independence in 1978—is currently being portrayed as a Pacific bogeyman, dragging the islands into China’s orbit. While we try to double-guess the motivations of the governments of China and Solomon Islands, two points are missing.

The first is detailed analysis of the character and political track record of Manasseh Sogavare, and his relationship with Australia. At 67 years of age Sogavare remains very fit and although not tall is a commanding charismatic figure. However, is this well-educated and charismatic martial arts expert and seasoned politician, really in control of what is happening? While we don’t have a final copy of the security pact with China, should anyone believe his denials about a possible military base? The leaked draft certainly included scope for China to move in troops and police, to establish port facilities for Chinese ships, help defend infrastructure, and safeguard ethnic Chinese in Solomon Islands (some of whom are PRC citizens).

I will also discuss the site for a hypothetical Chinese base, suggesting that perhaps we are misled in our thinking around what constitutes a base, as there already are two large Chinese corporate bases close to Honiara, and another looming at Yandina.

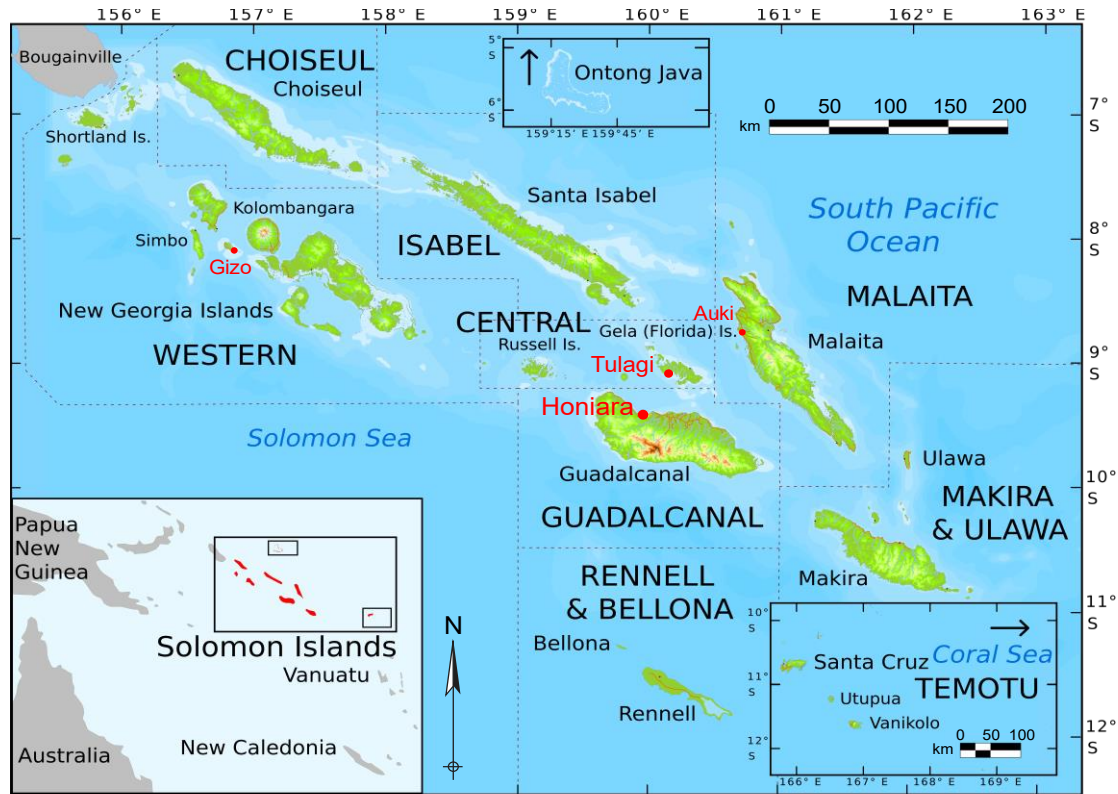


Figure 2: The Solomon Islands, the last British Protectorate, an independent nation since 1978. The Solomon Islands shares boundaries with Australia’s Coral Sea Islands External Territory and several other Pacific nations. The only urban centre of significant size is Honiara, followed by much smaller Gizo and Auki. The only other government-owned island of significance is small Tulagi, the first capital between 1896 and 1942.

(Courtesy of Vincent Verheyen)

The Mouse that Roared*

After a long period—1983 to 2019—recognising the Republic of China (Taiwan), the Solomon Islands Government has a newly developing relationship with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The swap in 2019 and a security treaty signed between the PRC and Solomon Islands in April 2022 is at centre of the current debate. China already has bilateral relations with 13 other Pacific nations: Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, New Zealand, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The arrangement in different in each nation and it is up to the Solomon Islands Government to work with China to design a suitable model for engagement.

Australia, New Zealand and the USA clearly misread what was happening, even though the Taiwan/China debate in the Solomon Islands goes back to 1980s. Early in the 2022 debate, the Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne spoke of protecting ‘Australia’s backyard’, seemingly forgetting that there was an international border with a sovereign nation on the

other side. America was caught napping by the China pact with Solomon Islands, and has had no embassy in Solomon Islands for thirty years, managing with a local Consular Officer and running everything at a minimal level out of Port Moresby. All of this is now revolving around an Australian national election, with Labor taking pot-shots at the Coalition's ineptitude and Prime Minister Morrison using the occasion to appear strong to a gullible public.

Remember that Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government has not handled relations with China well, to the detriment of Australian trade. Chinese leaders will not even return phone calls from Australian Government ministers. After allowing Darwin's port to be leased to a Chinese company for 99 years and other Chinese installations such as an international airport in Western Australia, the government is in no position to threaten the Solomon Islands with a 'Red Line' they cannot cross. Australia has been complacent and condescending in its dealings with the Solomon Islands and other Pacific nations. There is nothing wrong with having more than one security partner. There is more than a touch of neo-colonialism in the shrill cries emanating from Canberra.

Equally, Sogavare has been disingenuous about his nation's 2018 security treaty with Australia. At the time of the November 2021 riots in Honiara, Australia and New Zealand put police and troops on the ground very fast, along with peacekeepers from Papua New Guinea and Fiji. Sogavare has said that Australia's response was not fast enough, even though it was done in just over 24 hours, which is about as speedy as any nation could ever manage. He also accused the Australian forces of refusing to protect Chinese infrastructure and investments in Honiara, at which Morrison accused Sogavare of parroting Chinese rhetoric. Relations between the two nations have hardly ever been worse, not since during the second Sogavare government in 2006.

Sogavare has also reminded the Australian Government that they did not consult their Pacific neighbours before dumping the French submarine deal for one using USA and British vessels with nuclear technology. Sogavare's point is that arranging diplomatic alliances is a matter for sovereign nations, not their neighbours. Sogavare is a strong nationalist and is insulted that when a Pacific nation chooses to assert its sovereignty they are branded as unfit to manage their own affairs.

Sogavare is playing to his national audience in a largely Christian country uncomfortable about Communism, and where most local businesses are Chinese-owned. One local leader, Premier of Malaita Province Daniel Suidani, has been forthright in his criticism of the China pact, to the detriment of economic development in his province. Sogavare has behaved vindictively towards the Premier and his province. *De facto*, Suidani has become a national opposition leader in the face of a weak parliamentary Opposition. And, as explained in the conclusion, Malaitans in their home province have shown that protests and discussions can be accomplished without riots.

Sogavare is expert in manipulating the government apparatus and is increasingly autocratic. For instance, by constantly extending a Covid-inspired national security State of Emergency he has silenced any internal critics and the national media. By yelling aggressively in the Parliament he is intimidating all around him. His ranting is certainly not a Solomons way to behave. All of this is in the context of a new world order with Russia asserting its place in Europe, and China hell bent on sailing south into Pacific waters. Is Sogavare just reading

clearly what is about to occur in the South Pacific? He has promised repeatedly that there will be no Chinese military base in Solomon Islands, although what I consider here is Chinese corporate bases with connections to the Chinese Government. However, he did lie to Zed Seselja, the junior Australian envoy sent by Prime Minister Morrison, saying that he had not yet signed the pact, when he already had. He escaped the same issue when Kurt Campbell, President Biden's Indo-Pacific Co-ordinator visited, as discussions were limited to bilateral relationships and development projects respecting national sovereignty.

Finally, Sogavare is not ignorant of the risks he is taking, and must be smiling at one outcome. Undoubtedly Solomon Islands will now receive more development aid than ever before from Australia, the USA, the Peoples Republic of China, and perhaps Japan. However, when we look at Sogavare over the last two decades he has become increasingly autocratic and fixated on his own political survival. He is a clever and ruthless politician backed by an efficient party machine and has connections to corruption in the logging industry. Like all Prime Ministers, he has a 'slush fund', first courtesy of Taiwan and now China. Both have also heavily subsidised the Constituency Development Funds which parliamentarians receive to develop their electorates. The CDF's account for 10 to 15 percent of government spending and can be used largely free of restrictions. In recent years Taiwan had decreased its commitment to subsidising the funds, perhaps another reason to switch to China.

A Chinese Military Base in the Solomons: The Thin Red Line?***

Foreign naval ships have been visiting Solomon Islands since the mid-nineteenth century when the British used 'gun boat diplomacy' to punish local people who dared to transgress British rules of behaviour, of which they had no knowledge. They sailed up, shelled villages as punishment, and carried out executions. During the Second World War the Solomon Islands became a key battle ground for the Japanese and American military forces, which made the Solomons newsworthy world-wide. Today, naval visits are fairly constant, with Australian, New Zealand, American and British ships calling in to 'show the flag', as did Taiwan until 2019. Adding the PRC navy to the visiting military ships is not a problem, as long as they stay within Post Authority regulations.

Some overseas media and political 'experts' who have joined the debate seem to presume that there will inevitably be a Chinese military base built in Solomon Islands. China currently has overseas military bases in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa (the Somali Peninsula) and Tajikistan, with others under investigation in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and African countries. This is in stark contrast to the USA's hundreds of bases in over 80 countries. China uses a different model: a limited number of strategic positions; development funding and large loans; global investments through large corporations with close ties to the government; and diaspora population in smaller businesses. This is all rather sanitised. We also need to remember China's record in domestic policing—Tiananmen Square, Tibet, the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, and Hong Kong, for instance. Solomon Islanders would be most unhappy with any similar heavy-handed actions.

The logic of supportive infrastructure and past events suggest a base or bases close to Honiara. Previous civil unrest (1989, 1996, in the Tension years 1998–2003, 2006, 2014, 2019, and 2021), suggests that future unrest will probably occur again in Honiara. It is also

the home to the majority of the ethnic Chinese. Let us explore Honiara and other possible sites as a way of getting to understand the Solomon Islands.

The Solomon Islands population is around 750,000. There are 900 islands, small and large, many surrounded by reefs. Two of them are unlikely candidates for a base because they have active or dormant volcanoes, and one has an underwater volcano nearby. According to government sources about 150 islands are inhabited. There are good deep water ports and sheltered lagoon areas, although many of them are too exposed to the weather to be useful. It makes most sense to add to existing infrastructure with quick access to Honiara. Other than Honiara and the old capital Tulagi in Central Islands Province, most of the land is under customary ownership and is not owned by the government. The strength of the nation lies in this traditional community ownership, although the system always frustrates national development plans.

Honiara, with its 160,000 people, is on the north coast of Guadalcanal, the largest island in the nation. The only existing legal international port facility on Guadalcanal is at Point Cruz, once a small island with a causeway joining it to the mainland, which since the 1950s has been developed as the port. Any further development there is virtually impossible.

Honiara already extends into surrounding land under customary ownership. The entire area is known as Greater Honiara. One glance at maps of Honiara shows that there is virtually no space for a substantial Chinese military base anywhere within Honiara's boundary.

HONIARA'S CURRENT AND PROJECTED URBAN GROWTH

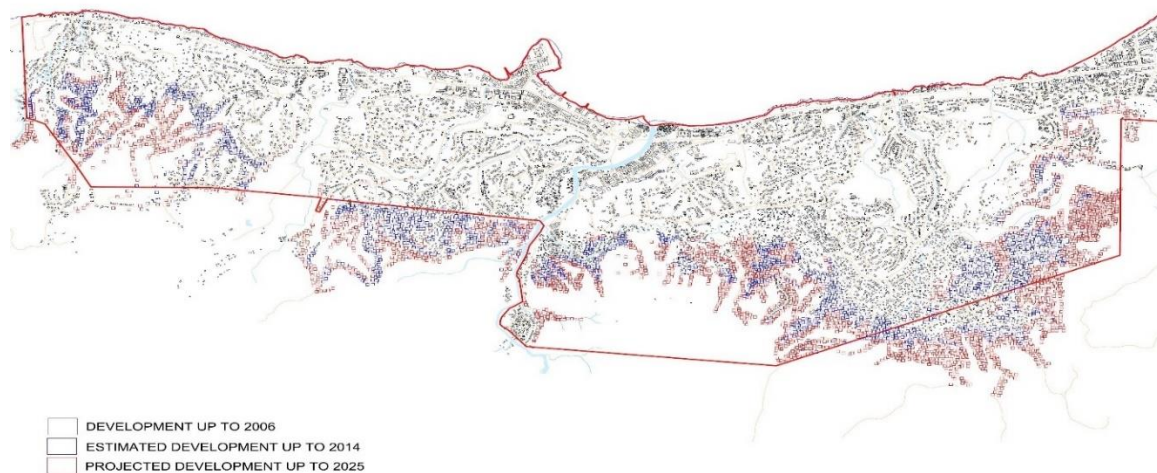


Figure 3: Honiara's Current and Projected Urban Growth beyond the City Council Boundaries as projected up to 2025.

(Courtesy of the Solomon Islands Government)



Figure 4: Greater Honiara (the orange boundary), encompassing the City Council (the green boundary) and surrounding urban areas that spread out over customary land.

(Courtesy of the Solomon Islands Government)

Two possible sites just outside of Honiara are already in Chinese commercial hands. The most likely coastal site is Lee Kwok Kuen's Leroy Wharf Port at Lungga, on the eastern edge of Honiara not far from Henderson international airfield. This wharf, 180 metres long and 30 metres wide was built between 2010 and 2014. Over the last 18 months the wharf has been used unofficially to service PRC container ships. It acts as an informal international port, much to the dismay of the Solomon Islands Ports Authority (SIPA). There is deep water access (better than at Point Cruz), and the shore precinct is larger than the SIPA's Point Cruz site. The wharf could easily be expanded. A fully laden aircraft carrier draws about 15 metres of water depth, which could be accommodated. Perhaps this is all China requires: its own private wharf, where the Ports Authority and Customs cannot easily pry.

The other close-by location is Gold Ridge, the 3,000-hectare gold-mining lease in the mountains inland from Honiara. Since 2019 this has been owned by Chinese companies China Overseas Engineering Co. Ltd, China Railway Shanghai Engineering Bureau Group Co. Ltd, and Wanguo International Mining Group Co. Ltd. The local guards wear PRC-flagged uniforms. We need to widen our military mind-sets away from the coast as Gold Ridge has plenty of space for barracks, training, and military facilities. Why not have a mountain base as well as a coastal wharf facility? Gold Ridge has quick road access to Honiara and is a short helicopter ride away. It never was a great success as a mine, which is probably not the only motivation for these large Chinese corporations.

Doma, further along the northern coast, which has long been designated as a future independent provincial centre and urban area for Guadalcanal Province, is already an area of Chinese investment. Perhaps the provincial government will not welcome any further Chinese development, and there would have to be further negotiations with customary landholders. Also close by and up for sale is Patrick Wong's Russell Islands Plantation Estates Ltd (RIPEL) at Yandina in the Russell Islands. RIPEL (once a major Levers copra plantation) has plenty of land, its own port and a private airfield. Several Solomon Islands

Governments have tried to reopen Yandina, and at present Attorney General John Muria Jr. and Sogavare's nephew and Chief of Staff Robson Djokovic are negotiating its sale to a Chinese corporation.

It would also be possible to take over one or two of the various defunct coastal mining leases around the country. The ex-Axiom Mining leases at San Jorge and Kolosori in Isabel Province springs to mind, with the extra advantage that they cover the largest nickel laterite deposits in the Pacific. It would take some legal manoeuvring to convert any mining lease, but it is not impossible as these areas are already marked for alienation over the next several decades. Thousand Ships Bay between San Jorge Island and Isabel was named by the Spanish in 1568 because of its commodious harbour, although admittedly galleons require less water clearance than Chinese aircraft carriers. There are many other possible sites, as long as the infrastructure begins from scratch and the customary landowners agree.

After Honiara, there are only two other urban centres of any size in Solomon Islands. Small Gizo (7,000 people) is in the north in Western Province, too far away from Honiara, and has a shallow harbour. The other is Auki (also around 7,000 people), the capital of Malaita Province on the west coast of Malaita. Given the poor relationship between the national government and Malaita Province, no Chinese base will ever be built there. Malaita is also the most populous island, and its people are notorious for not making their land available for development projects.

The only other easy possibility is Tulagi, the old capital in the Ngela Group opposite Honiara, and now the headquarters of Central Islands Province. It is hardly ideal for access to Honiara (Doma or Gold Ridge on Guadalcanal would be better), but it is a small island (320 hectares is size, 5 kilometres long and 0.8 kilometres wide) on an excellent sheltered harbour. The Tulagi-Gavutu harbour is big enough to hold naval fleets, as the Japanese and Americans discovered during the Second World War. Back in 2019, AVIC International Project Engineering Co., and the China Sam Enterprise Group, which produces weapons for China, wanted to arrange a 75 year lease of Tulagi. In their negotiations with the Premier, AVIC and China Sam said they wanted to study the 'opportunities to develop naval and infrastructure projects on leased land for the People's Liberation Army Navy'. The Chinese bid was rebuffed, although this may well have been the first attempt by a Chinese corporation acting on behalf of its government. Tulagi is unusual as it is Crown land purchased by the British in 1896 and now the property of the national government.

Other islands in the Tulagi enclave are held on long term leases and have deep water access. One is Double Island that has a long-term lease and is controlled by the Leong family of Pacific Casino Hotel. The downside is that the islands are small and distant from any area that could house an international airfield, although the nearby larger Ngela Islands could be used for this. Tulagi could easily be joined to the mainland by a causeway, although this would silt up the harbour. Another stumbling block, of course, is customary ownership of the surrounding land.

There are lots of choices. My conclusion is that, *de facto*, the two necessary bases—Leroy Wharf Port and Gold Ridge—already exist and are in Chinese corporate hands. Yandina or Tulagi may follow.

Manasseh Damukana Sogavare

Who is this man who has caused a Pacific frenzy? Manasseh Damukana Sogavare was born on 17 January 1955 in Oro Province in Papua New Guinea, of Choiseul Island parents who were working as Seventh-day Adventist missionaries. He left Honiara's Betikama High School in 1974 to work as a clerk in the Honiara Consumers Co-operative shop, before moving on to another clerical position, in the Inland Revenue Division of the Ministry of Finance. He rose through the ranks until he became Commissioner for Inland Revenue and Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Finance in 1993. Sidelined by the Mamaloni government in 1994 when he disagreed with their shoddy practices, he resigned and went to study accounting and economics at the University of the South Pacific in Suva. His parliamentary career began when he won the East Choiseul seat in the August 1997 elections and became Minister for Finance and Treasury in the Ulafa`alu Government. As a young politician he was mentored by Solomon Mamaloni, the nation's most unpredictable and devious political leader (until Sogavare got into power). Sacked by Ulafa`alu in 1999, Sogavare became deputy to Mamaloni who was then Leader of the Opposition. During this time he completed a flexible delivery Master's Degree from New Zealand's Waikato University.

In the late 1990s Mamaloni helped shape Sogavare's core ideas and after Mamaloni died in January 2000 Sogavare, then Leader of the Opposition, kept in touch with him in the spirit world. There are plenty of references from later years to Sogavare communicating with Mamaloni's spirit. In the rational Western world this would probably be interpreted as Sogavare thinking through issues that were troubling him, and wondering what Mamaloni would do. Solomon Islanders do not find this to be unusual behaviour; and indeed, Christian prayer is similar. Add to this that some on Makira (Mamaloni's island) believe that he is still alive and well, living in an underground cave network with his secret army.

Sogavare absorbed Mamaloni's unpredictability, anti-colonial and anti-Australia attitudes, and willingness to play the sovereignty card. Christopher Chevalier's recent biography of Solomon Malanoli, *Understanding 'Solo'*, throws an interesting (reverse) link back to 1983 when Prime Minister Mamaloni went against his Cabinet colleagues who wanted to recognise the PRC. Mamaloni chose Taiwan, which was embarrassing as there were cabinet ministers waiting in Beijing to sign the protocol with China. The relationship was then bolstered by Prime Minister Sir Peter Kenilorea in 1985 when he established full diplomatic relations at ambassador level. Kenilorea's Secretary to Cabinet refused to write a supporting Cabinet paper, leaving Sir Peter to write his own. His Cabinet offered no support, but accepted his decision, an indication of the power of Solomon Islands' Prime Ministers. There are signs of the Melanesian bigman system imbedded in the respect given to Prime Ministers, and Sogavare has benefited from this.

The relationship with Taiwan was continued by all governments until Sogavare's 2019 decision. Sogavare threatened Taiwan with a change to China while Prime Minister in 2000 and in 2006, the later occasion outlined by Jon Fraenkel in his *The Manipulation of Custom*. On both occasions it was to obtain larger amounts of development assistance. If the change had occurred on any of these occasions, the situation today would be very different.

Mamaloni also influenced Sogavare's interest in social credit theory, a now largely discredited distributive philosophy which attributed economic downturns to discrepancies

between the cost of goods produced and the compensation of workers, which required government intervention through debt free money to alleviate. As his political philosophy matured in the 2000s, Sogavare mixed in social credit economic ideas, obvious in his Solomon Islands Social Credit (Socred) Party, along with a strong belief in nationalism.

Sogavare's 2000–01 and 2006–07 Prime Ministerships

A series of circumstances hardened Sogavare's resolve. Sogavare is the longest-serving Prime Minister, the most significant Solomon Islands leader of his generation. He is very much a bigman and chief in the tradition of 'Man Choiseul', a distinct cultural entity from the north of the nation. His alliance with China now places him in the forefront of Pacific and regional affairs. Other than the early Mamaloni influences, I do not believe he had a constant 'game plan' right from the beginning.

Sogavare took over after Prime Minister Ulafa`alu was deposed in late June 2000 in an armed *coup* during political unrest called the 'Tension', which had begun in 1998. He was elected as Prime Minister, serving for a little over a year during the very difficult 'Tension' years. Events and the power of the militant groups were stacked against him. He lost his prime ministership in a general election in December 2001 and resumed the role of Leader of the Opposition. I distinctly remember his opposition to the arrival of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in 2003, on the grounds of erosion of national sovereignty.

The Pacific Forum's RAMSI remained until mid-2017, never a government but always an alternative source of power and finance. Sogavare retained his seat in the April 2006 national election, failed to be elected Prime Minister (obtaining only 11 of 50 votes), and switched his support to Snyder Rini, who was elected. The crowd outside Parliament forced Rini to flee and he resigned after only eight days in office. He was seen as closely allied to corrupt Asian logging interests. After the short Rini prime ministership, Sogavare stood again and gained 28 votes, becoming Prime Minister.

I would argue that Sogavare is an intelligent, energetic and extremely able leader who has pursued a calculated policy that has enabled him to assume more political power than any other Solomon Islands leader has ever possessed. During his second term as Prime Minister, Sogavare was able to take control of key positions within the legal system, and he worked towards obtaining a three-quarters majority in the Parliament, which would have enabled him to alter the Constitution. This goes against notions of parliamentary balance and the basic principles of the division of power in the Westminster system, leading to a more dictatorial form of leadership. He continues to pursue this and is hoping to alter the National Constitution to defer the national election due in 2023 until 2024, after the Pacific Games in Honiara.

Like any Prime Minister he has learnt on the job and reacted to situations he faced. Political machinations and confrontations, particularly with Australia, have shaped and hardened Sogavare's resolve. Nevertheless, he is the only Prime Minister to come to power through violent circumstances, and he has done so twice. When Dr Derek Sikua moved a motion of no-confidence in Sogavare in December 2007 he used parliamentary privilege to make public what many already knew, that Sogavare had been involved in preparations for the 2000 *coup*. Whether Sogavare had a clear role in the 2006 riots which led to Rini's resignation is uncertain, although his role in the manoeuvres for the Prime Minister's position are quite

clear and are detailed in the interim report of the Commission into the riots. Nevertheless, it must be said that there is evidence that the riots were not spontaneous.

Sogavare soon realised that there are key posts that, if controlled, can make governing much easier. I have previously called it a creeping coup. The list of officials he removed or did not reappointed is impressive: the Attorney-General (the position is not held by a parliamentarian), the Solicitor-General, the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Legal Draftsman (who creates the legislation), the Police Commissioner, and the Ombudsman. The Speaker of the House (again, not a parliamentarian) opposed Sogavare over procedure and came close to being removed, and the Governor-General was compromised. Sogavare manipulated all of these positions, and had a sad involvement with Indo-Fijian Julian Moti as Attorney-General, which even compromised the PNG Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare. Matters kept getting worse and eventually the Australian High Commissioner Patrick Cole was made *persona non grata* in September 2006, although there was ample provocation. RAMSI raided Sogavare's office (he was not present) looking for evidence relating to Moti, and Sogavare threatened to expel Australia from RAMSI.

Naturally, the Australian Government viewed the Cole expulsion and the threat to its position in RAMSI as provocative. Sogavare's enemies (particularly the Australian Government) tried to write him off as unstable. In October 2006 he survived a no-confidence motion, largely brought on by his deteriorating relationship with Australia.

Sogavare, 2014–17 and 2019–2022

Sogavare was replaced as Prime Minister by Derek Sikua (2007–10), Danny Phillip (2010–11) and Gordon Darcy Lilo (2011–14). Between 2007 and 2014 he was again Leader of the Opposition. He regained the prime ministership from 2014 to 2017, then lost it to Rick Houenipwela (2017–19) after Derek Sikua again brought a motion of no-confidence, claiming that Sogavare was fixated by conspiracy theories. Sikua also made allegations that Sogavare had received 'donations' from Huawei, the Chinese telecommunication company which had contracted to provide an undersea fibre optic cable. Australia moved quickly to replace Huawei, providing the undersea cable, to ensure that Chinese technology could not compromise Australian security.

In the April 2019 National Elections no single party held more than eight seats in the 50-seat Parliament, and there were 21 Independents. In the usual post-election jostling Sogavare managed to gain the votes of 34 members. His ploy was to relaunch the Ownership, Unity and Responsibility (OUR) Party a week after the election, in an attempt to get the Independents to group together. Matthew Wale applied to the High Court to challenge the legality, but the Governor-General ruled that the election for Prime Minister was legal under the National Constitution, and the High Court supported him. A large number of MPs, including the Deputy Prime Minister John Maneniaru and other ministers, abstained from voting. Matthew Wale and 15 Opposition supporters walked out. Frustration boiled over in Honiara, with a general feeling that the public no longer had any power to change the government through elections. They decried the change from Taiwan to the PRC, and that Chinese and Malaysian Chinese interests had taken control of the logging industry, plus investments in the mining and fishing industries, as well as much of the retail trade. The government was seen as far too close to logging interests, which were destroying the forests of the nation. Cronyism and corruption is rife in the government.

Sogavare's re-election as Prime Minister caused a riot outside Parliament, which also moved to newer large Chinese-owned businesses. Sogavare had to flee from Parliament, making his way via back roads to safety at Rove police headquarters. It was not as ignoble as Snyder Rini's debacle in 2006, although the event clearly frightened Sogavare. He knows that he needs a strong police force and will happily combine Australian and Chinese assistance.

There were more serious riots in November 2021, which began as peaceful protests against the decision to recognise China over Taiwan. Leader of the Opposition Matthew Wale brought a vote of no-confidence against Sogavare, claiming that he was 'in the service of a foreign power'. A motion of no-confidence was put to Parliament on 6 December: 32 parliamentarians voted against, 15 voted for the motion and two abstained. The demonstration turned violent when protesters attempted to storm Parliament to depose Sogavare. The police were called in, who used tear gas on the protesters, and the riot spread to Chinatown, leading to massive burning and looting. A house in Sogavare's compound at Lungga was destroyed. Sogavare introduced a 36-hour lockdown and called on the 2017 security treaty with Australia. Australia and New Zealand sent police and troops and Papua New Guinea and Fiji sent peacekeepers. In late December the Solomon Islands also requested help from China, which supplied batons, shields and helmets for help in any future riots. The violence was roundly condemned.

Sogavare is a political survivor. He presents as logical and forthright, but fears losing power and has no problems with destroying the basic principles on which the nation was founded. He has obtained a large majority in the Parliament, but so far not large enough to enable him to delay the national elections until 2024. If he succeeds he will have perverted the four-yearly election cycle, a basic tenet of the founding National Constitution. However, money talks in Solomon Islands politics and he has been liberal with his rewards.

Sogavare is emotional, and alarmingly, some observers who know him well are stressing that his behaviour is quite paranoid. Can we trust him to keep his word that there will be no Chinese military base, particularly when he refuses to release a copy of the final agreement with China? All we have is a leaked copy of an early draft. The answer is no, Sogavare is self-serving, an expert manipulator, and planning to remain as Prime Minister. However, it is what constitutes a base that is important. It can be argued that China already has two potential military bases, Lee Kwok Kuen's Leroy Wharf Port at Lungga, and the old Gold Ridge mine site in central Guadalcanal.

Despite RAMSI and other assistance, Sogavare and his government are well aware of the Australian Government's arrogant shortcomings and refuse to be lectured to by hypocrites. Safeguarding their environment is crucial for Pacific Islanders and they look askance at Australia's ducking and weaving on this issue, that if unchecked will make whole islands and even nations uninhabitable. Using PNG's Manus Island, and Nauru, as dumping places for refugees did not go down well, and Australian exploitation of Pacific guest workers is viewed poorly. The obvious historical simile used to compare with the Pacific guest workers is the 'Blackbirding' of Pacific Islanders to Queensland on more than 56,000 indenture contracts over the last four decades of the nineteenth century, 17,700 of them from the Solomon Islands. Solomon Islanders have not forgotten and see this as slavery. Although the guest worker scheme has possibilities, and 3,000 Solomon Islanders participate, there is clearly exploitation of some of them that needs to be stopped.

Solomon Islander Frustration

As Honiara observer Anouk Ride reminds us, the riots are not irrational and occur at key periods of political transition. They are symbolic, usually led by a small number of activists, target key areas, and have clear purposes. Most of Honiara's residents do not participate.

Solomon Islanders are frustrated by domestic politics but feel powerless as they watch their Parliament and government behaving badly. This is not what they expected as their future after independence in 1978. Faced with growing poverty and a leadership that will not listen and is dragging them down what they see as wrong roads, many urban-dwellers, particularly marginalised youths, feel they have no other choice but to resort to destructive behaviour. There is also opportunism as not everything gets burnt in riots and there is plenty of stolen property circulating. This minority of urban Solomon Islanders have been their own worst enemies. Many have yet to realise that protest by rioting is wrong, destructive and counterproductive.

Governments should only be removed by votes of no-confidence or in elections, not by rioting mobs. However, with the parliamentarians either independents or having only loose alliances to political parties, many of them can be bought when it comes to leadership votes. Given the devastating success of the various riots, they will probably not stop unless there is either concerted police or military action, or an Opposition leadership develops that is capable of standing up to Sogavare's political machine and its finances. Although the RSIPF was deliberately left weak and gutted by RAMSI between 2003 and 2011, the Force has now been rebuilt and is recovering its self-pride. The RSIPF now has Chinese as well as Australian advisers, but any attempt to use Chinese police or armed forces to control public disturbances would make the situation much worse. The chances of Chinese military forces behaving in a 'Pacific Way' is remote.

No one wants another riot, certainly not Sogavare, as riots debilitate Honiara and the nation. Regardless of my views on the importance of observing government processes, it is always possible that another riot could mark the end of his prime ministership. Sogavare is already unpopular (the 2019 and 2021 riots) and on borrowed time. There is a general feeling that he has stayed too long, and that without him the security pact with China may collapse.

In conclusion, we should not presume that the Honiara riots are typical of the way Solomon Islanders seek to disagree or protest. When there were tensions late in 2021 in Auki, the capital of Malaita Province, there was a peaceful crowd of 20,000 people. Sogavare had instructed the police commander to arm his men and 'break the crowd' which he refused to do. Sogavare later called him 'useless', but the commander's decision was quite correct. Both sides engaged in debate and the political leaders were assisted by the police to maintain a constructive relationship. The outcome was lawful and reflected the will of the people. Solomon Islanders can and do carry out public debate with decorum. That is at the base of all local communities.

Notes

* *The Mouse that Roared* is a 1955 Cold War satirical novel by Leonard Wibberley about the Duchy of Grand Fenwick, a small imaginary English-speaking country in the Alps in Europe which declared war on the USA. Their standing army arrived in New York on a rented ship with a High Constable, three men-at-arms equipped with spears and maces, and 20 with longbows, all wearing chain mail. Their intention was immediate defeat, and the hope of receiving bountiful American aid. Unintentionally, they captured the world's largest nuclear bomb, and were showered with development assistance by the USA and the Soviet Union. The bomb turned out to be a dud. The novel became a 1959 movie starring Peter Sellers playing three roles.

** *The Thin Red Line* is a 1962 autobiographical novel by James Jones, focusing on Guadalcanal campaign during the Second World War. It became a movie in 1964, remade in 1998.

*** I wish to thank several colleagues for their advice on this paper. Given various sensitivities, I have decided not to name individuals.

Clive Moore is a major historian of the Solomon Islands. His research and publications began in the 1970s. Over the last decade he has published an online Solomon Islands Encyclopaedia, and three monographs through ANU Press. The first was *Making Mala*, a history of Malaita the most populous Island. The second, *Tulagi*, was a history of the first capital. The third, *Honiara: Village-City of Solomon Islands*, is a history of the capital city, due to be released in mid-May 2022.

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